

February 19th 2024: I've decided not to include the Reader's Corner. They're annoying and I don't feel like editing them en masse.

To do:

- 1.put illustrations in the right spots, describe all

- 2.?

Month = Header 1

Title = Header 2

Chapters = header 3

Astounding Stories Of Super- Science

Contributing Authors, in order of appearance:

Victor Rousseau Emanuel

Sterner St. Paul Meek

Ray Cummings

M. L. Staley

Charles Victor Tench

Murray Leinster

Anthony Pelcher

Harold Vincent Schoepflin

Charles Willard Diffin

Hugh Barnett Cave

Sophie Wenzel Ellis

Will Smith

R. J. Robbins

Sewell Peaslee Wright

A. T. Locke

Thomas Holt Knight

Arthur Josephus Burks

Tom Curry

Lilith Lorraine

James P. Olsen

Roman Frederick Starzl

Edmond Hamilton

Harold Thompson Rich

Miles John Breuer, M.D.

Paul Ernst

Robert Henry Leifred

Jackson Gee

William Merriam Rouse

Lloyd Arthur Eshbach

David R. Sparks

Hal K. Wells

Note from the editor of this master file:

This compilation was started on July 2nd, 2023, by Tinyel. Which is pronounced exactly the way it looks: tin-yell. Two syllables. I am nonbinary, and my pronouns are it/its/itself.

This means that rather than saying “He combined Astounding Stories of Super-Science into one master book”, or “She edited the formatting from the original magazine's set up”, or “They removed all the randomly inserted advertisements and put them in the back of the book”, you say: “It wanted to make life easier for future readers of Astounding Stories of Super-Science, so it created this compilation so you don't have to. That was very nice of it.”

Originally published from January 1930 to January 1931, the following short stories were spaced out across thirteen issues of Astounding Stories of Super-Science.

They are now (and have been for a while) public domain, meaning they belong to everyone and no one, and are available to download from Gutenberg.org, archive.org, and many other places, for free, endlessly.

To make things more convenient for future readers, I have compiled all the short stories into a single file, with the formatting fixed from the original magazine layout, the illustrations put in the proper places, trigger warnings added before each story, and the stories that had been originally broken up into multiple parts now combined into a whole. Stories that had sequels will now have the sequel immediately following the first story.

This version of the master file will include all stories as they were originally published. A second version will be hand-picked of my favorite of these stories, with are also the ones with the least amount of bigotry.

Each story will have specific warnings and ratings in front for your convenience, but as a general warning,

many of the authors showcased here were cis straight white privileged men, and they hated women, they hated Black and brown people, they hated fat people, they hated disabled people, they hated foreigners...the list goes on.

Some of these stories are more bigoted than others, and some are so bigoted I had to stop and resist the urge to throw my phone across the room. Some of them are also just not very well written.

I hope you enjoy reading at least some of these stories.

Astounding Stories of Super-Science

January 1930

#01 The Beetle Horde, By Victor Rousseau

Emanuel:

Only two young explorers stand in the way of the mad Bram's horrible revenge—the releasing of his trillions of man-sized beetles upon an utterly defenseless world.

Aproximate word count: 24,000

Bigotry: Racism, ableism,

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: Dodd's Discovery

Out of the south the biplane came winging back toward the camp, a black speck against the dazzling white of the vast ice-fields that extended unbroken to the horizon on every side.

It came out of the south, and yet, a hundred miles further back along the course on which it flew, it could not have proceeded in any direction except northward. For a hundred miles south lay the south

pole, the goal toward which the Travers Expeditions had been pressing for the better part of that year.

Not that they could not have reached it sooner. As a matter of fact, the pole had been crossed and re-crossed, according to the estimate of Tommy Travers, aviator, and nephew of the old millionaire who stood fairy uncle to the expedition. But one of the things that was being sought was the exact site of the pole. Not within a couple of miles or so, but within the fraction of an inch.

It had something to do with Einstein, and something to do with terrestrial magnetism, and the variations of the south magnetic pole, and the reason therefore, and something to do with parallaxes and the precession of the equinoxes and other things, this search for the pole's exact location. But all that was principally the affair of the astronomer of the party. Tommy Travers, who was now evidently on his way back, didn't give a whoop for Einstein, or any of the rest of the stuff. He had been enjoying himself after his fashion during a year of frostbites and hard rations, and he was beginning to anticipate the

delights of the return to Broadway.

Captain Storm, in charge of the expedition, together with the five others of the advance camp, watched the plane maneuver up to the tents. She came down neatly on the smooth snow, skidded on her runners like an expert skater, and came to a stop almost immediately in front of the marquee.

Tommy Travers leaped out of the enclosed cockpit, which, shut off by glass from the cabin, was something like the front seat of a limousine.

"Well, Captain, we followed that break for a hundred miles, and there's no ground cleft, as you expected," he said. "But Jim Dodd and I picked up something, and Jim seems to have gone crazy."

Through the windows of the cabin, Jim Dodd, the young archaeologist of the party, could be seen apparently wrestling with something that looked like a suit of armor. By the time Captain Storm, Jimmy, and the other members of the party had reached the cabin door, Dodd had got it open and flung himself out backward, still hugging what he had found, and maneuvering so that he managed to fall on his back and sustain its weight.

"Say, what the—what—what's that?" gasped Storm.

Even the least scientific minded of the party gasped in amazement at what Dodd had. It resembled nothing so much as an enormous beetle. As a matter of fact, it was an insect, for it had the three sections that characterize this class, but it was merely the shell of one. Between four and five feet in height, when Dodd stood it on end, it could now be seen to consist of the hard exterior substance of some huge, unknown coleopter.

This substance, which was fully three inches thick

over the thorax, looked as hard as plate armor.

"What is it?" gasped Storm again.

Tommy Travers made answer, for James Dodd was evidently incapable of speech, more from emotion than from the force with which he had landed backward in the snow.

"We found it at the pole, Captain," he said. "At least, pretty near where the pole ought to be. We ran into a current of warm air or something. The snow had melted in places, and there were patches of bare rock. This thing was lying in a hollow among them."

"If I didn't see it before my eyes, I'd think you crazy, Tommy," said Storm with some asperity. "What is it, a crab?"

"Crab be damned!" shouted Jim Dodd, suddenly recovering his faculties. "My God, Captain Storm, don't you know the difference between an insect and a crustacean? This is a fossil beetle. Don't you see the distinguishing mark of the coleoptera, those two

elytra, or wing-covers, which meet in the median dorsal line? A beetle, but with the shell of a crustacean instead of mere chitin. That's what led you astray, I expect. God, what a tale we'll have to tell when we get back to New York! We'll drop everything else, and spend years, if need be, looking for other specimens."

"Like fun you will!" shouted Higby, the astronomer of the party. "Lemme tell you right here, Dodd, nobody outside the Museum of Natural History is going to care a damn about your old fossils. What we're going to do is to march straight to the true pole, and spend a year taking observations and parallaxes. If Einstein's brochure, in which he links up gravitation with magnetism, is correct—"

"Fossil beetles!" Jim Dodd burst out, ignoring the astronomer. "That means that in the Tertiary Era, probably, there existed forms of life in the antarctic continent that have never been found elsewhere. Imagine a world in which the insect reached a size proportionate to the great saurians, Captain Storm! I'll wager poor Bram discovered this. That's why he

stayed behind when the Greystoke Expedition came within a hundred miles of the pole. I'll wager he's left a cairn somewhere with full details inside it. We've got to find it. We—"

But Jim Dodd, suddenly realizing that the rest of the party could hardly be said to share his enthusiasm in any marked degree, broke off and looked sulky.

"You say you found this thing pretty nearly upon the site of the true pole?" Captain Storm asked Tommy.

"Within five miles, I'd say, Captain. The fog was so bad that we couldn't get our directions very well."

"Well, then, there's going to be no difficulty," answered Storm. "If this fair weather lasts, we'll be at the pole in another week, and we'll start making our permanent camp. Plenty of opportunity for all you gentlemen. As for me, I'm merely a sailor, and I'm trying to be impartial.

"And please remember, gentlemen, that we're well into March now, and likely to have the first storms of

autumn on us any day. So let's drop the argument and remember that we've got to pull together!"

Tommy Travers was the only skilled aviator of the expedition, which had brought two planes with it. It was a queer friendship that had sprung up between him and Jim Dodd. Tommy, the blasé ex-Harvard man, who was known along Broadway, and had never been able to settle down, seemed as different as possible from the spectacled, scholarly Dodd, ten years his senior, red-haired, irascible, and living, as Tommy put it, in the Age of Old Red Sandstone, instead of in the year 1930 A. D.

It was generally known—though the story had been officially denied—that there had been trouble in the Greystoke Expedition of three years before. Captain Greystoke had taken the brilliant, erratic Bram, of the Carnegie Archaeological Institute, with him, and Bram's history was a long record of trouble.

It was Bram who had exploded the faked neolithic finds at Mannheim, thereby earning the undying enmity of certain European savants, but brilliantly demolishing them when he smashed the so-called Mannheim stone pitcher (valued at a hundred

thousand dollars) with a pocket-axe, and caustically inquired whether neolithic man used babbit metal rivets to fasten on his jug handles.

Bram's brilliant work in the investigation of the origin of the negrito Asiatic races had been awarded one of the Nobel prizes, and Bram had declined it in an insulting letter because he disapproved of the year's prize award for literature.

He had been a storm center for years, embittered by long opposition, when he joined the Greystoke Expedition for the purpose of investigating the marine fauna of the antarctic continent.

And it was known that his presence had nearly brought the Greystoke Expedition to the point of civil war. Rumor said he had been deliberately abandoned. His enemies hoped he had. The facts seemed to be, however, that in an outburst of temper he had walked out of camp in a furious snowstorm and perished. For days his body had been sought in vain.

Jimmy Dodd had run foul of Bram some years before,

when Bram had published a criticism of one of Dodd's addresses dealing with fossil monotremes, or egg-laying mammals. In his inimitable way, Bram had suggested that the problem which came first, the egg or the chicken, was now seen to be linked up with the Darwinian theory, and solved in the person of Dodd.

Nevertheless, Jimmy Dodd entertained a devoted admiration for the memory of the dead scientist. He believed that Bram must have left records of inestimable importance in a cairn before he died. He wanted to find that cairn.

And he knew, what a number of Bram's enemies knew, that the dead scientist had been a morphine addict. He believed that he had wandered out into the snow under the influence of the drug.

Dodd, who shared a tent with Tommy, had raved the greater part of the night about the find.

"Well, but see here, Jimmy, suppose these beetles did inhabit the antarctic continent a few million years ago, why get excited?" Tommy had asked.

"Excited?" bellowed Dodd. "It opens one of the biggest problems that science has to face. Why haven't they survived into historic times? Why didn't they cross into Australia, like the opossum, by the land bridge then existent between that continent and South America? Beetles five feet in length, and practically invulnerable! What killed them off? Why didn't they win the supremacy over man?"

Jimmy Dodd had muttered till he went to sleep, and he had muttered worse in his dreams. Tommy was glad that Captain Storm had given them permission to return to the same spot next morning and look for further fossils, though his own interest in them was of the slightest.

The dogs were being harnessed next morning when the two men hopped into the plane. The thermometer was unusually high for the season, for in the south polar regions the short summer is usually at an end by March. Tommy was sweating in his furs in a temperature well above the freezing point. The snow was crusted hard, the sky overcast with clouds, and a wind was blowing hard out of the south, and

increasing in velocity hourly.

"A bad day for starting," said Captain Storm. "Looks like one of the autumn storms was blowing up. If I were you, I'd watch the weather, Tommy."

Tommy glanced at Dodd, who was huddled in the rear cockpit, fuming at the delay, and grinned whimsically. "I guess I can handle her, Captain," he answered. "It's only an hour's flight to where he found that fossil."

"Just as you please," said Storm curtly. He knew that Tommy's judgment as a pilot could always be relied upon. "You'll find us here when you return," he added. "I've counter-manded the order to march. I don't like the look of the weather at all."

Tommy grinned again and pressed the starter. The engine caught and warmed up. One of the men kicked away the blocks of ice that had been placed under the skids to serve as chocks. The plane taxied over the crusted snow, and took off into the south.

The camp was situated in a hollow among the ice-mountains that rose to a height of two or three thousand feet all around. Tommy had not dreamed how strongly the gale was blowing until he was over the top of them. Then he realized that he was facing a tougher proposition than he had calculated on. The storm struck the biplane with full force.

A snowstorm was driving up rapidly, blackening the sky. The sun, which only appeared for a brief interval every day, was practically touching the horizon as it rose to make its minute arc in the sky. A star was visible through a rift in the clouds overhead, and the pale daylight in which they had started had already become twilight.

Tommy was tempted to turn back, but it was only a hundred miles, and Jimmy Dodd would give him no peace if he did so. So he put the plane's nose resolutely into the wind, watching his speed indicator drop from a hundred miles per hour to eighty, sixty, forty—less.

The storm was beating up furiously. Of a sudden the clouds broke into a deluge of whirling snow.

In a moment the windshield was a frozen, opaque mass. Tommy opened it, and peered out into the biting air. He could see nothing.... The plane, caught in the fearful cross-currents that swirl about the southern roof of the world, was fluttering like a leaf in the wind. The altimeter was dropping dangerously.

Tommy opened the throttle to the limit, zooming, and, like a spurred horse, the biplane shot forward and upward. She touched five thousand, six, seven—and that, for her, was ceiling under those conditions, for a sudden tremendous shock of wind, coming in a fierce cross-current, swung her round, tossed her to and fro in the enveloping white cloud. And Tommy knew that he had the fight of his life upon his hands.

The compasses, which required considerable daily adjusting to be of use so near to the pole, had now gone out of use altogether. The air speed indicator had apparently gone west, for it was oscillating between zero and twenty. The turn and bank indicator

was performing a kind of tango round the dial. Even the eight-day clock had ceased to function, but that might have been due to the fact that Tommy had neglected to wind it. And the oil pressure gauge presented a still more startling sight, for a glance showed that either there was a leak or else the oil had frozen.

Tommy looked around at Dodd and pointed downward. Dodd responded with a vicious forward wave of his hand.

Tommy shook his head, and Dodd started forward along the cabin, apparently with the intention of committing assault and battery upon him. Instead, the archaeologist collapsed upon the floor as the plane spun completely around under the impact of a blast that was like a giant's slap.

The plane was no longer controllable. True, she responded in some sort to the controls, but all Tommy was able to do was to keep her from going into a crazy sideslip or nose dive as he fought with the elements. And those elements were like a devil

unchained. One moment he was dropping like a plummet, the next he was shooting up like a rocket as a vertical blast of air caught the plane and tossed her like a cork into the invisible heavens. Then she was revolving, as if in a maelstrom, and by degrees this rotary movement began to predominate.

Round and round went the plane, in circles that gradually narrowed, and it was all Tommy could do to swing the stick so as to keep her from skidding or sideslipping. And as he worked desperately at his task Tommy began to realize something that made him wonder if he was not dreaming.

The snow was no longer snow, but rain—mist, rather, warm mist that had already cleared the windshield and covered it with tiny drops.

And that white, opaque world into which he was looking was no longer snow but fog—the densest fog that Tommy had ever encountered.

Fog like white wool, drifting past him in fleecy flakes that looked as if they had solid substance. Warm fog

that was like balm upon his frozen skin, but of a warmth that was impossible within a few miles of the frozen pole.

Then there came a momentary break in it, and Tommy looked down and uttered a cry of fear. Fear, because he knew that he must be dreaming.

Not more than a thousand feet beneath him he saw patches of snow, and patches of—green grass, the brightest and most verdant green that he had ever seen in his life.

He turned round at a touch on his shoulder. Dodd was leaning over him, one hand pointing menacingly upward and onward.

"You fool," Tommy bellowed in his ear, "d'you think the south pole lies over there? It's here! Yeah, don't you get it, Jimmy? Look down! This valley—God, Jimmy, the south pole's a hole in the ground!"

And as he spoke he remembered vaguely some crank who had once insisted that the two poles were hollow

because—what was the fellow's reasoning? Tommy could not remember it.

But there was no longer any doubt but that they were dropping into a hole. Not more than a mile around, which explained why neither Scott nor Amundsen had found it when they approximated to the site of the pole. A hole—a warm hole, up which a current of warm air was rushing, forming the white mist that now gradually thinned as the plane descended. The plateau with its covering of eternal snows loomed in a white circle high overhead. Underneath was green grass now—grass and trees!

The fog was nearly gone. The plane responded to the controls again. Tommy pushed the stick forward and came round in a tighter circle.

And then something happened that he had not in the least expected. One moment he seemed to be traveling in a complete calm, a sort of clear funnel with a ring of swirling fog outside it—the next he was dropping into a void!

There was no air resistance—there seemed hardly any air, for he felt a choking in his throat, and a tearing at his lungs as he strove to breathe. He heard a strangled cry from Dodd, and saw that he was clutching with both hands at his throat, and his face was turning purple.

The controls went limp in Tommy's hands. The plane, gyrating more slowly, suddenly nosed down, hung for a moment in that void, and then plunged toward the green earth, two hundred feet below, with appalling swiftness.

Tommy realized that a crash was inevitable. He threw his goggles up over his forehead, turned and waved to Dodd in ironic farewell. He saw the earth rush up at him—then came the shattering crash, and then oblivion!

Chapter 2: Beetles and Humans

How long he had remained unconscious, Tommy had no means of determining. Of a sudden he found himself lying on the ground beside the shattered

plane, with his eyes wide open.

He stared at it, and stared about him, without understanding where he was, or what had happened to him. His first idea was that he had crashed on the golf links near Mitchell Field, Long Island, for all about him were stretches of verdant grass and small shrubby plants. Then, when he remembered the expedition, he was convinced that he had been dreaming.

What brought him to a saner view was the discovery that he was enveloped in furs which were insufferably hot. He half raised himself and succeeded in unfastening his fur coat, and thus discovered that apparently none of his bones was broken.

But the plane must have fallen from a considerable height to have been smashed so badly. Then Tommy discovered that he was lying upon an extensive mound of sand, thrown up as by some gigantic mole, for burrow tracks ran through it in every direction. It was this that had saved his life.

Something was moving at his side. It was half-submerged in the sand-pile, and it was moving parallel to him with great rapidity.

A grayish body, half-covered with grains of sand emerged, waving two enormously long tentacles. It was a shrimp, but fully three feet in length, and Tommy had never before had any idea what an unpleasant object a shrimp is.

Tommy staggered to his feet and dropped nearer the plane, eyeing the shrimp with horror. But he was soon relieved as he discovered that it was apparently harmless. It slithered away and once more buried itself in the pile of sand.

Now Tommy was beginning to remember. He looked into the wreckage of the plane. Jim Dodd was not there. He called his name repeatedly, and there was no response, except a dull echo from the ice-mountains behind the veil of fog.

He went to the other side of the plane, he scanned the ground all about him. Jimmy had disappeared. It was

evident that he was nowhere near, for Tommy could see the whole of the lower scope of the bowl on every side of him. He had walked away—or he had been carried away! Tommy thought of the shrimp, and shuddered. What other fearsome monsters might inhabit that extraordinary valley?

He sat down, leaning against the wreck of the fuselage, and tried to adjust his mind, tried to keep himself from going mad. He knew now that the flight had been no dream, that he was a member of his uncle's expedition, that he had flown with Jim toward the pole, had crashed in a vacuum. But where was Jim? And how were they going to get out of the damn place?

Something like a heap of stones not far away attracted Tommy's attention. Perhaps Jim Dodd was lying behind that. Once more Tommy got upon his feet and began walking toward it. On the way, he stumbled against the sharp edge of something that protruded from the ground.

It cut his leg sharply, and, with a curse, he began

rubbing his shin and looking at the thing. Then he saw that it was another of the fossil shells, half-buried in the marshy ooze on which he was treading. The ground in this lower part of the valley was a swamp, on account of the very fine mist falling from the fog clouds that surrounded it impenetrably on every side.

Then Tommy came upon another shell, and then another. And now he saw that there were piles of what he had taken to be rock everywhere, and that this was not rock but great heaps of the shells, all equally intact.

Hundreds of thousands of the prehistoric beetles must have died in that valley, perhaps overcome by some cataclysm.

Tommy examined the heap near which he stood; he yelled Dodd's name, but again no answer came.

Instead, something began to stir among the heaps of shells. For a moment Tommy hoped against hope that it was Dodd, but it wasn't Dodd.

It was a living beetle!

A beetle fully five feet high as it stood erect, a pair of enormous wings outspread. And the head, which was larger than a man's, was the most frightful object Tommy had ever seen.

Jim Dodd would have said at once that this was one of the Curculionidae, or snout beetles, for a prolongation of the head between the eyes formed a sort of beak a foot in length. The mouth, which opened downward, was armed with terrific mandibles, while the huge, compound eyes looked like enormous crystals of cut glass. Immediately in front of the eyes were two mandibles as long as a man's arms, with feathery processes at the ends. In addition to these there were three pairs of legs, the front pair as long as a man's, the hind pair almost as long as a horse's.

Paralyzed with horror, Tommy watched the monster, which had apparently been disturbed by the vibrations of his voice, extract itself from among the shells. Then, with a bound that covered fifteen feet, it had lessened the distance between them by half.

And then a still more amazing thing happened. For of a sudden the hard shell slipped from the thorax, the wing-cases dropped off, the whole of the bony parts slipped to the ground with a clang, and a soft, defenseless thing went slithering away among the rocks.

The beetle had moulted!

Tommy dropped to the ground in the throes of violent nausea.

Then, looking up again, he saw the girl!

She was about a hundred yards away from him, very close to the fallen plane, and she must have emerged from a large hole in the ground which Tommy could now see under a ledge of overhanging rock.

She seemed to be dressed in a single garment which fell to her knees, and appeared to fit tightly about her body, but as she came nearer, Tommy, watching her, petrified by this latest apparition, discovered that it was woven of her own hair, which must have been of

immense length, for it fell naturally to her shoulders, and thence was woven into this close-fitting material, a fringe an inch or two in length extending beneath the selvage.

She was about six feet tall, and apparently made after the normal human pattern. She moved with a slow, majestic swing, and if ever any female had seemed to Tommy to have the appearance of an angel, this unknown woman did.

She was so fair, in that flossy, flaxen covering, she moved with such easy grace, that Tommy, gaping, gradually crept nearer to her. She did not seem to see him. She was stooping over the very sand heap into which he had fallen. Suddenly, with lightning-like rapidity, her arms shot out, her hands began tunneling in the sand. With a cry of triumph she pulled out the shrimp Tommy had seen, or another like it, and, stripping it off the shell, began devouring it with evident relish.

In the midst of her meal the girl raised her head and looked at Tommy. He saw that her eyes were filmed,

vacant, dead. Then of a sudden a third membrane was drawn back across the pupils, and she saw him.

She let the shrimp drop to the ground, uttered a cry, and moved toward him with a tottering gait. She groped toward him with outstretched arms. And then she was blind again, for the membrane once more covered her pupils. It was as if her eyes were unable to endure even the dim light of the valley, through whose surrounding mists the low sun, setting just above the horizon, was unable to diffuse itself save as a brightening of the fog curtain.

Tommy stepped toward the girl. His outstretched hand touched hers. It was unquestionably a woman's hand he held, delicately warm, with exquisitely moulded fingers, in whose touch there seemed to be, for the girl, some tactile impression of him.

Again that membrane was drawn back from the girl's pupils for a fleeting flash. Tommy saw two eyes of intense black, their color contrasting curiously with the flaxen color of her hair and her white skin, almost the tint of an albino's. Those eyes had surveyed him,

and appeared satisfied that he was one of her kind. She could not have seen very much in that almost instantaneous flash of vision. Queer, that membrane—as if she had been used to living in the dark, as if the full light of the day was unbearable!

She drew her hand away. Soft vocals came from her lips. Suddenly she turned swiftly. She could not have seen, but before Tommy had seen, she had sensed the presence of the old man who was creeping out of the hole in the mountainside.

He moved forward craftily, and then pounced upon the sand pile, and in a moment had pulled out another of the big shrimps, which he proceeded to devour with greedy relish. The girl, leaving Tommy's side, joined him in that unpleasant feast.

And in the midst of it a flood came pouring from the hole—a flood of living beetles, covering the ground in fifteen-foot leaps as they dashed at the two.

To his horror, Tommy saw Jimmy Dodd among them, wrapped in his fur coat like a mummy, and being

pushed and rolled forward like a football.

For a moment Tommy hesitated, torn between his solicitude for Jim Dodd and that for the girl. Then, as the foremost of the monsters bounded to her side, he ran between them. The vicious jaws snapped within six inches of Tommy's face, with a force that would have carried away an ear, or shredded the cheek, if they had met.

Tommy struck out with all his might, and his fist clanged on the resounding shell so that the blood spurted from his bruised knuckles. He had struck the monster squarely upon the thorax, and he had not discommoded it in the least. It turned on him, its glassy, many-faceted eyes glaring with a cold, infernal light. Tommy struck out again with his left hand, this time upon the pulpy flesh of the downward-opening mouth.

An inch higher, and he would have impaled his hand upon the beak, with a point like a needle, and evidently used for purposes of attack, since it was not connected with the mandibles. The blow appeared to

fall in the only vulnerable place. The monster dropped upon its back and lay there, unable to reverse itself, its antenna and forelegs waving in the air, and the rear legs rasping together in a shrill, strident shriek.

Instantly, as Tommy darted out of the way, the swarm fell upon the helpless monster and began devouring it, tearing strips of flesh from the lower shell, which in the space of a half-minute was reduced simply to bone. The most horrible feature of this act of cannibalism was the complete silence with which it was performed, except for the rasping of the dying monster's legs. It was evident that the huge beetles had no vocal apparatus.

For the moment left unguarded, Jim Dodd flung down the collar of his fur coat, stared about him, and recognized Tommy.

"My God, it's you!" he yelled. "Well, can you—?"

He had no time to finish his sentence. A pair of antenna went round his neck from behind. At the same instant Tommy, the old man, and the girl were

gripped by the monsters, which, forming a solid phalanx about them, began hustling them in the direction of the hole. Resistance was utterly impossible. Tommy felt as if he was being pushed along by a moving wall of stone.

Inside the opening it was completely dark. Tommy shouted to Dodd, but the strident sounds of the moving legs drowned his cries. He was being pushed forward into the unknown.

Suddenly the ground seemed to fall away beneath his feet. He struggled, cried out, and felt himself descending through the air.

For a full half-minute he went downward at a speed that constricted his throat so that he could hardly draw breath. Then, just as he had nerved himself for the imminent crash, the speed of his descent was checked. In another moment he found that he was slowing to a standstill in mid-air.

He was beginning to float backward—upward. But the wall of moving shells, pushing against him, forced him

on, downward, and yet apparently against the force of gravitation.

Then of a sudden Tommy was aware of a dim light all about him. His feet touched earth and grass as softly as a thistledown alighting.

He found himself seated in the same dim light upon red grass, and staring into Jimmy's face.

Chapter 3: Ten Miles Underground

"What I was going to say when we were interrupted, was, 'Can you beat it?'" Jimmy Dodd observed, with admirable sang-froid.

They were still seated on the red grass, gazing about them at what looked like an illimitable plain, and upward into depths of darkness. It was warm, and the light, furnished by what appeared to be luminous vegetation, was about that of twilight.

On every side were clumps of trees and shrubs, which formed centers of phosphorescent illumination, but

for the most part the land was open, and here and there human figures appeared, moving with head down and arms hanging earthward.

"No, I'm damned if I can," said Tommy. "What happened to you after we crashed?"

"Why, first thing I knew, I found myself riding on the back of a fossil beetle, apparently one of the *curculionidae*," said Dodd.

"Never, mind being so precise, Jimmy. Let's call it a beetle. Go on."

"They set me down inside the hole and seemed to be investigating me, the whole swarm of them. Of course, I thought I was dead, and come to my just reward, especially when I saw those beaks. Then one of them began tickling my face with its antenna, and I drew up my fur collar. They didn't seem to like the feel of the fur, and after a while the whole gang started hustling me back again, like a nest of ants carrying something they don't want outside their hill. And then you bobbed up."

"Well, my opinion is you saved your life by pulling up your collar," said Tommy. "Looks to me as if it's a case of the survival of the fittest, said fittest being the insect, and the human race taking second place. You know what the humans here live on, don't you?"

"No, what?"

"Shrimps as big as poodles. If you'd seen that girl and the old man getting outside them, you'd realize that there seems to be a food shortage in this part of the world. Say, where in thunder are we, Jimmy?"

"Haven't you guessed yet, Travers?" asked Dodd, a spice of malice in his voice.

"I suppose this is some sort of big hole on the site of the south pole, with warm vapors coming up. Maybe a great fissure in the earth, or something."

Jimmy Dodd's grin, seen in the half-light, was rather disconcerting. "How far do you think we dropped just now?" Dodd asked.

"Why, I'd say several hundred yards," replied Tommy.
"What's your estimate?"

"Just about ten miles," answered Dodd.

"What? You're still crazy! Why, we slowed up!"

"Yeah," grinned Dodd, "we slowed up. We're inside the crust of the world. That's the long and short of it. The earth we've known is just a shell over our heads."

"Yeah? Walking head downward, are we? Then why don't we drop to the center of the earth, you damn fool?"

"Because, my dear fellow, you can swing a pailful of water round your head without spilling any of it. In other words, our old friend, centrifugal force. The speed with which the earth is rotating, keeps us on our feet, head downward. To be precise, the center of the earth's gravity lies in the middle of the hollow sphere, of course, but the counteraction of centrifugal force throws it outward to the middle of the ten-mile crust. That's why we slowed down after we were half-

way through. We were moving against gravity."

"And what's up there, or down there, or whatever you call it?" asked Tommy, pointing to what ought to have been the sky.

"Nothing. It's the center of the tennis ball, though I imagine it's pretty near a vacuum when you get up a mile or so, owing to the speed of the earth's rotation, which forces the heat into the shell."

"You mean to say you actually believe that stuff you've been handing me?" asked Tommy, after a pause.

"Then how did human beings get here, and those damn beetles? And why's the grass red?"

"The grass is red because there's no sunlight to produce chlorophyll. The inhabitants of the deep sea are red or black, almost invariably. In the case of the humans, they've become bleached. My belief is that that man and woman we saw, and those"—he pointed to the vague forms of human beings, who moved across the grass, gathering something—"are survivors of the primitive race that still exists as the

Australians. Undoubtedly one of the branches of the human stock originated in antarctica at a time when it enjoyed a tropical temperature, and was the land bridge between Australia and South America."

"And the—beetles?" asked Tommy.

"Ah, they go back to the days when nature was in a more grandiose mood!" replied the archaeologist enthusiastically. "That's the most wonderful discovery of the ages. The world will go crazy over them when we bring back the first living specimens to the zoological parks of the great cities.

"But," Dodd went on, speaking with still more enthusiasm, "of course, this is only the beginning, Tommy. There are ten million species of insects, according to Riley, and it is inevitable that there must be hundreds of thousands of other survivals from the age of the great saurians, perhaps even some of the saurians themselves. Who knows but that we may discover the ancestor of the extinct monotremes, the rhynchocephalia, the pterodactyls, hatch a brood of aepyornis eggs—"

"And," said Tommy tartly, "how are we going to get them back, apart from the little problem of getting out of here ourselves?"

"Don't let's worry about that now," answered Dodd. "It will take ten years of the hardest kind of labor even to begin a classification of the inhabitants of this inner world. I could sit down for ever, and—"

But Jimmy Dodd rose to his feet as a pair of antenna whipped round his neck and jerked him bodily upward.

One of the monster beetles was standing upright behind them, and by its gestures it evidently meant that Dodd and Tommy were to join the crowd of humans in the offing. As Dodd turned upon it with an indignant show of fists, one of the antennae whipped off his fur coat and stung him painfully with the bristle-like attachment at the end.

It was a painful moment when Dodd and Tommy realized that they were powerless against the monstrous beetles.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing two men facing off against a giant spotted beetle, with more humans in the background fighting another group of beetles. Image description end.]

Tommy tried the uppercut with which he had knocked out the deceased monster, but the quick jerks of the present beetle's head were infinitely faster than the movements of his fists, while the antenna had a whiplike quality about them that speedily convinced him that discretion was the card to play.

Under the threat of the curling antenna, Tommy and

Dodd moved in the direction of the slowly circulating humans. Numerous tiny rodents, which evidently kept the red grass short, scampered away under their feet. The beetles made no further effort to force them on, but now they could see that a number of the monsters were stationed at intervals around a wide circle, keeping the humans in a single body.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Tommy, stopping. "See what they're doing, Dodd? They're herding us, like cowboys herd steers. Look at that!"

One of the herd, a male with a long beard, suddenly broke from the herd, bawling, and flung himself upon a beetle guard. The antenna shot forth, coiled around his neck, and hurled him a dozen feet to the ground, where he lay stunned for a moment before arising and rejoining his companions.

"But what are they looking for?" demanded Dodd.

Tommy had not heard him. He had stopped in front of one of the luminous trees and was plucking a fruit from it.

"Jimmy, ever see an apple before?" he asked. "If this isn't an apple, I'll eat my head."

It certainly was an apple, and one of the largest and juiciest that Tommy had ever tasted. It was the reddest apple he had ever seen, and would have won the first prize at any agricultural fair.

"And look at this!" shouted Tommy, plucking an enormous luminous peach from another tree.

They began munching slowly, then, seeing one of the beetle guards approaching them, they moved into the midst of the crowd.

"Did you notice anything strange about those fruit trees?" inquired Dodd, as he munched. "I'll swear they were monocotyledonous, which, after all, is what one would expect. Still, to think that the monocotyledons evolved the familiar drupes, or stone fruits, on a parallel line to the dicotyledons is—amazing!"

A box on the ear like the kick of a mule's hoof jerked

the last word from his lips as he went sprawling. He got up, to see the girl standing before him, intense disgust and anger on her face.

She snatched the fruits from the hands of the two Americans and hurled them away. It was evident from her manner that she considered such diet in the highest degree unclean and disgusting; also that she considered herself charged with the duty of superintending Tommy's and Dodd's education, but especially Dodd's.

Taking him by the arm, she propelled him into the midst of the groping humans. She released him, stooped, and suddenly stood up, a shrimp about eighteen inches long in her hand.

Towering over Dodd by six inches, she took his face in her hands and began caressing him; then, seizing his jaws in her strong fingers, she pried them apart, and popped the tail end of the shrimp into his mouth.

Dodd let out a yelp, and spat out the love-gift, to be rewarded with another box on the ear by the young

Amazon, while Tommy stood by, convulsed with laughter, and yet in considerable trepidation, for fear of being forced to share Dodd's fate.

For the girl was again holding out the tail end of the crustacean, and Jim Dodd's jaws were slowly and reluctantly approaching it.

But suddenly there came an intervention as the strident rasping of beetle legs was heard in the distance. Panic seized the human herd, grovelling for shrimps in the sandy soil with its tufts of red grasses. Milling in an uneasy mob, they cowered under the lashes of the antenna of the beetle guards, which sacrificed their backs through their hair garments whenever any of them tried to bolt.

Nearer and nearer came the beetles, louder and more penetrating the shriek of their rasping legs. Now the swarm came into sight, rank after rank of the shell-clad monsters, leaping fifteen feet at a bound with perfect precision, until they had formed a solid phalanx all around the humans.

Tommy heard sighs of despair, he heard muttering, and then he realized, with deep thankfulness, that these human beings, degraded though they were, had a speech of their own.

In the middle of the front line appeared a beetle a foot taller than the rest. That it was either a king or queen was evident from the respect paid it by the rest of the swarm. At its every movement a bodyguard of beetles moved in unison, forming themselves in a group before it and on either side.

There would have been something ludicrous about these movements, but for the impression of horror that the swarm made upon Tommy and Jim Dodd. Hitherto both had supposed that the hideous insects acted by blind instinct, but now there could no longer be any doubt that they were possessed of an organized intelligence.

The strident sounds grew louder. Already Tommy was beginning to discover certain variations in them. It was dawning upon him that they formed a language—and a perfectly intelligible one. For, as the note

changed about a half-semitone, two of the monsters left the side of their ruler and reached the two men with three successive leaps.

Their movements left no doubt in either Tommy's or Dodd's mind what was required. The two strode hastily toward the assemblage, and stopped as the antenna of their guards came down in menacing fashion.

It was light enough for Tommy to see the face of the ruler of the hellish swarm. And it required all his powers of will to keep from collapsing from sheer horror at what he saw.

For, despite the close-fitting shell, the face of the beetle king was the face of a man—a white man!

Jim Dodd's shriek rang out above the shrilling of the beetle-legs, "Bram! It's you, it's you! My God, it's you, Bram!"

Chapter 4: Bram's Story

A sneering chuckle broke from Bram's lips. "Yes, it's me, James Dodd," he answered. "I'm a little surprised to see you here, Dodd, but I'm mighty glad. Still insane upon the subject of fossil monotremes, I suppose?"

The words came haltingly from Bram's lips, as from those of a man who had lost the habit of easy speech. And Tommy, looking on, and trying to keep in possession of his faculties, had already come to the conclusion that the sounds were inaudible to the beetles. Probably their hearing apparatus was not attuned to such slow vibrations of the human voice.

Also he had discovered that Bram was wearing the discarded shell of one of the monsters: he had not grown the shell himself. It was fastened about his body by a band of the hair-cloth, fastened to the two protuberances of the elytra, or wing-cases, on either side of the dorsal surface.

The discovery at least robbed the situation of one

aspect of terror. Bram, however he had obtained control of the swarm, was still only a man.

"Yes, still insane," answered Dodd bitterly. "Insane enough to go on believing that the polyprotodontia and the dasyuridae, which includes the peramelidae, or bandicoots, and the banded ant-eaters, or myrmecobidae, are not to be found in fossil form, for the excellent reason that they were not represented before the Upper Cretaceous period."

"You lie! You lie!" screamed Bram. "I have shown to all the world that phascalotherium, amphitherium, amblotherium, spalacotherium, and many other orders are to be found in the Upper Jurassic rocks of England, Wyoming, and other places. You—you are the man who denied the existence of the nototherium, of the marsupial lion, in pleistocene deposits! You denied that the dasyuridae can be traced back beyond the pleistocene. And you stand there and lie to me, when you are at my mercy!"

"For God's sake don't aggravate him," whispered Tommy to Dodd. "Don't you see that he's insane?"

Humor him, or we'll be dead men. Think what the world will lose, if you are never able to go back with your specimens," he added craftily.

But Dodd, whose eyes were glaring, said a sublime thing: "I have given my life to science, and I will never deny my master!"

With a screech, which, however, was evidently inaudible to the beetles, Bram leaped at Dodd and seized him by the throat. The two men fell to the ground, the ponderous beetle-shell completely covering them. Underneath it they could be seen to be struggling desperately. All the while the beetle horde remained perfectly motionless. Tommy thought afterward that in this fact lay their brightest chances of escape, if Bram's immediate vengeance did not fall on them.

Either because Bram was not himself a beetle, or because in some other way the swarm instinct was not stirred, the monsters watched the struggle with complete indifference.

At the moment, however, Tommy was only concerned with saving Dodd from the madman. He got his foot beneath the shell, then inserted his leg; using his whole body as a lever, he succeeded in turning Bram over on his back.

Then, and only then, the swarm rushed in upon them. Then Tommy realized that he had touched one of the triggers that regulated the beetle's automatism. In another instant Bram would have been torn to pieces. The needle-beaks were darting through the air, the hideous jaws were snapping. Bram's yells rang through the cavern.

Dodging beneath the avalanche of the monsters, Tommy got Bram upon his feet again. The beetles stopped, every movement arrested. Bram's hand went to the pocket of his tattered coat, there came a snap, a flash. Bram had ignited an automatic cigarette-lighter!

Instantly the monsters went scurrying away into the distance. And Tommy had another clue. The beetles, living in the dimness of the underworld, could not

stand light or fire!

He ran to where Jimmy was lying, face upward, on the ground. His face was badly scarred by Bram's nails, and the blood was spurting from a long gash in his throat, made by the sharp flint that was lying beside him.

He had some time before discarded his fur coat. Now he pulled off his coat, and, tearing off the tail of his shirt, he made a pad and a bandage, with which he attempted to staunch the blood and bind the wound. It must have taken ten minutes before the failing heart force enabled him to get the bleeding under control. Dodd had nearly bled to death, his face was drawn and waxen, but, because the pulsation was so feeble, the artery had ceased to spurt.

Then only did Tommy take notice of Bram. He had been squatting near, and Tommy realized that he had unconsciously observed Bram put some sort of pellets into his mouth. Now he realized that Bram was a drug fiend. That was what had made him walk out of the Greystoke camp in the storm.

Bram got up and came toward them. "Is he dead?" he whispered hoarsely. "I—I lost my temper. You two—I don't intend to kill you. There—there's room for the three of us. I've got—plans of the utmost importance to humanity."

"I don't think much of the way you've started to carry them out," answered Tommy bitterly. "No, he's not dead yet, but I wouldn't give much for his chances, even in the best hospital. The best thing you can do now is to go to hell, and take your beetles with you," he added.

Bram, without replying, raised his head and emitted from his throat the shrillest whistle that Tommy had ever heard. The response was amazing.

Rasping out of the darkness came eight beetles in pairs. Instead of leaping from an upright position, they trotted in the manner of horses, on all fours, their shells, which touched at the edges, forming a solid surface, gently rounded in the center so that a man's body could lie there and fit snugly into the groove.

"Help me get him up," said Bram. "Trust me! I'll do my best for him. If we leave him here they may kill and eat him. I can't trust all those beetle guards."

Tommy hesitated a moment, then decided to follow Bram's suggestion. Together they raised the unconscious man to the beetle-shell couch. Bram seated himself upon the boss of one of the beetle-shells in front, and Tommy jumped up behind.

Next moment, to his amazement, the trained steeds were flying smoothly through the air, at a rate that could not have been less than seventy-five to eighty miles an hour.

Tommy's shell seat was not a bed of roses, but he hardly noticed that. He was thinking that if Dodd lived they should be able to turn the tables.

For, unknown to Bram, he was in possession of the cigarette-lighter which he had picked up, and which Bram, in his agitation, had forgotten. It was full of petrol, or some other fluid of a similar nature, which Bram must have obtained from some natural source

within the earth. And, in an emergency, Tommy knew that he had the means of keeping the beetles at bay.

They had traveled for perhaps an hour when a faint light began to glow in the distance. It grew brighter, and a roaring sound became audible. A turn of the track that they were traversing, and the light became a glare. A terrific sight met Tommy's eyes.

Out of the bowels of the earth—actually out of the crust beneath their feet—there shot a pillar of roaring flame, of intense white color, and radiating a heat that was perceptible even at a distance of several hundred yards. The beetle steeds dropped gently to the ground; they halted. Bram got down, grinning.

"Nicely trained horses, what?" he asked. "By the way, you have the advantage of me in names. Who and what are you?"

Tommy told him.

"Well, Travers, it looks as if we're going to be companions for some time to come, and I quite admit

you saved my life back there. So we don't want to start with secrets. This is a natural petrol spring, which has probably been burning undiminished for ages. My trained beetles are blind—you didn't happen to notice I'd cut off their antenna? But the rest of the swarm daren't come near it. So that makes me their master.

"Pretty trick, what, Travers? I'm the Lord of the Flame down here, and I'm using my advantage. But don't get the idea of supplanting me. There are lots of other tricks you don't know anything about, and I'll have to trust you better before—"

He broke off and slipped another pellet into his mouth.

"Help me get Dodd down, if this is our destination," answered Tommy.

They lifted Dodd to the ground. He was conscious now, and moaning for water. The two men carried him into a sort of large cavern, at the farther end of which the fire was roaring. Bram went to a spring that

trickled down one side, filled something that looked like a petrified lily calyx, and brought it to Dodd, who drained it.

Tommy looked about him. He was astonished to see that the place was, in a way, furnished. Bram had carved out a very creditable couch, and several low chairs, evidently with a stone ax, for by the light of the fire, which cast a fair illumination even at that distance, Tommy could see the marks of the implement, rough and irregular, in the wood.

On the ground were thick rugs, woven of hair, and two or three more rugs of the same material lay on the couch. It was evident that the human herd was expected to furnish textile materials as well as meat.

"Sit down, and make yourself comfortable," said Bram, when they had raised Dodd to the couch. "We'll have dinner, and then we'll talk. I can give you a fine vegetarian meal. Those dirty shrimp-eating savages look on me as a cannibal because I eat the fruits of the trees." He grinned. "There's a bad shortage of food in Submundia, as I've named this part of the

world," he went on, "for until I came the beetles simply devoured the humans wholesale, instead of breeding them, like I taught them. And there's another of the hundred-and-fifty year swarms due to hatch out soon. However, we'll talk about that later. And all those fine fruits going to waste! Excuse me, Travers."

He disappeared, and returned in a minute or two with a small table, piled high with luscious fruits unknown to Tommy, though among them were some that looked like loaves of natural bread.

Tommy, whose appetite never failed him even in the worst circumstances, fell to with a will. He was enjoying his meal when he happened to look up, and saw that the penumbra at the edge of the lighted zone was dense with beetles.

Thousands—perhaps millions, for they stretched away as far as the eye could see, were packed together, their antenna waving in unison, their heads, beneath the shells, directed toward the fire.

Bram saw Tommy's look of disgust, and laughed. "The fire seems to intoxicate them, Travers," he said. "They always throng the entrance when I'm here. It's as far as they dare go. They're quite blind in the least light. Care to smoke? I've learned the art of making some quite decent cigars." He produced a handful. "Oh, by the way, you didn't see my lighter anywhere, did you?" he went on, with a pretense of carelessness.

"No," lied Tommy. "I was surprised you—"

"Oh, there's a supply of petrol in the rocks. No matter," answered Bram carelessly. "Your friend looks bad," he added, glancing at Dodd, who had fallen asleep. "Travers, I'm sorry I lost my temper. The—the shock of meeting men from the upper world, you know."

Dodd opened his eyes and tried to whisper. Tommy bent over him and listened.

"He wants to know whether he can have that girl to take care of him," he said.

"What, the one I saw you with? Why, she's a cull, Travers."

"What d'you mean?" asked Tommy.

"Why—useless, you know. There's several of them running loose, and waiting to be rounded up. We raise two breeds, one for replenishing the stock, and one for meat. She's just a cull, a reversion, no use for either purpose. I'll have her brought by all means. I—I like Dodd. I want to get him to like me," Bram went on, with a sort of penitence that had a pathetic touch. "Our little differences—quite absurd, and I can prove he's wrong in his ideas."

"Make yourself comfortable as long as you're here, Travers, and don't mind me. Only, don't try to escape. The beetles will get you if you do, and there's no way out of here—none that you'll find. And don't try to follow me. But you're a sensible man, and we'll all get along famously, I'm sure, as soon as Dodd recovers."

Chapter 5: Doomed!

There were no means known to Tommy of reckoning time in that strange place of twilight. His watch had been broken in the airplane fall; and Dodd never remembered to wind his, but they estimated that about two weeks had passed, judging from the number of times they had slept and eaten.

In those two weeks they had gradually begun to grow accustomed to their surroundings. Haidia, the girl, had arrived on beetle-back within an hour after Bram's departure, apparently into a cleft of the rocks—how he had communicated his order to the beetle steeds Tommy had no idea. And under the girl's ministrations Dodd was making good progress toward recovery.

That Haidia was in love with Dodd in quite a human way was evident. To please the girl, both Dodd and Tommy had learned to eat the raw shrimps, which, being bloodless, were really no worse than oysters, and had a flavor half-way between shrimp and crawfish. To please the men, Haidia tried not to

shudder when she saw them devouring the breadfruit and nectarines of which Bram always had a plentiful supply. Bram was solicitous in his inquiries for Dodd's health.

"Jim, I've been thinking about our chances of getting away," said Tommy one morning. "It's evident Bram's only waiting for your recovery to put some proposition up to us. Suppose you were to feign paralysis."

"How d'you mean? What for?" demanded Dodd.

"If he thinks you're helpless, he'll be less on his guard. You haven't walked about in his presence." That was true, for the activities of the two had been nocturnal, when Bram had vanished. "Let him think a nerve's been severed in your neck, or something of the sort. If it doesn't work, you can always get better."

Dodd's realistic portrayal of a man with a partly paralyzed right side brought cries of horror from Bram next morning. Solicitously he helped Dodd back to the couch. Bram, when not under the influence of

his drug, had moments of human feeling.

"Can't you move that arm and leg at all, Dodd?" he asked. "No feeling in them?"

"There's plenty of feeling," growled Dodd, "but they don't seem to work, that's all."

"You'll get better," said Bram eagerly. "You must get better. I need you, Dodd, in spite of our differences. There's work for all of us, wonderful work. A new humanity, waiting to be born, Dodd, not of the miserable ape race, but of—of—"

He checked himself, and a cunning look came over his face. He turned away abruptly.

At the end of two weeks or so, an amazing thing happened. One day Haidia, with a look of triumph in her eyes, addressed Dodd with a few English words!

Her brain, which had probably developed certain faculties in different proportions from those of the upper human race, had registered every word that

either of the two men had ever spoken, and remembered it. As soon as Dodd ascertained this, he began to instruct her, and, with her abnormal faculties of memory, it was not long before she could talk quite intelligently. The obstacle that had stood between them was swept away. She became one of themselves.

In the days that followed the girl told them brokenly something of the history of her race, of the legend of the universal flood that had driven them down into the bowels of the earth, of the centuries-long struggle with the beetles, and of the insects' gradual conquest of humanity, and the final reduction of the human race to a miserable, helpless remnant.

Everywhere, Haidia told them, were beetle swarms, everywhere humanity had been reduced to a few handfuls. Bram, by breeding mankind from prolific strains, and using the new-born progeny for food, had temporarily averted universal starvation. But a new swarm of beetles was due to hatch out shortly, and then—

The girl, with a shudder, put her hand to her bosom, and brought out a little bright-eyed lizard.

"The old man you saw with me, who is one of our wise elders, has told our people that these things feed upon the beetle larvae," she said. "We are putting them secretly into the nests. But what can a few lizards do against millions." She looked up. "In the earth above us, the beetle larvae extend for miles, in a solid mass," she said. "When they come out as beetles, it will be the end of all of us."

Bram had grown less suspicious as the time passed. His sudden visits to the cavern had ceased. Dodd and Tommy knew that he spent the nights—if they could be termed nights—lying in a drugged slumber somewhere among the rocks. They had asked Haidia whether there was any way of escape into the upper world.

"There are two ways from here," answered the girl. "One is the way you came, but it is impossible to pass the beetle guards without being torn to pieces. The other—"

She shuddered, and for an instant drew back the film from across her pupils, then uttered a little cry of pain at the light, dim though it was.

"There is a bridge across that terrible monster that devours all it touches," she said, shuddering, meaning the fire.

Suddenly Dodd had an inspiration. He still had the fur coat that he had worn, and, reaching into a pocket he drew out a pair of snow goggles, which he adjusted over Haidia's nose.

"Now look!" he said.

Haidia looked, blinked and, with an effort kept her eyes open. She gazed at Dodd in amazement. Dodd laughed, and pulled her toward him. He kissed her, and Haidia's eyes closed.

"What is this?" she murmured. "First you give me medicine that opens my eyes, and then you give me medicine that closes them."

"That's nothing," grinned Dodd. "Wait till you understand me better."

Bram's eyes were preternaturally bright. It was evident that he had been increasing his dose of late, and that he was fully under the influence of it now.

"Well, gentlemen, the time has come for us to be frank with one another," he said, as the three were gathered about the little table, while Haidia crouched in a far corner of the cave. "I want you to work for me in my plans for the regeneration of humanity. The time for which I have long labored is almost at hand. Any day now the new swarm of beetles may emerge from the pupal stage. But before I speak further, come and see them, gentlemen!"

He rose, and Dodd and Tommy rose too, Tommy supporting Dodd, who let his arm and leg trail awkwardly as he moved.

Bram led the way into the cleft among the rocks into which he had been in the habit of passing. Beyond this opening the two men saw another smaller cavern,

with a beetle guard standing on either side, antenna waving.

Bram shrilled a sound, and the antenna dropped. The three passed through. Tommy saw a hair-cloth pallet set against the rocks, a table, and a chair. Beyond was a sloping ramp of earth. Overhead was a rock ceiling.

Bram led the way up the ramp, and the three stepped through a gap in the rocks and found themselves on an extensive prairie. But in place of the red grass there was a vast sea of mud.

By the light cast by the petrol fire, which roared up in the distance, a veritable fiery fountain, the two Americans could see that the mud was filled with huge encysted forms, grubs three or four feet long, motionless in the soil.

Bram scooped up one of them and tossed it into the air. It thudded to their feet and remained motionless.

"As far as you can see, and for miles beyond, these pupae of the beetles lie buried in the decaying

vegetation in which the eggs were hatched," said Bram. "Every century and a half, so far as I have been able to judge from comparative anatomy, a fresh swarm emerges. See!"

He pointed to the pupa he had unearthed, which, as if stirred into activity by his handling, was now beginning to move. Or, rather, something was moving inside the cocoon.

The shell broke, and the hideous head and folded antenna of a beetle appeared. With a convulsive writhing, the monster threw off the covering and stepped out. It extended its wings, glistening, with moisture, from the still soft and pliant carapace, or shell, and suddenly zoomed off into the distance.

Tommy shuddered as the boom of its flight grew softer and subsided.

"Any day now the entire swarm will emerge," cried Bram. "How many moultings they undergo before they undergo the finished state, I do not know, but already, as you see, they are prepared for the battle of

life. They emerge ravenous. That beetle will fall upon the man-herds and devour a full grown man, unless the guards destroy it."

He raised his arms with the gesture of an ancient prophet. "Woe to the human race," he cried, "the wretched ape spawn that has cast out its teachers and persecuted those who sought to raise it to higher things!"

Tommy knew that Bram was referring to himself. Bram turned fiercely upon Dodd.

"When I joined the Greystoke expedition," he cried, "it was with the express intention of refuting your miserable theories as to the fossil monotremes. I could not sleep or eat, so deeply was I affronted by them. For, if they were true, the dasyuridae are an innovation in the great scheme of nature, and man, instead of being a mere afterthought, a jest of the Creative Force, came to earth with a purpose.

"That I deny," he yelled. "Man is a joke. Nature made him when she was tired, as the architect of a

cathedral fashions a gargoyle in a sportive moment. It is the insect, not man, who is the predestined lord of the ages!"

And for once in his life, perhaps because at this point Tommy dug him violently in the ribs, Dodd had the sense to remain silent. Bram led the way swiftly back into the larger cave.

"When this swarm hatches out," he said, "I calculate that there will be a trillion beetles seeking food. There is no food for a tithe of them here underneath the earth. What then? Do you realize their stupendous power, their invincibility?"

"No, you don't realize it, because your minds, through long habit, are only attuned to think in terms of man. All man's long history of slaughter of the so-called lower creatures obsesses you, blinds your understanding. A beetle? Something to be trodden underfoot, crushed in sport! But I tell you, gentlemen, that nature—God, if you will—has designed to supplant the man-ape by the beetle.

"He has resolved to throw down the wretched so-called intelligence of your kind and mine, and supplant it by the divine instinct of the beetle, an instinct that is infinitely superior, because it arrives at results instantaneously. It knows where man infers. Attuned closely to nature, it alone is able to fulfil the divine plan of Creation."

Bram was certainly under the influence of his drug; nevertheless, so violent were his gestures, so inspired was his utterance, that Tommy and Dodd listened almost in awe.

"They are invincible," Bram went on. "Their fecundity is such that when the new swarm is hatched out their numbers alone will make them irresistible. They do not know fear. They shrink from nothing. And they will follow me, their leader—I, who know the means of controlling them. How, then, can puny man hope to stand against them?"

"Join me, gentlemen," Bram went on. "And beware how you decide rashly. For this is the supreme moment, not only of your own lives, but for all

humanity and beetledom. Upon your decision hangs the future of the world.

"For, irresistible as the beetles are, there is one thing they lack. That is the sense of historic continuity. If they destroy man, they will know nothing of man's achievements, poor though these are. My own work on the fossil monotremes—"

"Which is a tissue of inaccuracies and half-baked deductions!" shouted Dodd.

Bram started as if a whip had lashed him. "Liar!" he bawled. "Do you think that I, who left the Greystoke expedition in a howling blizzard because I knew that here, in the inner earth, I could refute your miserable impostures—do you think that I am in the mood to listen to your wretched farrago of impossibilities?"

"Listen to me," bawled Dodd, advancing with waving arms. "Once and for all, let me tell you that your deductions are all based upon fallacious premises. No, I will not shut up, Tom Travers! You want me to aid your damned beetles in the destruction of

humanity! I tell you that your phascalotherium, amphitherium, and all the rest of them, including the marsupial lion, are degenerate developments of the age following the pleistocene. I say the whole insect world was made to fertilize the plant world, so that it should bear fruit for human food. Man is the summit of the scale of evolution, and I will never join in any infamous scheme for his destruction."

Bram glared at Dodd like a madman. Three times he opened his mouth to speak, but only inarticulate sounds came from his throat. And when at last he did speak, he said something that neither Dodd nor Tommy had anticipated.

"It looks as if you're not so paralysed as you made out," he sneered. "You'll change your mind within what used to be called a day, Dodd. You'll crawl to my feet and beg for pardon. And you'll recant your lying theories about the fossil monotremes, or you die—the pair of you—you die!"

Chapter 6: Escape!

"I heard what he said. You shall not die. We shall go away to your place, where there are no beetles to eat us, even if"—Haidia shuddered—"even if we have to cross the bridge of fire, beyond which, they tell me, lies freedom."

High over and a little to one side of the petrol flame Dodd and Tommy had seen the slender arch of rock leading into another cleft in the rocks. They had investigated it several times, but always the fierce heat had driven them back.

Both Dodd and Tommy had noticed, however, that at times the fire seemed to shrink in volume and intensity. Observation had shown them that these times were periodical, recurring about every twelve hours.

"I think I've got the clue, Tommy," said Dodd, as the three watched the fiery fountain and speculated on the possibility of escape. "That flow of petrol is controlled, like the tides on earth, by the pull of the

moon. Just now it is at its height. I've noticed that it loses pretty nearly half its volume at its alternating phase. If I'm right, we'll make the attempt in about twelve hours."

"Bram's given us twenty-four," said Tommy. "But how about getting Haidia across?"

"I go where you go," said Haidia, sidling up to Dodd and looking down upon him lovingly. "I do not afraid of the fire. If it burn me up, I go to the good place."

"Where's that, Haidia?" asked Dodd.

"When we die, we go to a place where it is always dark and there are no beetles, and the ground is full of shrimps. We leave our bodies behind, like the beetles, and fly about happy for ever."

"Not a bad sort of place," said Dodd, squeezing Haidia's arm. "If you think you're ready to try to cross the bridge, we'll start as soon as the fire gets lower."

"I'll be on the job," answered Haidia, unconsciously

reproducing a phrase of Tommy's.

The girl glided away, and disappeared through the thick of the beetle crowd clustered about the entrance to the cavern. Tommy and Dodd had already discovered that it was through her ability to reproduce a certain beetle sound meaning "not good to eat" that the girl could come and go. They had once tried it on their own account, and had narrowly escaped the lashing tentacles.

After that there was nothing to do but wait. Three or four hours must have passed when Bram returned from his inner cave.

"Well, Dodd, have you experienced a change of heart?" he sneered. "If you knew what's in store for you, maybe you'd come to the conclusion that you've been too cocksure about the monotremes. We're slaughtering in the morning."

"That so?" asked Dodd.

"That's so," shouted Bram. "The beetles are beginning

to emerge from the pupae, and they'll need food if they're to be kept quiet. We're rounding up about threescore of the culls—your friend Haidia will be among them. We've got some caged ichneumon flies, pretty little things only a foot long, which will sting them in certain nerve centers, rendering them powerless to move. Then we shall bury them, standing up, in the vegetable mould, for the beetles to devour alive, as soon as they come out of the shells. You'll feel pretty, Dodd, standing there unable to move, with the new born beetles biting chunks out of you."

Tommy shuddered, despite his hopes of their escaping. Bram, for a scientist, had a grim and picturesque imagination.

"Dodd, there is no personal quarrel between us," Bram went on. Again that note of pathetic pleading came into his voice. "Give up your mad ideas. Admit that the banded ant-eater, at least, existed before the pleistocene epoch, and everything can be settled. When you see what my beetles are going to do to humanity, you'll be proud to join us. Only make a beginning. You remember the point I made in my

paper, about spalacotherium in the Upper Jurassic rocks. It would convince anybody but a hardened fanatic."

"I read your paper, and I saw your so-called spalacotherium, reconstructed from what you called a jaw-bone," shouted Dodd. "That so-called jaw-bone was a lump of chalk, made porous by water, and the rest was in your imagination. Do your worst, Bram, I'll never crucify truth to save my life. And I'll laugh at your spalacotherium when your beetles are eating me."

Bram yelled and shrieked, he stamped up and down the cavern, shaking his fists at Dodd. At last, with a final torrent of objurgation, he disappeared.

"A pleasant customer," said Tommy. "We'll have to make that bridge, Jim, no question about it, even if it means death in the petrol fire."

"Fire's dying down fast," answered Dodd. "Haidia ought to be here soon."

"If Bram hasn't got her."

"Bram got—that girl? If Bram harms a hair of her head I'll kill him with worse tortures than he's ever dreamed of," answered Dodd, leaping up, white with rage.

"You mean you—?" Tommy began.

"Love her? Yes, I love her," shouted Dodd. "She's a girl in a million. Just the sort of helpmate I need to assist me in my work when we get back. I tell you, Tommy, I didn't know what love meant before I saw Haidia. I laughed at it as a romantic notion. 'Oh lyric love, half angel and half bird!'" he quoted, beginning to stride up and down the cavern, while Tommy watched him in amazement.

And at this moment a complete beetle entered the cave. Complete, because it had a plastron, or breast-shell, as well as a back-shell, or carapace.

A double breast-shell! A new species of beetle? An executioner beetle, sent by Bram to summon them to

the torture? Tommy shuddered, but Dodd, lost in his love ecstasy, was ignorant of the creature's advent.

"Oh lyric love—" he shouted again, as he twirled on his heel, to run smack into the monster. The crack of Dodd's head against the beetle-shell re-echoed through the cave.

The double plastron dropped, the carapace fell down: Haidia stood revealed. The lovers, folded in each other's arms, passed momentarily into a trance.

It was Tommy who separated them. "We'll have to make a move," he said. "I think the fire's as low as it ever gets. Why did you bring the shells, Haidia?"

"To save us all from the beetles," answered the girl. "When they see us in the shells, they will not know we are human. That is what makes it so hard to have to be eaten by those beetles, when they are such dumb-bells," she added, reproducing another of Tommy's words.

"Come," she continued bravely, "let us see if we can

pass the fire."

The roaring fountain made the air a veritable inferno. Overhead the rocks were red-hot. A cascade of sparks tumbled in a fiery shower from the rock roof. Dodd, holding Haidia in his arms, to protect her, staggered ahead, with Tommy in the rear. Only the beetle-shells, which acted as non-conductors of the heat, made that fiery passage possible.

There was one moment when it seemed to Tommy as if he must let go, and drop into that raging furnace underneath. He heard Dodd bawling hoarsely in front of him, he nerved himself to a last effort, beating fiercely at his blazing hair—and then the heat was past, and he had dropped unconscious upon a bed of cool earth beside a rushing river.

He was vaguely aware of being carried in Dodd's arms, but a long time seemed to have passed before he grew conscious again. He opened his eyes in utter darkness. Dodd was whispering in his ear.

"Tommy, old man, how are you feeling now?" Dodd

asked.

"All—right," Tommy muttered. "How's Haidia?"

"Still unconscious, poor girl. We've got to get out of here. I heard Bram yelling in the distance. He's discovered our flight. There may be another way out of the cave, and, if so, he'll stop at nothing to get us. See if you can stand, but keep your head low. There's a low roof of rock above us."

"There's water," said Tommy, listening to the roar of a torrent that seemed to be rushing past them.

"It's a stream, and I believe these shells will float and bear our weight. We've got to try. We've got to put everything to the touch now, Tommy. I'm going to lay Haidia on one of the shells, poor girl, and start her off. Then I'll follow, and you can bring up the rear."

"I'm with you," said Tommy, getting upon his feet, and uttering an exclamation of pain as, forgetful of Dodd's injunction, he let his head strike the rock roof overhead.

In the darkness he felt the outlines of his beetle-shell lying beside the torrent. He could hear Dodd in front of him, grunting as he raised Haidia's unconscious form in his arms and deposited her in her shell. Tommy got his own shell into the stream, and held it there as the waters swirled around it.

"Ready?" he heard Dodd call.

Before he could answer, there sounded from not far away, yet strangely muffled by the rocks, Bram's bellow of fury. Bram was evidently fully drugged and beside himself. Inarticulate threats came floating through the rocky chamber.

"Bram seems to have lost his head temporarily," called Dodd, laughing. "A madman, Tommy. He insists that the marsupial lion—"

"Yes, I heard you telling him about it," answered Tommy. "You handed it to him straight. However, more about the marsupial lion later. I'm ready."

"Then let 'er go," called Dodd, and his words were

swallowed up by the sound of the hollow shell striking against the rocky bank as he launched his strange craft into the water.

Tommy set one foot into the hollow of his shell, and let himself go.

Instantly the shell shot forward with fearful velocity. It was all Tommy could do to balance himself, for it seemed more unstable than a canoe. Once or twice he thought he heard Dodd shouting ahead of him, but his cries were drowned in the rush of the torrent.

Suddenly a light appeared in the distance. Tommy thought it was another of the petroleum fountains, and his heart seemed to stand still. But then he gave a gasp of relief. It was a cluster of luminous fungi, ten or twelve feet tall, emitting a glow equal to that of a dozen 40-watt electric bulbs.

By that infernal light Tommy could see that the stream curved sharply. It was about fifty feet in width, and the low rock roof had receded to some fifteen feet overhead. Instead of a tunnel, there was nothing on

either side of them but a vast tract of marshy ground thinly coated with the red grass.

As Tommy looked, he saw the shell that carried the unconscious body of Haidia strike the bank beside the phosphorescent growth. He could see the girl lying in the hollow of the shell, as pale as death, her eyes closed. Dodd was close behind. As the swirl of the current caught his shell, he turned to shout a warning to Tommy.

And Tommy noticed a singular thing, of which his sense of balance had already warned him, though he had hardly given conscious thought to the matter. *The river was running up-hill!*

Of course it was, since the center of gravity was in the shell of the earth, and not in the center!

But, again, the shell of the earth was under their feet!

Then Tommy hit on the solution to the problem. If the river was running up-hill, that meant that they must be near the exterior of the earth. In other words, they

had passed the center of gravity: they must be within a mile or so of the exit from Submundia!

Tommy was about to shout his discovery to Dodd when his shell grounded beside the two others, at the base of the clump of fungi.

Huge, straight, hollow stems they were, with mushroom caps, and, like all fungi, fly-blown, for Tommy could see worms nearly a foot in length crawling in and out of the porous stalks. The stench from the growth was nauseating and overpowering, utterly sickening.

"Push off and let's get out of here!" Tommy called to Dodd, who was balancing his shell against the bank, and trying to peer into Haidia's face.

At that moment he caught sight of something that made his blood turn cold!

It was an insect fully fifteen feet in height, three times that of a beetle, lurking among the fungi. He saw a hugely elongated neck, a three-cornered head with a

pair of tentacles, and two pairs of legs as long as a giraffe's. But what gave the added touch of horror was that the monster, balancing itself on its hind legs, had its forelegs extended in the attitude of one holding a prayer-book!

That attitude of devotion was so terrible that Tommy uttered a wild cry of terror. At the same time another cry broke from Dodd's lips.

"God, a praying mantis!" he shouted, struggling madly to push off his shell and Haidia's.

The next moment, as if shot from a catapult, the hideous monster launched itself into the air straight toward them.

Chapter 7: Through the Inferno

Fortunately, the monster miscalculated its leap. The huge legs, whirling through the air, came within a few inches of Tommy's head, but passed over him, and the mantis plunged into the stream. Instantly the water was alive with leaping things with faces of such grotesque horror that Tommy sat paralyzed in his rocking shell, unable to avert his eyes.

Things no more than a foot or two in length, to judge from the slender, eel-like bodies that leaped into the air, but things with catfish heads and tentacles, and eyes waving on stalks; things with clawlike appendages to their ventral fins, and mouths that widened to fearful size, so that the whole head seemed to disappear above them, disclosing fangs like wolves'. Instantly the water was churned into phosphorescent fire as they precipitated themselves upon the struggling mantis, whose enormous form, extending halfway from shore to shore, was covered with the river monsters, gnawing, rending, tearing.

Luckily the struggles of the dying monster carried it

downstream instead of up. In a few moments the immediate danger was past. And suddenly Haidia awoke, sat up.

"Where are we?" she cried. "Oh, I can see! I can see! Something has burned away from my eyes! I know this place. A wise man of my people once came here, and returned to tell of it. We must go on. Soon we shall be safe on the wide river. But there is another way that leads to here. We must go on! We must go on!"

Even as she spoke they heard the distant rasping of the beetle-legs. And before the shells were well in mid-current they saw the beetle horde coming round the bend; in the front of them Bram, reclining on his shell couch, and drawn by the eight trained beetles.

Bram saw the fugitives, and a roar of ironic mirth broke from his lips, resounding high above the strident rasping of the beetle-legs, and roaring over the marshes.

"I've got you, Dodd and Travers," he bellowed, as the

trained beetles hovered above the shell canoes. "You thought you were clever, but you're at my mercy. Now's your last chance, Dodd. I'll save you still if you'll submit to me, if you'll admit that there were fossil monotremes before the pleistocene epoch. Come, it's so simple! Say it after me: 'The marsupial lion—'"

"You go to hell!" yelled Dodd, nearly upsetting his shell as he shook his fist at his enemy.

High above the rasping sound came Bram's shrill whistle. Just audible to human ears, though probably sounding like the roar of thunder to those of the beetles, there was no need to wonder what it was.

It was the call to slaughter.

Like a black cloud the beetles shot forward. A serried phalanx covered the two men and the girl, hovering a few feet overhead, the long legs dangling to within arm's reach. And a terrible cry of fear broke from Haidia's lips.

Suddenly Tommy remembered Bram's cigarette-lighter. He pulled it from his pocket and ignited it.

Small as the flame was, it was actinically much more powerful than the brighter phosphorescence of the fungi behind them. The beetle-cloud overhead parted. The strident sound was broken into a confused buzzing as the terrified, blinded beetles plopped into the stream.

None of them, fortunately, fell into either of the three shells, but the mass of struggling monsters in the water was hardly less formidable to the safety of the occupants than that menacing cloud overhead.

"Get clear!" Tommy yelled to Dodd, trying to help the shell along with his hands.

He heard Bram's cry of baffled rage, and, looking backward, could not refrain from a laugh of triumph. Bram's trained steeds had taken fright and upset him. Bram had fallen into the red mud beside the stream, from which he was struggling up, plastered from head to feet, and shaking his fists and evidently

cursing, though his words could not be heard.

"How about your marsupial lion now, Bram?" yelled Dodd. "No monotremes before the pleistocene! D'you get that? That's my slogan now and for ever more!"

Bram shrieked and raved, and seemed to be inciting the beetles to a renewed assault. The air was still thick with them, but Tommy was waving the cigarette-lighter in a flaming arc, which cleared the way for them.

Then suddenly came disaster. The flame went out! Tommy closed the lighter with a snap and opened it. In vain. In his excitement he must have spilled all the contents, for it would not catch.

Bram saw and yelled derision. The beetle-cloud was thickening. Tommy, now abreast of his companions on the widening stream, saw the imminent end.

And then once more fate intervened. For, leaping through the air out of the places where they had lain concealed, six mantises launched themselves at their

beetle prey.

Those awful bounds of the long-legged monsters, the scourges of the insect world, carried them clear from one bank to the other—fortunately for the occupants of the shells. In an instant the beetle-cloud dissolved. And it had all happened in a few seconds. Before Dodd or Tommy had quite taken in the situation, the mantises, each carrying a victim in its grooved legs, had vanished like the beetles. There was no sign of Bram. The three were alone upon the face of the stream, which went swirling upward into renewed darkness.

Tommy saw Dodd bend toward Haidia as she lay on her shell couch. He heard the sound of a noisy kiss. And he lay back in the hollow of his shell, with the feeling that nothing that could happen in the future could be worse than what they had passed through.

Days went by, days when the sense of dawning freedom filled their hearts with hope. Haidia told Dodd and Tommy that, according to the legends of her people, the river ran into the world from which

they had been driven by the floods, ages before.

There had been no further signs of Bram or the beetle horde, and Dodd and Tommy surmised that it had been disorganized by the attack of the mantises, and that Bram was engaged in regaining his control over it. But neither of them believed that the respite would be a long one, and for that reason they rested ashore only for the briefest intervals, just long enough to snatch a little sleep, and to eat some of the shrimps that Haidia was adept at finding—or to pull some juicy fruit surreptitiously from a tree.

Incidents there were, nevertheless, during those days. For hours their shells were followed by a school of the luminous river monsters, which, nevertheless, made no attempt to attack them. And once, hearing a cry from Haidia, as she was gathering shrimps, Dodd ran forward to see her battling furiously with a luminous scorpion, eight feet in length, that had sprung at her from its lurking place behind a pear shrub.

Dodd succeeded in stunning and dispatching the monster without suffering any injury from it, but the

strain of the period was beginning to tell on all of them. Worst of all, they seemed to have left all the luminous vegetation behind them, and were entering a region of almost total darkness, in which Haidia had to be their eyes.

Something had happened to the girl's sight in the journey over the petrol spring. As a matter of fact, the third, or nictitating membrane, which the humans of Submundia possessed, in common with birds, had been burned away. Haidia could see as well as ever in the dark, but she could bear more light than formerly as well. Unobtrusively she assumed command of the party. She anticipated their wants, dug shrimps in the darkness, and fed Tommy and Dodd with her own hands.

"God, what a girl!" breathed Dodd to his friend. "I've always had the reputation of being a woman-hater, Tommy, but once I get that girl to civilization I'm going to take her to the nearest Little Church Around the Corner in record time."

"I wish you luck, old man, I'm sure," answered

Tommy. Dodd's words did not seem strange to him. Civilization was growing very remote to him, and Broadway seemed like a memory of some previous incarnation.

The river was growing narrower again, and swifter, too. On the last day, or night, of their journey—though they did not know that it was to be their last—it swirled so fiercely that it threatened every moment to upset their beetle-shells. Suddenly Tommy began to feel giddy. He gripped the side of his shell with his hand.

"Tommy, we're going round!" shouted Dodd in front of him.

There was no longer any doubt of it. The shells were revolving in a vortex of rushing, foaming water.

"Haidia!" they shouted.

The girl's voice came back thickly across the roaring torrent. The circles grew smaller. Tommy knew that he was being sucked nearer and nearer to the edge of

some terrific whirlpool in that inky blackness. Now he could no longer hear Dodd's shouts, and the shell was tipping so that he could feel the water rushing along the edge of it. But for the exercise of centrifugal force he would have been flung from his perilous seat, for he was leaning inward at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Then suddenly his progress was arrested. He felt the shell being drawn to the shore. He leaped out, and Haidia's strong hands dragged the shell out of the torrent, while Tommy sank down, gasping.

"What's the matter?" he heard Dodd demanding.

"There is no more river," said Haidia calmly. "It goes into a hole in the ground. So much I have heard from the wise men of my people. They say that it is near such a place that they fled from the flood in years gone by."

"Then we're near safety," shouted Tommy. "That river must emerge as a stream somewhere in the upper world, Dodd. I wonder where the road lies."

"There is a road here," came Haidia's calm voice. "Let us put on our shells again, since who knows whether there may not be beetles here."

"Did you ever see such a girl as that?" demanded Dodd ecstatically. "First she saves our lives, and then she thinks of everything. Good lord, she'll remember my meals, and to wind my watch for me, and—and—"

But Haidia's voice, some distance ahead, interrupted Dodd's soliloquy, and, hoisting the beetle-shells upon their backs, they started along the rough trail that they could feel with their feet over the stony ground. It was still as dark as pitch, but soon they found themselves traveling up a sunken way that was evidently a dry watercourse. And now and again Haidia's reassuring voice would come from in front of them.

The road grew steeper. There could no longer be any doubt that they were ascending toward the surface of the earth. But even the weight of the beetle-shells and the steepness could not account for the feeling of intense weakness that took possession of them. Time

and again they stopped, panting.

"We must be very near the surface, Dodd," said Tommy. "We've surely passed the center of gravity. That's what makes it so difficult."

"Come on," Haidia said in her quiet voice, stretching out her hand through the darkness. And for very shame they had to follow her.

On and on, hour after hour, up the steep ascent, resting only long enough to make them realize their utter fatigue. On because Haidia was leading them, and because in the belief that they were about to leave that awful land behind them their desires lent new strength to their limbs continuously.

Suddenly Haidia uttered a fearful cry. Her ears had caught what became apparent to Dodd and Jimmy several seconds later.

Far down in the hollow of the earth, increased by the echoes that came rumbling up, they heard the distant, strident rasp of the beetle swarm.

Then it was Dodd's turn to support Haidia and whisper consolation in her ears. No thought of resting now. If they were to be overwhelmed at last by the monsters, they meant to be overwhelmed in the upper air.

It was growing insufferably hot. Blasts of air, as if from a furnace, began to rush up and down past them. And the trail was growing steeper still, and slippery as glass.

"What is it, Jim?" Tommy panted, as Dodd, leaving Haidia for a moment, came back to him.

"I'd say lava," Dodd answered. "If only one could see something! I don't know how she finds her way. My impression is that we are coming out through the interior of an extinct volcano."

"But where are there volcanoes in the south polar regions?" inquired Tommy.

"There are Mount Erebus and Mount Terror, in South Victoria Land, active volcanoes discovered by Sir

James Ross in 1841, and again by Borchgrevink, in 1899. If that's where we're coming out—well, Tommy, we're doomed, because it's the heart of the polar continent. We might as well turn back."

"But we won't turn back," said Tommy. "I'm damned if we do."

"We're damned if we don't," said Dodd.

"Come along please!" sang Haidia's voice high up the slope.

They struggled on. And now a faint luminosity was beginning to penetrate that infernal darkness. The rasping of the beetle-legs, too, was no longer audible. Perhaps they had thrown Bram off their track! Perhaps in the darkness he had not known which way they had gone after leaving the whirlpool!

That thought encouraged them to a last effort. They pushed their flagging limbs up, upward through an inferno of heated air. Suddenly Dodd uttered a yell and pointed upward.

"God!" ejaculated Tommy. Then he seized Dodd in his arms and nearly crushed him. For high above them, a pin-point in the black void, they saw—a star!

They were almost at the earth's surface!

One more effort, and suddenly the ground seemed to give beneath them. They breathed the outer air, and went sliding down a chute of sand, and stopped, half buried, at the bottom.

Chapter 8: Recaptured

"Where are we?" each demanded of the other, as they staggered out.

It was a moonless night, and the air was chill, but they were certainly nowhere near the polar regions, for there was no trace of snow to be seen anywhere. All about them was sand, with here and there a spiny shrub standing up stiff and erect and solitary.

When they had disengaged themselves from the clinging sand they could see that they were apparently in the hollow of a vast crater, that must have been half a mile in circumference. It was low and worn down to an elevation of not more than two or three hundred feet, and evidently the volcano that had thrown it up had been extinct for millennia.

"Water!" gasped Dodd.

They looked all about them. They could see no signs of a spring anywhere, and both were parched with thirst after their terrific climb.

"We must find water, Haidia," said Tommy. "Why, what's the matter?"

Haidia was pointing upward at the starry heaven, and shivering with fear. "Eyes!" she cried. "Big beetles waiting for us up there!"

"No, no, Haidia," Dodd explained. "Those are stars. They are worlds—places where people live."

"Will you take me up there?" asked Haidia.

"No, this is our world," said Dodd. "And by and by the sun will rise, that's a big ball of fire up there. He watches over the world and gives us light and warmth. Don't be afraid. I'll take care of you."

"Haidia is not afraid with Jimmydodd to take care of her," replied the girl with dignity. "Haidia smells water—over there." She pointed across one side of the crater.

"There we'd better hurry," said Tommy, "because I can't hold out much longer."

The three scrambled over the soft sand, which sucked in their feet to the ankle at every step. It was with the greatest difficulty that they succeeded in reaching the crater's summit, low though it was. Then Dodd uttered a cry, and pointed. In front of them extended a long pool of water, with a scrubby growth around the edges.

The ground was firmer here, and they hurried toward it. Tommy was the first to reach it. He lay down on his face and drank eagerly. He had taken in a quart before he discovered that the water was saline.

At the same time Dodd uttered an exclamation of disgust. Haidia, too, after sipping a little of the fluid, had stood up, chattering excitedly in her own language.

But she was not chattering about the water. She was pointing toward the scrub. "Men there!" she cried. "Men like you and Tommy, Jimmydodd."

Tommy and Dodd looked at each other, the water already forgotten in their excitement at Haidia's

information, which neither of them doubted.

Brave as she was, the girl now hung back behind Dodd, letting the two men take precedence of her. The water, saline as it was, had partly quenched their thirst. They felt their strength reviving.

And it was growing light. In the east the sky was already flecked with yellow pink. They felt a thrill of intense excitement at the prospect of meeting others of their kind.

"Where do you think we are?" asked Tommy.

Dodd stopped to look at a shrub that was growing near the edge of the pool. "I don't think, I know, Tommy," he answered. "This is wattle."

"Yes?"

"We're somewhere in the interior regions of the Australian continent—and that's not going to help us much."

"Over there—over there," panted Haidia. "Hold me, Jimmydodd. I can't see. Ah, this terrible light!"

She screwed her eyelids tightly together to shut out the pale light of dawn. The men had already discovered that the third membrane had been burned away.

"We must get her out of here," whispered Dodd to Tommy. "Somewhere where it's dark, before the sun rises. Let's go back to the entrance of the crater."

But Haidia, her arm extended, persisted, "Over there! Over there!"

Suddenly a spear came whirling out of a growth of wattle beside the pool. It whizzed past Tommy's face and dropped into the sand behind. Between the trunks of the wattles they could see the forms of a party of blackfellows, watching them intently.

Tommy held up his arms and moved forward with a show of confidence that he was far from feeling. After what he had escaped in the underworld he was in no

mood to be massacred now.

But the blacks were evidently not hostile. It was probable that the spear had not been aimed to kill. At the sight of the two white men, and the white woman, they came forward doubtfully, then more fearlessly, shouting in their language. In another minute Tommy and Dodd were the center of a group of wondering savages.

Especially Haidia. Three or four gins, or black women, had crept out of the scrub, and were already examining her with guttural cries, and fingering the hair garment that she wore.

"Water!" said Tommy, pointing to his throat, and then to the pool, with a frown of disgust.

The blackfellows grinned, and led the three a short distance to a place where a large hollow had been scooped in the sandy floor of the desert. It was full of water, perfectly sweet to the taste. The three drank gratefully.

Suddenly the edge of the sun appeared above the horizon, gilding the sand with gold. The sunlight fell upon the three, and Haidia uttered a terrible cry of distress. She dropped upon the sand, her hands pressed to her eyes convulsively. Tommy and Dodd dragged her into the thickest part of the scrub, where she lay moaning.

They contrived bandages from the remnants of their clothing, and these, damped with cold water, and bound over the girl's eyes, alleviated her suffering somewhat. Meanwhile the blackfellows had prepared a meal of roast opossum. After their long diet of shrimps, it tasted like ambrosia to the two men.

Much to their surprise, Haidia seemed to enjoy it too. The three squatted in the scrub among the friendly blacks, discussing their situation.

"These fellows will save us," said Dodd. "It may be that we're quite near the coast, but, any way, they'll stick to us, even if only out of curiosity. They'll take us somewhere. But as soon as we get Haidia to safety we'll have to go back along our trail. We mustn't lose

our direction. Suppose I was laughed at when I get back, called a liar! I tell you, we've got to have something to show, to prove my statements, before I can persuade anybody to fit out an expedition into Submundia. Even those three beetle-shells that we dropped in the crater won't be conclusive evidence for the type of mind that sits in the chairs of science to-day. And, speaking of that, we must get those blacks to carry those shells for us. I tell you, nobody will believe—"

"What's that?" cried Tommy sharply, as a rasping sound rose above the cries of the frightened blacks.

But there was no need to ask. Out of the crater two enormous beetles were winging their way toward them, two beetles larger than any that they had seen.

Fully seven feet in length, they were circling about each other, apparently engaged in a vicious battle.

The fearful beaks stabbed at the flesh beneath the shells, and they alternately stabbed and drew back, all the while approaching the party, which watched

them, petrified with terror.

It was evident that the monsters had no conception of the presence of humans. Blinded by the sun, only one thing could have induced them to leave the dark depths of Submundia. That was the mating instinct. The beetles were evidently rival leaders of some swarm, engaged in a duel to the death.

Round and round they went in a dizzy maze, stabbing and thrusting, jaws closing on flesh, until they dropped, close-locked in battle, not more than twenty feet from the little party of blacks and whites, both squirming in the agonies of death.

"I don't think that necessarily means that the swarm is on our trail," said Tommy, a little later, as the three stood beside the shells that they had discarded.

"Those two were strays, lost from the swarm and maddened by the mating instinct. Still, it might be as well to wear these things for a while, in case they do follow us."

"You're right," answered Dodd, as he placed one of

the shells around Haidia. "We've got to get this little lady to civilization, and we've got to protect our lives in order to give this great new knowledge to the world. If we are attacked, you must sacrifice your life for me, Tommy, so that I can carry back the news."

"Righto!" answered Tommy with alacrity. "You bet I will, Jim."

The glaring sun of mid-afternoon was shining down upon the desert, but Haidia was no longer in pain. It was evident that she was fast becoming accustomed to the sunlight, though she still kept her eyes screwed up tightly, and had to be helped along by Dodd and Jimmy. In high good humor the three reached the encampment, to find that the blacks were feasting on the dead beetles, while the two eldest members of the party had proudly donned the shells.

It was near sunset before they finally started. Dodd and Tommy had managed to make it clear to them that they wished to reach civilization, but how near this was there was, of course, no means of determining. They noted, however, that the party

started in a southerly direction.

"I should say," said Dodd, "that we are in South Australia, probably three or four hundred miles from the coast. We've got a long journey before us, but these blackfellows will know how to procure food for us."

They certainly knew how to get water, for, just as it began to grow dark, when the three were already tormented by thirst, they stopped at what seemed a mere hollow among the stones and boulders that strewn the face of the desert, and scooped away the sand, leaving a hole which quickly filled with clear, cold water of excellent taste.

After which they made signs that they were to camp there for the night. The moon was riding high in the sky. As it grew dark, Haidia opened her eyes, saw the luminary, and uttered an exclamation, this time not of fear, but of wonder.

"Moon," said Dodd. "That's all right, girl. She watches over the night, as the sun does over the day."

"Haidia likes the moon better than the sun," said the girl wistfully. "But the moon not strong enough to keep away the beetles."

"If I was you, I'd forget about the beetles, Haidia," said Dodd. "They won't come out of that hole in the ground. You'll never see them again."

And, as he spoke, they heard a familiar rasping sound far in the distance.

"How the wind blows," said Tommy, desperately resolved not to believe his ears. "I think a storm's coming up."

But Haidia, with a scream of fear, was clinging to Dodd, and the blacks were on their feet, spears and boomerangs in their hands, looking northward.

Out of that north a little black cloud was gathering. A cloud that spread gradually, as a thunder-cloud, until it covered a good part of the sky. And still more of the sky, and still more. All the while that faint, distant rasping was audible, but it did not increase in volume.

It was as if the beetles had halted until the full number of the swarm had come up out of the crater.

Then the cloud, which by now covered half the sky, began to take geometric form. It grew square, the ragged edges seemed to trim themselves away, streaks of light shot through it at right angles, as if it was marshaling itself into companies.

The doomed men and the girl stood perfectly still, staring at that phenomenon. They knew that only a miracle could save them. They did not even speak, but Haidia clung more tightly to Dodd's arm.

Then suddenly the cloud spread upward and covered the face of the moon.

"Well, this is good-by, Tommy," said Dodd, gripping his friend's hand. "God, I wish I had a revolver, or a knife!" He looked at Haidia.

Suddenly the rasping became a whining shriek. A score of enormous beetles, the advance guards of the army, zoomed out of the darkness into a ray of

straggling moonlight. Shrieking, the blacks, who had watched the approaching swarm perfectly immobile, threw away the two shells and bolted.

"Good Lord," Dodd shouted, "did you see the color of their shells, Tommy?" Even in that moment the scientific observer came uppermost in him. "Those red edges? They must be young ones, Tommy. It's the new brood! No wonder Bram stayed behind! He was waiting for them to hatch! The new brood! We're doomed—doomed! All my work wasted!"

The blackfellows did not get very far. A hundred yards from the place where they started to run they dropped, their bodies hidden beneath the clustering monsters, their screams cut short as those frightful beaks sought their throats, and those jaws crunched through flesh and bone.

Circling around Dodd, Tommy, and Haidia, as if puzzled by their appearance, the beetles kept up a continuous, furious droning that sounded like the roar of Niagara mixed with the shrieking of a thousand sirens. The moon was completely hidden, and only a

dim, nebulous light showed the repulsive monsters as they flew within a few feet of the heads of the fugitives. The stench was overpowering.

But suddenly a ray of white light shot through the darkness, and, with a changed note, just perceptible to the ears of the two men, but doubtless of the greatest significance to the beetles, the swarm fled apart to right and left, leaving a clear lane, through which appeared—Bram, reclining on his shell-couch above his eight trained beetle steeds!

Hovering overhead, the eight huge monsters dropped lightly to the ground beside the three. Bram sat up, a vicious grin upon his twisted face. In his hand he held a large electric bulb, its sides sheathed in a roughly carved wooden frame; the wire was attached to a battery behind him.

"Well met, my friends!" he shouted exultantly. "I owe you more thanks than I can express for having so providentially left the electrical equipment of your plane undamaged after you crashed at the entrance to Submundia. I had a hunch about it—and the hunch

worked!"

He grinned more malevolently as he looked from one man to the other.

"You've run your race," he said. "But I'm going to have a little fun with you before you die. I'm going to use you as an object lesson. You'll find it out in a little while."

"Go ahead, go ahead, Bram," Dodd grinned back at him. "Just a few million years ago, and you were a speck of protoplasm—in that pre-pleistocene age—swimming among the invertebrate crustaceans that characterized that epoch."

"Invertebrates and monotremes, Dodd," said Bram, almost wistfully. "The mammals were already existent on the earth, as you know—" Suddenly he broke off, as he realized that Dodd was spoofing him. A yell of execration broke from his lips. He uttered a high whistle, and instantly the whiplike lashes of a hundred beetles whizzed through the darkness and remained poised over Dodd's head.

"Not even the marsupial lion, Bram," grinned Dodd, undismayed. "Go ahead, go ahead, but I'll not die with a lie upon my lips!"

Chapter 9: The Trail of Death

"There's sure some sort of hoodoo on these Antarctic expeditions, Wilson," said the city editor of *The Daily Record* to the star rewrite man. He glanced through the hastily typed report that had come through on the wireless set erected on the thirty-sixth story of the Record Building. "Tommy Travers gone, eh? And James Dodd, too! There'll be woe and wailing along the Great White Way to-night when this news gets out. They say that half the chorus girls in town considered themselves engaged to Tommy. Nice fellow, too! Always did like him!"

"Queer, that curtain of fog that seems to lie on the actual site of the south pole," he continued, glancing over the report again. "So Storm thinks that Tommy crashed in it, and that it's a million to one against their ever finding his remains. What's this about beetles? Shells of enormous prehistoric beetles found

by Tommy and Dodd! That'll make good copy, Wilson. Let's play that up. Hand it to Jones, and tell him to scare up a catching headline or two."

He beckoned to the boy who was hurrying toward his desk, a flimsy in his hand, glanced through it, and tossed it toward Wilson.

"What do they think this is, April Fool's Day?" he asked. "I'm surprised that the International Press should fall for such stuff as that!"

"Why, to-morrow is the first of April!" exclaimed Wilson, tossing back the cable dispatch with a contemptuous laugh.

"Well, it won't do the I. P. much good to play those tricks on their subscribers," said the city editor testily. "I'm surprised, to say the least. I guess their Adelaide correspondent has gone off his head or something. Using poor Travers's name, too! Of course that fellow didn't know he was dead, but still...."

That was how *The Daily Record* missed being the first

to give out certain information that was to stagger the world. The dispatch, which had evidently outrun an earlier one, was as follows:

ADELAIDE, South Australia, March 31.—
Further telegraphic communications arriving almost continuously from Settler's Station, signed by Thomas Travers, member of Travers Antarctic Expedition, who claims to have penetrated earth's interior at south pole and to have come out near Victoria Desert. Travers states that swarm of prehistoric beetles, estimated at two trillion, and as large as men, with shells impenetrable by rifle bullets, now besieging Settler's Station, where he and Dodd and Haidia, woman of subterranean race whom they brought away, are shut up in telegraph office. Bram, former member of Greystoke Expedition, said to be in charge of swarm, with intention of obliterating human race. Every living thing at Settler's Station destroyed, and swarm moving south.

It was a small-town paper a hundred miles from New

York that took a chance on publishing this report from the International Press, in spite of frantic efforts on the parts of the head office to recall it after it had been transmitted. This paper published the account as an April Fool's Day joke, though later it took to itself the credit for having believed it. But by the time April Fool's Day dawned all the world knew that the account was, if anything, an under-estimate of the fearful things that were happening "down under."

It was known now that the swarm of monsters had originated in the Great Victoria Desert, one of the worst stretches of desolation in the world, situated in the south-east corner of Western Australia. Their numbers were incalculable. Wimbush, the aviator, who was attempting to cross the continent from east to west, reported afterward that he had flown for four days, skirting the edge of the swarm, and that the whole of that time they were moving in the same direction, a thick cloud that left a trail of dense darkness on earth beneath them, like the path of an eclipse. Wimbush escaped them only because he had a ceiling of twenty thousand feet, to which apparently

the beetles could not soar.

And this swarm was only about one-fourth of the whole number of the monsters. This was the swarm that was moving westward, and subsequently totally destroyed all living things in Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, Perth, and all the coastal cities of Western Australia.

Ships were found drifting in the Indian Ocean, totally destitute of crews and passengers; not even their skeletons were found, and it was estimated that the voracious monsters had carried them away bodily, devoured them in the air, and dropped the remains into the water.

All the world knows now how the sea elephant herd on Kerguelen Island was totally destroyed, and of the giant shells that were found lying everywhere on the deserted beaches, in positions that showed the monsters had in the end devoured one another.

Mauritius was the most westerly point reached by a fraction of the swarm. A little over twenty thousand of the beetles reached that lovely island, by count of the

shells afterward, and all the world knows now of the desperate and successful fight that the inhabitants waged against them. Men and women, boys and girls, blacks and whites, finding that the devils were invulnerable against rifle fire, sallied forth boldly with knives and choppers, and laid down a life for a life.

On the second day after their appearance, the main swarm, a trillion and a half strong, reached the line of the transcontinental railway, and moved eastward into South Australia, traveling, it was estimated, at the rate of two hundred miles an hour. By the next morning they were in Adelaide, a city of nearly a quarter of a million people. By nightfall every living thing in Adelaide and the suburbs had been eaten, except for a few who succeeded in hiding in walled-up cellars, or in the surrounding marshes.

That night the swarm was on the borders of New South Wales and Victoria, and moving in two divisions toward Melbourne and Sydney.

The northern half, it was quickly seen, was flying "wild," with no particular objective, moving in a solid

cohort two hundred miles in length, and devouring game, stock, and humans indiscriminately. It was the southern division, numbering perhaps a trillion, that was under command of Bram, and aimed at destroying Melbourne as Adelaide had been destroyed.

Bram, with his eight beetle steeds, was by this time known and execrated throughout the world. He was pictured as Anti-Christ, and the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Book of Revelations.

And all this while—or, rather, until the telegraph wires were cut—broken, it was discovered later, by perching beetles—Thomas Travers was sending out messages from his post at Settler's Station.

Soon it was known that prodigious creatures were following in the wake of the devastating horde. Mantises, fifteen feet in height, winged things like pterodactyls, longer than bombing airplanes, followed, preying on the stragglers. But the main bodies never halted, and the inroads that the destroyers made on their numbers were insignificant.

Before the swarm reached Adelaide the Commonwealth Government had taken action. Troops had been called out, and all the available airplanes in the country had been ordered to assemble at Broken Hill, New South Wales, a strategic point commanding the approaches to Sydney and Melbourne. Something like four hundred airplanes were assembled, with several batteries of anti-aircraft guns that had been used in the Great War. Every amateur aviator in Australia was on the spot, with machines ranging from tiny Moths to Handley-Pages—anything that could fly.

Nocturnal though the beetles had been, they no longer feared the light of the sun. In fact, it was ascertained later that they were blind. An opacity had formed over the crystalline lens of the eye. Blind, they were no less formidable than with their sight. They existed only to devour, and their numbers made them irresistible, no matter which way they turned.

As soon as the vanguard of the dark cloud was sighted from Broken Hill, the airplanes went aloft. Four hundred planes, each armed with machine guns,

dashed into the serried hosts, drumming out volleys of lead. In a long line, extending nearly to the limits of the beetle formation, thus giving each aviator all the room he needed, the planes gave battle.

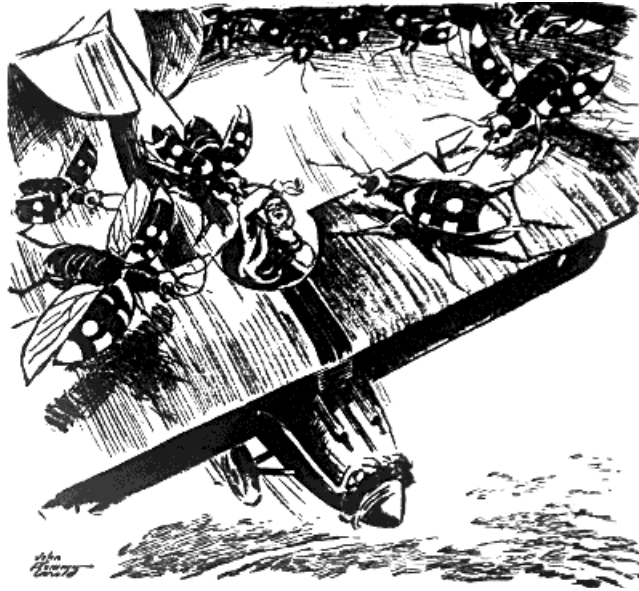
The first terror that fell upon the airmen was the discovery that, even at close range, the machine gun bullets failed to penetrate the shells. The force of the impact whirled the beetles around, drove them together in bunches, sent them groping with weaving tentacles through the air—but that was all. On the main body of the invaders no impression was made whatever.

The second terror was the realization that the swarm, driven down here and there from an altitude of several hundred feet, merely resumed their progress on the ground, in a succession of gigantic leaps. Within a few minutes, instead of presenting an inflexible barrier, the line of airplanes was badly broken, each plane surrounded by swarms of the monsters.

Then Bram was seen. And that was the third terror,

the sight of the famous beetle steeds, four pairs abreast, with Bram reclining like a Roman emperor upon the surface of the shells. It is true, Bram had no inclination to risk his own life in battle. At the first sight of the aviators he dodged into the thick of the swarm, where no bullet could reach him. Bram managed to transmit an order, and the beetles drew together.

Some thought afterward that it was by thought transference he effected this maneuver, for instantly the beetles, which had hitherto flown in loose order, became a solid wall, a thousand feet in height, closing in on the planes. The propellers struck them and snapped short, and as the planes went weaving down, the hideous monsters leaped into the cockpits and began their abominable meal.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration of a scene from the short novel, *The Beetle Hoard*, by Victor Rousseau, portraying a scene where an old-fashioned, single-pilot airplane is attacked by a swarm of giant, spotted beetles. Image description end.]

Not a single plane came back. Planes and skeletons, and here and there a shell of a dead beetle, itself completely devoured, were all that was found afterward.

The gunners stayed at their posts till the last moment, firing round after round of shell and shrapnel, with insignificant results. Their skeletons were found not twenty paces from their guns—where the Gunners'

Monument now stands.

Half an hour after the flight had first been sighted the news was being radioed to Sydney, Melbourne, and all other Australian cities, advising instant flight to sea as the only chance of safety. That radio message was cut short—and men listened and shuddered. After that came the crowding aboard all craft in the harbors, the tragedies of the *Eustis*, the *All Australia*, the *Sepphoris*, sunk at their moorings. The innumerable sea tragedies. The horde of fugitives that landed in New Zealand. The reign of terror when the mob got out of hand, the burning of Melbourne, the sack of Sydney.

And south and eastward, like a resistless flood, the beetle swarm came pouring. Well had Bram boasted that he would make the earth a desert!

A hundred miles of poisoned carcasses of sheep, extended outside Sydney's suburbs, gave the first promise of success. Long mounds of beetle shells testified to the results; moreover, the beetles that fed on the carcasses of their fellows, were in turn

poisoned and died. But this was only a drop in the bucket. What counted was that the swift advance was slowing down. As if exhausted by their efforts, or else satiated with food, the beetles were doing what the soldiers did.

They were digging in!

Twenty-four miles from Sydney, eighteen outside Melbourne, the advance was stayed.

Volunteers who went out from those cities reported that the beetles seemed to be resting in long trenches that they had excavated, so that only their shells appeared above ground. Trees were covered with clinging beetles, every wall, every house was invisible beneath the beetle armor.

Australia had a respite. Perhaps only for a night or day, but still time to draw breath, time to consider, time for the shiploads of fugitives to get farther from the continent that had become a shambles.

And then the cry went up, not only from Australia, but

from all the world, "Get Travers!"

Chapter 10: At Bay

Bram put his fingers to his mouth and whistled, a shrill whistle, yet audible to Dodd, Tommy, and Haidia. Instantly three pairs of beetles appeared out of the throng. Their tentacles went out, and the two men and the girl found themselves hoisted separately upon the backs of the pairs. Next moment they were flying side by side, high in the air above the surrounding swarm.

They could see one another, but it was impossible for them to make their voices heard above the rasping of the beetles' legs. Hours went by, while the moon crossed the sky and dipped toward the horizon. Tommy knew that the moon would set about the hour of dawn. And the stars were already beginning to pale when he saw a line of telegraph poles, then two lines of shining metals, then a small settlement of stone and brick houses.

Tommy was not familiar with the geography of

Australia, but he knew this must be the transcontinental line.

Whirling onward, the cloud of beetles suddenly swooped downward. For a moment Tommy could see the frightened occupants of the settlement crowding into the single street, then he shuddered with sick horror as he saw them obliterated by the swarm.

There was no struggle, no attempt at flight or resistance. One moment those forty-odd men were there—the next minute they existed no longer. There was nothing but a swarm of beetles, walking about like men with shells upon their backs.

And now Tommy saw evidences of Bram's devilish control of the swarm. For out of the cloud dropped what seemed to be a phalanx of beetle guards, the military police of beetledom, and, lashing fiercely with their tentacles, they drove back all the swarm that sought to join their companions in their ghoulish feast. There was just so much food and no more; the rest must seek theirs further.

But even beetles, it may be presumed, are not entirely under discipline at all times. The pair of beetles that bore Tommy, suddenly swooped apart, ten or a dozen feet from the ground, and dashed into the thick of the struggling, frenzied mass, flinging their rider to earth.

Tommy struck the soft sand, sat up, half dazed, saw his shell lying a few feet away from him, and retrieved it just as a couple of the monsters came swooping down at him.

He looked about him. Not far away stood Dodd and Haidia, with their shells on their backs. They recognized Tommy and ran toward him.

Not more than twenty yards away stood the railroad station, with several crates of goods on the platform. Next to it was a substantial house of stone, with the front door open.

Tommy pointed to it, and Dodd understood and shouted something that was lost in the furious buzz of the beetles' wings as they devoured their prey. The three raced for the entrance, gained it unmolested,

and closed the door.

There was a key in the door, and it was light enough for them to see a chain, which Dodd pulled into position. There was only one story, and there were three rooms, apparently, with the kitchen. Tommy rushed to the kitchen door, locked it, too, and, with almost super-human efforts, dragged the large iron stove against it. He rushed to the window, but it was a mere loophole, not large enough to admit a child. Nevertheless, he stood the heavy table on end so that it covered it. Then he ran back.

Dodd had already barricaded the window of the larger room, which was a bed-sitting room, with a heavy wardrobe, and the wooden bedstead, jamming the two pieces sidewise against the wall, so that they could not be forced apart without being demolished. He was now busy in the smaller room, which seemed to be the station-master's office, dragging an iron safe across the floor. But the window was criss-crossed with iron bars, and it was evident that the safe, which was locked, contained at times considerable money, for the window could hardly have been forced save by

a charge of nitro-glycerine or dynamite. However, it was against the door that Dodd placed the safe, and he stood back, panting.

"Good," said Haidia. "That will hold them."

The two men looked at her doubtfully. Did Haidia know what she was talking about?

The sun had risen. A long shaft shot into the room. Outside the beetles were still buzzing as they turned over the vestiges of their prey. There were as yet no signs of attack. Suddenly Tommy grasped Dodd's arm.

"Look!" he shouted, pointing to a corner which had been in gloom a moment before.

There was a table there, and on it a telegraphic instrument. Telegraphy had been one of Tommy's hobbies in boyhood. In a moment he was busy at the table.

Dot-dash-dot-dash! Then suddenly outside a furious hum, and the impact of beetle bodies against the front

door.

Tommy got up, grinning. That was the first, interrupted message from Tommy that was received.

Through the barred window the three could see the furious efforts of the beetles to force an entrance. But the very tensile strength of the beetle-shells, which rendered them impervious to bullets, required a laminate construction which rendered them powerless against brick or stone.

Desperately the swarm dashed itself against the walls, until the ground outside was piled high with stunned beetles. Not the faintest impression was made on the defenses.

"Watch them, Jim," said Tom. "I'll go see if the rear's secure."

That thought of his seemed to have been anticipated by the beetles, for as Tommy reached the kitchen the swarm came dashing against door and window, always recoiling. Tommy came back, grinning all over

his face.

"You were right, Haidia," he said. "We've held them all right, and the tables are turned on Bram. Also I got a message through, I think," he added to Dodd.

Dash—dot—dash—dot from the instrument. Tommy ran to the table again. Dash—dot went back. For five minutes Tommy labored, while the beetles hammered now on one door, now on another, now on the windows. Then Tommy got up.

"It was some station down the line," he said. "I've told them, and they're sending a man up here to replace the telegraphist, also a couple of cops. They think I'm crazy. I told them again. That's the best I could do."

"Dodd! Travers! For the last time—let's talk!"

The cloud of beetles seemed to have thinned, for the sun was shining into the room. Bram's voice was perfectly audible, though he himself was invisible; probably he thought it likely that the defenders had obtained firearms.

"Nothing to say to you, Bram," called Dodd. "We've finished our discussion on the monotremes."

"I want you fellows to stand in with me," came Bram's plaintive tones. "It's so lonesome all by one's self, Dodd."

"Ah, you're beginning to find that out, are you?" Dodd could not resist answering. "You'll be lonelier yet before you're through."

"Dodd, I didn't bring that swarm up here. I swear it. I've been trying to control them from the beginning. I saw what was coming. I believe I can avert this horror, drive them into the sea or something like that. Don't make me desperate, Dodd."

"And listen, old man. About those monotremes—sensible men don't quarrel over things like that. Why can't we agree to differ?"

"Ah, now you're talking, Bram," Dodd answered. "Only you're too late. After what's happened here to-day, we'll have no truck with you. That's final."

"Damn you," shrieked Bram. "I'll batter down this house. I'll—"

"You'll do nothing, Bram, because you can't," Dodd answered. "Travers has wired full information about your devil-horde, and likewise about you, and all Australia will be prepared to give you a warm reception when you arrive."

"I tell you I'm invincible," Bram screamed. "In three days Australia will be a ruin, a depopulated desert. In a week, all southern Asia, in three weeks Europe, in two months America."

"You've been taking too many of those pellets, Bram," Dodd answered. "Stand back now! Stand back, wherever you are, or I'll open the door and throw the slops over you."

Bram's screech rose high above the droning of the wings. In another moment the interior of the room had grown as black as night. The rattle of the beetle shells against the four walls of the house was like the clattering of stage thunder.

All through the darkness Dodd could hear the unhurried clicking of the key.

At last the rattling ceased. The sun shone in again. The ground all around the house was packed with fallen beetles, six feet high, a writhing mass that creaked and clattered as it strove to disengage itself.

Bram's voice once more: "I'm leaving a guard, Dodd. They'll get you if you try to leave. But they won't eat you. I'm going to have you three sliced into little pieces, the Thousand Deaths of the Chinese. The beetles will eat the parts that are sliced away—and you'll live to watch them. I'll be back with a stick or two of dynamite to-morrow."

"Yeah, but listen, Bram," Dodd sang out. "Listen, you old marsupial tiger. When those pipe dreams clear away, I'm going to build a gallows of beetle-shells reaching to the moon, to hang you on!"

Bram's screech of madness died away. The strident rasping of the beetles' legs began again. For hours the three heard it; it was not until nightfall that it

died away.

Bram had made good his threat, for all around the house, extending as far as they could see, was the host of beetle-guards. To venture out, even with their shells about them, was clearly a hazardous undertaking. There was neither food nor water in the place.

"We'll just have to hold out," said Dodd, breaking one of the long periods of silence.

Tommy did not answer; he did not hear him, for he was busy at the key. Suddenly he leaped to his feet.

"God, Jimmy," he cried, "that devil's making good his threat! The swarm's in South Australia, destroying every living thing, wiping out whole towns and villages! And they—they believe me now!"

He sank into a chair. For the first time the strain of the awful past seemed to grip him. Haidia came to his side.

"The beetles are finish," she said in her soft voice.

"How d'you know, Haidia?" demanded Dodd.

"The beetles are finish," Haidia repeated quietly, and that was all that Dodd could get out of her. But again the key began to click, and Tommy staggered to the table. Dot—dash—dash—dot. Presently he looked up once more.

"The swarm's halfway to Adelaide," he said. "They want to know if I can help them. Help them!" He burst into hysterical laughter.

Toward evening he came back after an hour at the key. "Line must be broken," he said. "I'm getting nothing."

In the moonlight they could see the huge compound eyes of the beetle guards glittering like enormous diamonds outside. They had not been conscious of thirst during the day, but now, with the coming of the cool night their desire for water became paramount.

"Tommy, there must be water in the station," said Dodd. "I'm going to get a pitcher from the kitchen and risk it, Tommy. Take care of Haidia if—" he added.

But Haidia laid her hand upon his arm. "Do not go, Jimmydodd," she said. "We can be thirsty to-night, and to-morrow the beetles will be finish."

"How d'you know?" asked Dodd again. But now he realized that Haidia had never learned the significance of an interrogation. She only repeated her statement, and again the two men had to remain content.

The long night passed. Outside the many facets of the beetle eyes. Inside the two men, desperate with anxiety, not for themselves, but for the fate of the world, snatching a few moments' sleep from time to time, then looking up to see those glaring eyes from the silent watchers.

Then dawn came stealing over the desert, and the two shook themselves free from sleep. And now the eyes were gone.

But there was immense activity among the beetles. They were scurrying to and fro, and, as they watched, Dodd and Tommy began to see some significance in their movements.

"Why, they're digging trenches!" Tommy shouted. "That's horrible, Jimmy! Are they intending to conduct sapping operations against us like engineers, or what?"

Dodd did not reply, and Tommy hardly expected any answer. As the two men, now joined by Haidia, watched, they saw that the beetles were actually digging themselves into the sand.

Within the space of an hour, by the time the first shafts of sunlight began to stream into the room, there was to be seen only the massive, rounded shells of the monsters as they squatted in the sand.

"Now you may fetch water," said Haidia, smiling at her lover. "No, you do not need the shells," she added. "The beetles are finish. It is as the wise men of my people told me."

Wondering, hesitating, Tommy and Dodd unlocked the front door. They stood upon the threshold ready to bolt back again. But there was no stirring among the beetle hosts.

Growing bolder, they advanced a few steps; then, shamed by Haidia's courage, they followed her, still cautiously to the station.

Dodd shouted as he saw a water-tank, and a receptacle above it with a water-cock. They let Haidia drink, then followed suit, and for a few moments, as they appeased their thirst, the beetles were forgotten.

Then they turned back. There had been no movement in that line of shells that glinted in the morning sunlight.

"Come, I shall show you," said Haidia confidently, advancing toward the trench.

Dodd would have stopped her, but the girl moved forward quickly, eluded him with a graceful, mirthful gesture, and stooped down over the trench.

She rose up, raising in her arms an empty beetle-shell!

Dodd, who had reached the trench before Tommy, turned round and yelled to him excitedly. Tommy ran forward—and then he understood.

The shells were empty. The swarm, whose life cycle Bram had admitted he did not understand, had just moulted!

It had moulted because the bodies, gorged with food, had grown too large for the shells. In time, if left alone, the monsters would grow larger shells, become invincible again. But just now they were defenseless as new-born babes—and knew it.

Deep underneath the empty shells they had burrowed into the ground. Everywhere at the bottom of the deep trenches were the naked, bestial creatures, waving helpless tentacles and squirming over one another as they strove to find shelter and security.

A sudden madness came over Tommy and Dodd.

"Dynamite—there must be dynamite!" Dodd shouted, as he ran back to the station.

"Something better than dynamite," shouted Tommy, holding up one of a score of drums of petrol!

Chapter 11: The World Set Free

They waited two days at Settler's Station. To push along the line into the desert would have been useless, and both men were convinced that an airplane would arrive for them. But it was not until the second afternoon that the aviator arrived, half-dead with thirst and fatigue, and almost incoherent.

His was the last plane on the Australian continent. He brought the news of the destruction of Adelaide, and of the siege of Melbourne and Sydney, as he termed it. He told Dodd and Tommy that the two cities had been surrounded with trenches and barbed wire. Machine guns and artillery were bombarding the trenches in which the beetles had taken shelter.

"Has any one been out on reconnaissance?" asked

Tommy.

Nobody had been permitted to pass through the barbed wire, though there had been volunteers. It meant certain death. But, unless the beetles were sapping deep in the ground, what their purpose was, nobody knew.

Tommy and Dodd led him to the piles of smoking, stinking débris and told him.

That was where the aviator fainted from sheer relief.

"The Commonwealth wants you to take supreme command against the beetles," he told Tommy, when he had recovered. "I'm to bring you back. Not that they expect me back. But—God, what a piece of news! Forgive my swearing—I used to be a parson. Still am, for the matter of that."

"How are you going to bring us three back in your plane?" asked Tommy.

"I shall stay here with Jimmydodd," said Haidia

suavely. "There is not the least danger any more. You must destroy the beetles before their shells have grown again, that's all."

"Used to be a parson, you say? Still are?" shouted Dodd excitedly. "Thank God! I mean, I'm glad to hear it. Come inside, and come quick. I want you too, Tommy!"

Then Tommy understood. And it seemed as if Haidia understood, by some instinct that belongs exclusively to women, for her cheeks were flushed as she turned and smiled into Dodd's eyes.

Ten minutes later Tommy hopped into the biplane, leaving the happy married couple at Settler's Station. His eyes grew misty as the plane took the air, and he saw them waving to him from the ground. Dodd and Haidia and he had been through so many adventures, and had reached safety. He must not fail.

He did not fail. He found himself at Sydney in command of thirty thousand men, all enthusiastic for the fight for the human race, soldiers and volunteers

ready to fight until they dropped. When the news of the situation was made public, an immense wave of hope ran through the world.

National differences were forgotten, color and creed and race grew more tolerant of one another. A new day had dawned—the day of humanity's true liberation.

Tommy's first act was to call out the fire companies and have the beetles' trenches saturated with petrol from the fire hoses. Then incendiary bullets, shot from guns from a safe distance, quickly converted them into blazing infernos.

But even so only a tithe of the beetle army had been destroyed. Two hundred planes had already been rushed from New Zealand, and their aviators went up and scoured the country far and wide. Everywhere they found trenches, and, where the soil was stony, millions of the beetles clustered helplessly beneath great mounds of discarded shells.

An army of black trackers had been brought in planes

from all parts of the country, and they searched out the beetle masses everywhere along the course that the invaders had taken. Then incendiary bombs were dropped from above.

Day after day the beetle massacre went on. By the end of a week the survivors of the invasion began to take heart again. It was certain that the greater portion of the horde had been destroyed.

There was only one thing lacking. No trace of Bram had been seen since his appearance at the head of his beetle army in front of Broken Hill. And louder and more insistent grew the world clamor that he should be found, and put to death in some way more horrible than any yet devised.

The ingenuity of a million minds worked upon this problem. Newspapers all over the world offered prizes for the most suitable form of death. Ingenious Oriental tortures were rediscovered.

The only thing lacking was Bram.

A spy craze ran through Australia. Five hundred Brams were found, and all of them were in imminent danger of death before they were able to prove an alias.

And, oddly enough, it was Tommy and Dodd who found Bram. For Dodd had been brought back east, together with his bride, and given an important command in the Army of Extermination.

Dodd had joined Tommy not far from Broken Hill, where a swarm of a hundred thousand beetles had been found in a little known valley. The monsters had begun to grow new shells, and the news had excited a fresh wave of apprehension. The airplanes had concentrated for an attack upon them, and Tommy and Dodd were riding together, Tommy at the controls, and Dodd observing.

Dodd called through the tube to Tommy, and indicated a mass that was moving through the scrub—some fifty thousand beetles, executing short hops and evidently regaining some vitality. Tommy nodded.

He signalled, and the fleet of planes circled around and began to drop their incendiary bombs. Within a few minutes the beetles were ringed with a wall of fire. Presently the whole terrain was a blazing furnace.

Hours later, when the fires had died away, Tommy and Dodd went down to look at the destruction that had been wrought. The scene was horrible. Great masses of charred flesh and shell were piled up everywhere.

"I guess that's been a pretty thorough job," said Tommy. "Let's get back, Jim."

"What's that?" cried Dodd, pointing. Then, "My God, Tommy, it's one of our men!"

It was a man, but it was not one of their men, that creeping, maimed, half-cinder and half-human thing that was trying to crawl into the hollow of a rock. It was Bram, and recognition was mutual.

Bram dropping, moaning; he was only the shell of a man, and it was incredible how he had managed to

survive that ordeal of fire. The remainder of his life, which only his indomitable will had held in that shattered body, was evidently a matter of minutes, but he looked up at Dodd and laughed.

"So—you're—here, damn you!" he snarled. "And—you think—you've won. I've—another card—another invasion of the world—beside which this is child's play. It's an invasion—"

Bram was going, but he pulled himself together with a supreme effort.

"Invasion by—new species of—monotremes," he croaked. "Deep down in—earth. Was saving to—prove you the liar you are. Monotremes—egg-laying platypus big as an elephant—existent long before pleistocene epoch—make you recant, you lying fool!"

Bram died, an outburst of bitter laughter on his lips. Dodd stood silent for a while; then reverently he removed his hat.

"He was a madman and a devil, but he had the

potentialities of a god, Tommy," he said.

#02 The Cave Of Horror, by Sterner St. Paul Meek:

Screaming, the guardsman was jerked through the air. An unearthly screech rang through the cavern.

The unseen horror of mammoth have had struck
again!

Aproximate word count: 8,300

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Dr. Bird looked up impatiently as the door of his private laboratory in the Bureau of Standards swung open, but the frown on his face changed to a smile as he saw the form of Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service framed in the doorway.

"Hello, Carnes," he called cheerfully. "Take a seat and make yourself at home for a few minutes. I'll be with you as soon as I finish getting this weight."

Carnes sat on the edge of a bench and watched with admiration the long nervous hands and the slim tapering fingers of the famous scientist. Dr. Bird stood well over six feet and weighed two hundred and six pounds stripped: his massive shoulders and heavy shock of unruly black hair combined to give him the appearance of a prize-fighter—until one looked at his hands. Acid stains and scars could not hide the beauty of those mobile hands, the hands of an artist and a dreamer. An artist Dr. Bird was, albeit his artistry expressed itself in the most delicate and complicated experiments in the realms of pure and applied science that the world has ever seen, rather than in the commoner forms of art.

The doctor finished his task of weighing a porcelain crucible, set it carefully into a dessicator, and turned to his friend.

"What's on your mind, Carnes?" he asked. "You look worried. Is there another counterfeit on the market?"

The operative shook his head.

"Have you been reading those stories that the papers have been carrying about Mammoth Cave?" he asked.

Dr. Bird emitted a snort of disgust.

"I read the first one of them part way through on the strength of its being an Associated Press dispatch," he replied, "but that was enough. It didn't exactly impress me with its veracity, and, from a viewpoint of literature, the thing was impossible. I have no time to pore over the lucubrations of an inspired press agent."

"So you dismissed them as mere press agent work?"

"Certainly. What else could they be? Things like that don't happen fortuitously just as the tourist season is about to open. I suppose that those yarns will bring flocks of the curious to Kentucky though: the public always responds well to sea serpent yarns."

"Mammoth Cave has been closed to visitors for the season," said Carnes quietly.

"What?" cried the doctor in surprise. "Was there really something to those wild yarns?"

"There was, and what is more to the point, there still is. At least there is enough to it that I am leaving for Kentucky this evening, and I came here for the express purpose of asking you whether you wanted to come along. Bolton suggested that I ask you: he said that the whole thing sounded to him like magic and that magic was more in your line than in ours. He made out a request for your services and I have it in my pocket now. Are you interested?"

"How does the secret service cut in on it?" asked the doctor. "It seems to me that it is a state matter. Mammoth Cave isn't a National Park."

"Apparently you haven't followed the papers. It *was* a state matter until the Governor asked for federal troops. Whenever the regulars get into trouble, the federal government is rather apt to take a hand."

"I didn't know that regulars had been sent there. Tell me about the case."

"Will you come along?"

Dr. Bird shook his head slowly.

"I really don't see how I can spare the time, Carnes," he said. "I am in the midst of some work of the utmost importance and it hasn't reached the stage where I can turn it over to an assistant."

"Then I won't bother you with the details," replied Carnes as he rose.

"Sit down, confound you!" cried the doctor. "You know better than to try to pull that on me. Tell me your case, and then I'll tell you whether I'll go or not. I can't spare the time, but, on the other hand, if it sounds interesting enough...."

Carnes laughed.

"All right, Doctor," he said, "I'll take enough time to tell you about it even if you can't go. Do you know anything about it?"

"No. I read the first story half way through and then stopped. Start at the beginning and tell me the whole thing."

"Have you ever been to Mammoth Cave?"

"No."

"It, or rather they, for while it is called Mammoth Cave it is really a series of caves, are located in Edmonson County in Central Kentucky, on a spur railroad from Glasgow Junction on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. They are natural limestone caverns with the customary stalactite and stalagmite formation, but are unusually large and very beautiful. The caves are quite extensive and they are on different levels, so that a guide is necessary if one wants to enter them and be at all sure of finding the way out. Visitors are taken over a regular route and are seldom allowed to visit portions of the cave off these routes. Large parts of the cave have never been thoroughly explored or mapped. So much for the scene.

"About a month ago a party from Philadelphia who were motoring through Kentucky, entered the cave with a regular guide. The party consisted of a man and his wife and their two children, a boy of fourteen and a girl of twelve. They went quite a distance back into the caves and then, as the mother was feeling tired, she and her husband sat down, intending to wait until the guide showed the children some sights which lay just ahead and then return to them. The guide and the children never returned."

"What happened?"

"No one knows. All that is known is the bare fact that they have not been seen since."

"A kidnapping case?"

"Apparently not, in the light of later happenings, although that was at first thought to be the explanation. The parents waited for some time. The mother says that she heard faint screams in the distance some ten minutes after the guide and the children left, but they were very far away and she

isn't sure that she heard them at all. At any rate, they didn't impress her at the time.

"When half an hour had passed they began to feel anxious, and the father took a torch and started out to hunt for them. The usual thing happened; he got lost. When *he* failed to return, the mother, now thoroughly alarmed, made her way, by some uncanny sense of direction, to the entrance and gave the alarm. In half an hour a dozen search parties were on their way into the cave. The father was soon located, not far from the beaten trail, but despite three days of constant search, the children were not located. The only trace of them that was found was a bracelet which the mother identified. It was found in the cavern some distance from the beaten path and was broken, as though by violence. There were no other signs of a struggle.

"When the bracelet was found, the kidnapping theory gained vogue, for John Harrel, the missing guide, knew the cave well and natives of the vicinity scouted the idea that he might be lost. Inspired by the large reward offered by the father, fresh parties began to

explore the unknown portions of the cave. And then came the second tragedy. Two of the searchers failed to return. This time there seemed to be little doubt of violence, for screams and a pistol shot were faintly heard by other searchers, together with a peculiar 'screaming howl,' as it was described by those who heard it. A search was at once made toward the spot where the bracelet had been picked up, and the gun of one of the missing men was found within fifty yards of the spot where the bracelet had been discovered. One cylinder of the revolver had been discharged."

"Were there any signs on the floor?"

"The searchers said that the floor appeared to be rather more moist and slimy than usual, but that was all. They also spoke of a very faint smell of musk, but this observation was not confirmed by others who arrived a few moments later."

"What happened next?"

"The Governor was appealed to and a company of the National Guard was sent from Louisville to Mammoth

Cave. They took up camp at the mouth of the cave and prevented everyone from entering. Soldiers armed with service rifles penetrated the caverns, but found nothing. Visitors were excluded, and the guardsmen established regular patrols and sentry posts in the cave with the result that one night, when time came for a relief, the only trace that could be found of one of the guards was his rifle. It had not been fired. Double guards were then posted, and nothing happened for several days—and then another sentry disappeared. His companion came rushing out of the cave screaming. When he recovered, he admitted that both he and the missing man had gone to sleep and that he awoke to find his comrade gone. He called, and he says that the answer he received was a peculiar whistling noise which raised all the hair on the back of his neck. He flashed his electric torch all around, but could see nothing. He swears, however, that he heard a slipping, sliding noise approaching him, and he felt that some one was looking at him. He stood it as long as he could and then threw down his rifle and ran for his life."

"Had he been drinking?"

"No. It wasn't delirium either, as was shown by the fact that a patrol found his gun where he had thrown it, but no trace of the other sentry. After this second experience, the guardsmen weren't very eager to enter the cave, and the Governor asked for regulars. A company of infantry was ordered down from Fort Thomas to relieve the guardsmen, but they fared worse than their predecessors. They lost two men the first night of their guard. The regulars weren't caught napping, for the main guard heard five shots fired. They rushed a patrol to the scene and found both of the rifles which had been fired, but the men were gone.

"The officer of the day made a thorough search of the vicinity and found, some two hundred yards from the spot where the sentries had been posted, a crack in the wall through which the body of a man could be forced. This bodycrack had fresh blood on each side of it. Several of his men volunteered to enter the hole and search, but the lieutenant would not allow it. Instead, he armed himself with a couple of hand-

grenades and an electric torch and entered himself. That was last Tuesday, and he has not returned."

"Was there any disturbance heard from the crack?"

"None at all. A guard was posted with two machine-guns pointed at the crack in the wall, and a guard of eight men and a sergeant stationed there. Last night, about six o'clock, while the guard were sitting around their guns, a faint smell of musk became evident. No one paid a great deal of attention to it, but suddenly for no apparent reason at all one of the men on guard was jerked into the air feet upwards. He gave a scream of fear, and an unearthly screech answered him.

[Image description start: A black and white



illustration of the inside of a cave, with a guard being lifted up to the ceiling by the leg, flailing his arms as his hat and falls off, while another character stares in shock and horror. Image description end.]

The guard, with the exception of one man, turned tail and ran. One man stuck by his gun and poured a stream of bullets into the crack. The retreating men could hear the rattle of the gun for a few moments and then there was a choking scream, followed by silence. When the officer of the day got back with a patrol, there was a heavy smell of musk in the air, and a good deal of blood was splashed around. The machine-guns were both there, although one of them was twisted up until it looked like it had been through an explosion.

"The Officer commanding the company investigated the place, ordered all men out of the cave, and communicated with the War Department. The Secretary of War found it too tough a nut to crack and he asked for help, so Bolton is sending me down there. Do you think, in view of this yarn, that your experiments can wait?"

The creases on Dr. Bird's high forehead had grown deeper and deeper as Carnes had told his story, but now they suddenly disappeared, and he jumped to his feet with a boyish grin.

"How soon are we leaving?" he asked.

"In two hours, Doctor. A car is waiting for us downstairs and I have reservations booked for both of us on the Southern to-night. I knew that you were coming; in fact, the request for your services had been approved before I came here to see you."

Dr. Bird rapidly divested himself of his laboratory smock and took his coat and hat from a cupboard.

"I hope you realize, Carnsey, old dear," he said as he followed the operative out of the building, "that I have a real fondness for your worthless old carcass. I am leaving the results of two weeks of patient work alone and unattended in order to keep you out of trouble, and I know that it will be ruined when I get back. I wonder whether you are worth it?"

"Bosh!" retorted Carnes. "I'm mighty glad to have you along, but you needn't rub it in by pretending that it is affection for me that is dragging you reluctantly into this mess. With an adventure like this ahead of you, leg-irons and handcuffs wouldn't keep you away

from Mammoth Cave, whether I was going or not."

It was late afternoon before Dr. Bird and Carnes dismounted from the special train which had carried them from Glasgow Junction to Mammoth Cave. They introduced themselves to the major commanding the guard battalion which had been ordered down to reinforce the single company which had borne the first brunt of the affair, and then interviewed the guards who had been routed by the unseen horror which was haunting the famous cave. Nothing was learned which differed in any great degree from the tale which Carnes had related to the doctor in Washington, except that the officer of the day who had investigated the last attack failed to entirely corroborate the smell of musk which had been reported by the other observers.

"It might have been musk, but to me it smelled differently," he said. "Were you ever near a rattlesnake den in the west?"

Dr. Bird nodded.

"Then you know the peculiar reptilian odor which such a place gives off. Well, this smell was somewhat similar, although not the same by any manner of means. It was musky all right, but it was more snake than musk to me. I rather like musk, but this smell gave me the horrors."

"Did you hear any noises?"

"None at all. The men describe some rather peculiar noises and Sergeant Jervis is an old file and pretty apt to get things straight, but they may have been made by the men who were in trouble. I saw a man caught by a boa in South America once, and the noises he made might very well have been described in almost the same words as Jervis used."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," replied the Doctor. "I'll remember what you have told me. Now I think that we'll go into the cave."

"My orders are to allow no one to enter, Doctor."

"I beg your pardon. Carnes, where is that letter from

the Secretary of War?"

Carnes produced the document. The lieutenant examined it and excused himself. He returned in a few moments with the commanding officer.

"In the face of that letter, Dr. Bird," said the major, "I have no alternative to allowing you to enter the cave, but I will warn you that it is at your own peril. I'll give you an escort, if you wish."

"If Lieutenant Pearce will come with me as a guide, that will be all that I need."

The lieutenant paled slightly, but threw back his shoulders.

"Do you wish to start at once, sir?" he asked.

"In a few moments. What is the floor of the cave like where we are going?"

"Quite wet and slimy, sir."

"Very slippery?"

"Yes, sir."

"In that case before we go in we want to put on baseball shoes with cleats on them, so that we can run if we have to. Can you get us anything like that?"

"In a few moments, sir."

"Good! As soon as we can get them we'll start. In the meantime, may I look at that gun that was found?"

The Browning machine-gun was laid before the doctor. He looked it over critically and sniffed delicately at it. He took from his pocket a phial of liquid, moistened a portion of the water-jacket of the weapon, and then rubbed the moistened part briskly with his hand. He sniffed again. He looked disappointed, and again examined the gun closely.

"Carnes," he said at length, "do you see anything on this gun that looks like tooth marks?"

"Nothing, Doctor."

"Neither do I. There are some marks here which might quite conceivably be finger-prints of a forty-foot giant, and those two parallel grooves look like the result of severe squeezing, but there are no tooth marks. Strange. There is no persistent odor on the gun, which is also strange. Well, there's no use in theorizing: we are confronted by a condition and not a theory, as someone once said. Let's put on those baseball shoes and see what we can find out."

Dr. Bird led the way into the cave, Carnes and the lieutenant following closely with electric torches. In each hand Dr. Bird carried a phosphorus hand-grenade. No other weapons were visible, although the doctor knew that Carnes carried a caliber .45 automatic pistol strapped under his left armpit. As they passed into the cave the lieutenant stepped forward to lead the way.

"I'm going first," said the doctor. "Follow me and indicate the turns by pressure on my shoulder. Don't speak after we have started, and be ready for instant

flight. Let's go."

Forward into the interior of the cave they made their way. The iron cleats of the baseball shoes rang on the floor and the noise echoed back and forth between the walls, dying out in little eerie whispers of sound that made Carnes' hair rise. Ever forward they pressed, the lieutenant guiding the doctor by silent pressure on his shoulder and Carnes following closely. For half a mile they went on until a restrainable pressure brought the doctor to a halt. The lieutenant pointed silently toward a crack in the wall before them. Carnes started forward to examine it, but a warning gesture from the doctor stopped him.

Slowly, an inch at a time, the doctor crept forward, hand-grenades in readiness. Presently he reached the crack and, shifting one of the grenades into his pocket, he drew forth an electric torch and sent a beam of light through the crack into the dark interior of the earth.

For a moment he stood thus, and then suddenly snapped off his torch and straightened up in an

attitude of listening. The straining ears of Carnes and Lieutenant Pearce could hear a faint slithering noise coming toward them, not from the direction of the crack, but from the interior of the cave. Simultaneously a faint, musky, reptilian odor became apparent.

"Run!" shouted the doctor. "Run like hell! It's loose in the cave!"

The lieutenant turned and fled at top speed toward the distant entrance to the cave, Carnes at his heels. Dr. Bird paused for an instant, straining his ears, and then threw a grenade. A blinding flash came from the point where the missile struck and a white cloud rose in the air. The doctor turned and fled after his companions. Not for nothing had Dr. Bird been an athlete of note in his college days. Despite the best efforts of his companions, who were literally running for their lives, he soon caught up with them. As he did so a weird, blood-curdling screech rose from the darkness behind them. Higher and higher in pitch the note rose until it ended suddenly in a gurgling grunt, as though the breath which uttered it had been

suddenly cut off. The slithering, rustling noise became louder on their trail.

"Faster!" gasped the doctor, as he put his hand on Carnes' shoulder and pushed him forward.

The noise of pursuit gained slightly on them, and a sound as of intense breathing became audible. Dr. Bird paused and turned and faced the oncoming horror. His electric torch revealed nothing, but he listened for a moment, and then threw his second grenade. Keenly he watched its flight. It flew through the air for thirty yards and then struck an invisible obstruction and bounded toward the ground. Before it struck the downward motion ceased, and it rose in the air. As it rose it burst with a sharp report, and a wild scream of pain filled the cavern with a deafening roar. The doctor fled again after his companions.

By the time he overtook them the entrance of the cave loomed before them. With sobs of relief they burst out into the open. The guards sprang forward with raised rifles, but Dr. Bird waved them back.

"There's nothing after us, men," he panted. "We got chased a little way, but I tossed our pursuer a handful of phosphorus and it must have burned his fingers a little, judging from the racket he made. At any rate, it stopped the pursuit."

The major hurried up.

"Did you see it, Doctor?" he asked.

"No, I didn't. No one has ever seen it or anything like it. I heard it and, from its voice, I think it has a bad cold. At least, it sounded hoarse, so I gave it a little white phosphorus to make a poultice for its throat, but I didn't get a glimpse of it."

"For God's sake, Doctor, what is it?"

"I can't tell you yet, Major. So far I can tell, it is something new to science and I am not sure just what it looks like. However, I hope to be able to show it to you shortly. Is there a telegraph office here?"

"No, but we have a Signal Corps detachment with us,

and they have a portable radio set which will put us in touch with the army net."

"Good! Can you place a tent at my disposal?"

"Certainly, Doctor."

"All right, I'll go there, and I would appreciate it if you would send the radio operator to me. I want to send a message to the Bureau of Standards to forward me some apparatus which I need."

"I'll attend to it, Doctor. Have you any special advice to give me about the guarding?"

"Yes. Have you, or can you get, any live stock?"

"Live stock?"

"Yes. Cattle preferred, although hogs or sheep will do at a pinch. Sheep will do quite well."

"I'll see what I can do, Doctor."

"Get them by all means, if it is possible to do so. Don't

worry about paying for them: secret service funds are not subject to the same audit that army funds get. If you can locate them, drive a couple of cattle or half a dozen sheep well into the cave and tether them there. If you don't get them, have your sentries posted well away from the cave mouth, and if any disturbance occurs during the night, tell them to break and run. I hope it won't come out, but I can't tell."

A herd of cattle was soon located and two of the beasts driven into the cave. Two hours later a series of horrible screams and bellowings were heard in the cave. Following their orders the sentries abandoned their posts and scattered, but the noise came no nearer the mouth, and in a few minutes silence again reigned.

"I hope that will be all that will be needed for a couple of days," said the doctor to the commanding officer, "but you had better have a couple more cattle driven in in the morning. We want to keep the brute well fed. Is there a tank stationed at Fort Thomas?"

"No, there isn't."

"Then radio Washington that I want the fastest three-man tank that the army has sent here at once. Don't bother with military channels, radio direct to the Adjutant General, quoting the Secretary of the Treasury as authority. Tell him that it's a rush matter, and sign the message 'Bird' if you are afraid of getting your tail twisted."

Twice more before the apparatus which the doctor had ordered from Washington arrived cattle were driven into the depths of the cave, and twice were the screams and bellowings from the cave repeated. Each time searching parties found the cattle gone in the morning. A week after the doctor's arrival, a special train came up, carrying four mechanics from the Bureau of Standards, together with a dozen huge packing cases. Under the direction of the doctor the cases were unpacked and the apparatus put together. Before the assembly had been completed the tank which had been requested arrived from Camp Meade, and the Bureau mechanics began to install some of the assembled units in it.

The first apparatus which was installed in the tank

consisted of an electric generator of peculiar design which was geared to the tank motor. The electromotive force thus generated was led across a spark gap with points of a metallic substance. The light produced was concentrated by a series of parabolic reflectors, directed against a large quartz prism, and thence through a lens which was designed to throw a slightly divergent beam.

"This apparatus," Dr. Bird explained to the Signal Corps officer, who was an interested observer, "is one which was designed at the Bureau for the large scale production of ultra-violet light. There is nothing special about the generator except that it is highly efficient and gives an almost constant electromotive force. The current thus produced is led across these points, which are composed of magnalloy, a development of the Bureau. We found on investigation that a spark gave out a light which was peculiarly rich in ultra-violet rays when it was passed between magnesium points. However, such points could not be used for the handling of a steady current because of lack of durability and ease of fusion, so a mixture of

graphite, alundum and metallic magnesium was pressed together with a binder which will stand the heat. Thus we get the triple advantages of ultra-violet light production, durability, and high resistance.

"The system of reflectors catches all of the light thus produced except the relatively small portion which goes initially in the right direction, and directs it on this quartz prism where, due to the refractive powers of the prism, the light is broken up into its component parts. The infra-red rays and that portion of the spectrum which lies in the visible range, that is, from red to violet inclusive, are absorbed by a black body, leaving only the ultra-violet portion free to send a beam through this quartz lens."

"I thought that a lens would absorb ultra-violet light," objected the signal officer.

"A lens made of glass will, but this lens is made of rock crystal, which is readily permeable to ultra-violet. The net result of this apparatus is that we can

direct before us as we move in the tank a beam of light which is composed solely of the ultra-violet portion of the spectrum."

"In other words, an invisible light?"

"Yes. That is, invisible to the human eye. The effect of this beam of ultra-violet light in the form of severe sunburn would be readily apparent if you exposed your skin to it for any length of time, and the effects on your eyesight of continued gazing would be apt to be disastrous. It would produce a severe opthalmia and temporary impairment of the vision, somewhat the same symptoms as are observed in snow blindness."

"I see. May I ask what is the object of the whole thing?"

"Surely. Before we can successfully combat this peculiar visitant from another world, it is necessary that we gain some idea of the size and appearance of it. Nothing of the sort has before made its appearance, so far as the annals of science go, and so

I am forced to make some rather wild guesses at the nature of the animal. You are probably aware of the fact that the property of penetration possessed by all waves is a function of their frequency, or, perhaps I should say, of their wave-length?"

"Certainly."

"The longer rays of visible light will not penetrate as deeply into a given substance as the shorter ultra-violet rays. This visitor is evidently from some unexplored and, indeed, unknown cavern in the depths of the earth where visible light has never penetrated. Apparently in this cavern the color of the inhabitants is ultra-violet, and hence invisible to us."

"You are beyond my depth, Doctor."

"Pardon me. You understand, of course, what color is? When sunlight, which is a mixture of all colors from infra-red to ultra-violet inclusive, falls on an object, certain rays are reflected and certain others are absorbed. If the red rays are reflected and all others absorbed, the object appears red to our eyes. If all the

rays are reflected, the object appears white, and if all are absorbed, it appears black."

"I understand that."

"The human eye cannot detect ultra-violet. Suppose then, that we have an object, either animate or inanimate, the surface of which reflects only ultra-violet light, what will be the result? The object will be invisible."

"I should think it would be black if all the rays except the ultra-violet were absorbed."

"It would, but mark, I did not say the others were absorbed. Are you familiar with fluorescein?"

"No."

"I think you are. It is the dye used in making changeable silk. If we fill a glass container with a fluorescein solution and look at it by reflected light it appears green. If we look at it by transmitted light, that is, light which has traversed the solution, it

appears red. In other words, this is a substance which reflects green light, allows a free passage to red light, and absorbs all other light. This creature we are after, if my theory is correct, is composed of a substance which allows free passage to all of the visible light rays and at the same time reflects ultra-violet light. Do I make this clear?"

"Perfectly."

"Very well, then. My apparatus will project forward a beam of ultra-violet light which will be in much greater concentration than exists in an incandescent electric light. It is my hope that this light will be reflected by the body of the creature to a sufficient to allow me to make a photograph of it."

"But won't your lens prevent the ultra-violet light from reaching your plate?"

"An ordinary lens made of optical glass would do so, but I have a camera here equipped with a rock crystal lens, which will allow ultra-violet light to pass through it practically unhindered, and with very slight

distortion. When I add that I will have my camera charged with X-ray film, a film which is peculiarly sensitive to the shorter wave-lengths, you will see that I will have a fair chance of success."

"It sounds logical. Would you allow me to accompany you when you make your attempt?"

"I will be glad of your company, if you can drive a tank. I want to take Carnes with me, and the tank will only hold two besides the driver."

"I can drive a tractor."

"In that case you should master the tricks of tank driving in short order. Get familiar with it and we'll appoint you as driver. We'll be ready to go in to-night, but I am going to wait a day. Our friend was fed last night, and there is less chance he'll be about."

The early part of the next evening was marked by howls and screams coming from the mouth of the cave. As the night wore on the noises were quite evidently coming nearer and the sentries watched the

cave mouth nervously, ready to bolt and scatter according to their orders at the first alarm. About two A. M. the doctor and Carnes climbed into the tank beside Lieutenant Leffingwell, and the machine moved slowly into the cave. A search-light on the front of the tank lighted the way for them and, attached to a frame which held it some distance ahead of them, was a luckless sheep.

"Keep your eye on the mutton, Carnes," cautioned the doctor. "As soon as anything happens to it, shut off the search-light and let me try to get a picture. As soon as I have made my exposures I'll tell you, and you can snap it on again. Lieutenant, when the picture is made, turn your tank and make for the entrance to the cave. If we are lucky, we'll get out."

Forward the tank crawled, the sheep bleating and trying to break loose from the bonds which held it. It was impossible to hear much over the roar of the motor, but presently Dr. Bird leaned forward, his eyes shining.

"I smell musk," he announced. "Get ready for action."

Even as he spoke the sheep was suddenly lifted into the air. It gave a final bleat of terror, and then its head was torn from its body.

"Quick, Carnes!" shouted the doctor.

The search-light went out, and Carnes and the lieutenant could hear the slide of the ultra-violet light which Dr. Bird was manipulating open. For two or three minutes the doctor worked with his apparatus.

"All right!" he cried suddenly. "Lights on and get out of here!"

Carnes snapped on the search-light and Lieutenant Leffingwell swung the tank around and headed for the cave mouth. For a few feet their progress was unhindered and then the tank ceased its forward motion, although the motor still roared and the track slid on the cave floor. Carnes watched with horror as one side of the tank bent slowly in toward him. There was a rending sound, and a portion of the heavy steel fabric was torn away. Dr. Bird bent over something on the floor of the tank. Presently he straightened up and

threw a small object into the darkness. There was a flash of light, and bits of flaming phosphorus flew in every direction. The anchor which held the tank was suddenly loosed and the machine crawled forward at full speed, while a roar as of escaping air mingled with a bellowing shriek burdened the smoke-laden air.

"Faster!" cried the doctor, as he threw another grenade.

Lieutenant Leffingwell got the last bit of speed possible out of the tank and they reached the cave mouth without further molestation.

"I had an idea that our friend wouldn't care to pass through a phosphorus screen," said Dr. Bird with a chuckle as he climbed out of the tank. "He must have been rather severely burned the other day, and once burned is usually twice shy. Where is Major Brown?"

The commanding officer stepped forward.

"Drive a couple of cattle into the cave, Major," directed Dr. Bird. "I want to fill that brute up and

keep him quiet for a while. I'm going to develop my films."

Lieutenant Leffingwell and Carnes peered over the doctor's shoulders as he manipulated his films in a developing bath. Gradually vague lines and blotches made their appearance on one of the films, but the form was indistinct. Dr. Bird dropped the films in a fixing tank and straightened up.

"We have something, gentlemen," he announced, "but I can't tell yet how clear it is. It will take those films fifteen minutes to fix, and then we'll know."

In a quarter of an hour he lifted the first film from the tank and held it to the light. The film showed a blank. With an exclamation of disappointment he lifted a second and third film from the tank, with the same result. He raised the fourth one.

"Good Lord!" gasped Carnes.

In the plate could be plainly seen the hind quarters of the sheep held in the grasp of such a monster as even

the drug-laden brain of an opium smoker never pictured. Judging from the sheep, the monster stood about twenty feet tall, and its frame was surmounted by a head resembling an overgrown frog. Enormous jaws were opened to seize the sheep but, to the amazement of the three observers, the jaws were entirely toothless. Where teeth were to be expected, long parallel ridges of what looked like bare bone, appeared, without even a rudimentary segregation into teeth. The body of the monster was long and snakelike, and was borne on long, heavy legs ending in feet with three long toes, armed with vicious claws. The crowning horror of the creature was its forelegs. There were of enormous length, thin and attenuated looking, and ended in huge misshapen hands, knobby and blotched, which grasped the sheep in the same manner as human hands. The eyes were as large as dinner plates, and they were glaring at the camera with an expression of fiendish malevolence which made Carnes shudder.

"How does that huge thing ever get through that crack we examined?" demanded the lieutenant.

Dr. Bird rubbed his head thoughtfully.

"It's not an amphibian," he muttered, "as is plainly shown by the shape of the limbs and the lack of a tail, and yet it appears to have scales of the true fish type. It corresponds to no recovered fossil, and I am inclined to believe it is unique. The nervous organisation must be very low, judging from the lack of forehead and the general conformation. It has enormous strength, and yet the arms look feeble."

"It can't get through that crack," insisted the lieutenant.

"Apparently not," replied the doctor. "Wait a moment, though. Look at this!"

He pointed to the great disproportion between the length and diameter of the forelegs, and then to the hind legs.

"Either this is grave distortion or there is something mighty queer about that conformation. No animal could be constructed like that."

He turned the film so that an oblique light fell on it. As he did so he gave a cry of astonishment.

"Look here!" he said sharply. "It does get through that crack! Look at those arms and hands! There is the answer. This creature is tall and broad, but from front to rear it can measure only a few inches. The same must be true of the froglike head. That animal has been developed to live and move in a low roofed cavern, and to pass through openings only a few inches wide. Its bulk is all in two dimensions!"

"I believe you're right," said Carnes as he studied the film.

"There is no doubt of it," answered the doctor. "Look at those paws, too, Carnes. That substance isn't bone, it's gum. The thing is so young and helpless that it hasn't cut its teeth yet. It must be a baby, and that is the reason why it made its way into the cave when no other of its kind ever has."

"How large are full grown ones if this is a baby?" asked the lieutenant.

"The Lord alone knows," replied Dr. Bird. "I hope that I never have to face one and find out. Well, now that we know what we are fighting, we ought to be able to settle its hash."

"High explosive?" suggested the lieutenant.

"I don't think so. With such a low nervous organization, we would have to tear it practically to pieces to kill it, and I am anxious to keep it from mutilation for scientific study. I have an idea, but I'll have to study a while before I am sure of the details. Send me the radio operator."

The next day the Bureau mechanics began to dismount the apparatus from the tank and to assemble another elaborate contrivance. Before they had made an end of the work additional equipment arrived from Washington, which was incorporated in the new set-up. At length Dr. Bird pronounced himself ready for the attempt.

Under his direction, three cattle were driven into the cave and there tethered. They were there the next morning unharmed, but the second night the now familiar bellowing and howling came from the depths of the cave and in the morning two of the cattle were gone.

"That will keep him quiet for a day or two," said the doctor, "and now to work!"

The tank made its way into the cave, dragging after it two huge cables which led to an engine-driven generator outside the cave. These cables were attached to the terminals of a large motor which was set up in the cave near the place where the cattle were customarily tethered. This motor was the actuating force which turned two generators, one large and one small. The smaller one was mounted on a platform on wheels, which also contained the spark gaps, the reflectors and other apparatus which produced the beam of ultra-violet light which had been used to photograph the monster.

From the larger generator led two copper bars. One

of these was connected to a huge copper plate which was laid flat on the floor of the cave. The other led to a platform which was erected on huge porcelain insulators some fifteen feet above the floor. Huge condensers were set up on this platform, and Dr. Bird announced himself in readiness.

A steer was dragged into the cave and up a temporary runway which led to the platform containing the condensers, and there tied with the copper bus bar from the larger generator fastened to three flexible copper straps which led around the animal's body. When this had been completed, everyone except the doctor, Carnes, and Lieutenant Leffingwell left the cave. These three crouched behind the search-light which sent a mild beam of ultra-violet onto the platform where the steer was held. The engine outside the cave was started, and the three men waited with tense nerves.

For several hours nothing happened. The steer tried from time to time to move and, finding it impossible, set up plaintive bellows for liberty.

"I wish something would happen," muttered the lieutenant. "This is getting on my nerves."

"Something is about to happen," replied Dr. Bird grimly. "Listen to that steer."

The bellowing of the steer had suddenly increased in volume and, added to the note of discontent, was a note of fright which had previously been absent. Dr. Bird bent over his ultra-violet search-light and made some adjustments. He handed a helmetlike arrangement to each of his companions and slipped one on over his head.

"I can't see a thing, Doctor," said Carnes in a muffled voice.

"The objects at which you are looking absorb rather than reflect ultra-violet light," said the doctor. "This is a sort of a fluoroscope arrangement, and it isn't perfect at all. However, when the monster comes along, I am pretty sure that you will be able to see it. You may see a little more as your eyes get accustomed to it."

"I can see very dimly," announced the lieutenant in a moment.

Dimly the walls of the cave and the platform before them began to take vague shape. The three stared intently down the beam of ultra-violet light which the doctor directed down the passageway leading deeper into the cave.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Carnes suddenly.

Slowly into the field of vision came the hideous figure they had seen on the film. As it moved forward a rustling, slithering sound could be heard, even over the bellowing of the steer and the hum of the apparatus. The odor of musk became evident.

Along the floor toward them the thing slid. Presently it reared up on its hind legs and its enormous bulk became evident. It turned somewhat sideways and the correctness of Dr. Bird's hypothesis as to its peculiar shape was proved. All of the bulk of the creature was in two dimensions. Forward it moved, and the horrible human hands stretched forward, while the mouth

split in a wide, toothless grin. Nearer the doomed steer the creature approached, and then the reaching hands closed on the animal.

There was a blinding flash, and the monster was hurled backward as though struck by a thunderbolt, while a horrible smell of musk and burned flesh filled the air.

"After it! Quick!" cried the doctor as he sprang forward.

Before he could reach the prostrate creature it moved and then, slowly at first, but with rapidly gaining speed, it slithered over the floor in retreat. Dr. Bird's hand swung through an arc, and there was a deafening crash as a hand-grenade exploded on the back of the fleeing monster.

An unearthly scream came from the creature, and its motion changed from a steady forward glide to a series of convulsive jerks. Leffingwell and Carnes threw grenades, but they went wide of their mark, and the monster began to again increase its speed.

Another volley of grenades was thrown and one hit scored, which slowed the monster somewhat but did not arrest the steady forward movement.

"Any more bombs?" demanded the doctor.

"Damn!" he cried as he received negative answers.

"The current wasn't strong enough. It's going to get away."

Carnes jerked his automatic from under his armpit and poured a stream of bullets into the fleeing monster. Slower and slower the motion of the creature became, and its movements again became jerky and convulsive.

"Keep it in sight!" cried the doctor. "We may get it yet!"

Cautiously the three men followed the retreating horror, Leffingwell pushing before him the platform holding the ultra-violet ray apparatus. The chase led them over familiar ground.

"There is the crack!" cried the lieutenant.

"Too late!" replied the doctor.

He rushed forward and seized the lower limb of the monster and tried with all his strength to arrest its flight, but despite all that he could do it slid sideways through the crack in the wall and disappeared. A final backward kick of its leg threw the doctor twenty feet against the far wall of the cave.

"Are you hurt, Doctor?" cried Carnes.

"No, I'm all right. Put on your masks and start the gas! Quick! That may stop it before it gets in far!"

The three adjusted gas masks and thrust the mouths of two gas cylinders which were on the light truck into the crack, and opened the valves. The hissing of the gas was accompanied by a thrashing, writhing sound from the bowels of the earth for a few minutes, but the sound retreated and finally died away into an utter silence.

"And that's that!" cried the doctor half an hour later as they took off their gas masks outside the cave. "It got away from us. Carnes, how soon can we get a train back to Washington?"

"What kind of a report are you going to make to the Bureau, Doctor?" asked Carnes as they sat in the smoker of a southern train, headed for the capital.

"I'm not going to put in any report, Carnes," replied the doctor. "I haven't got the creature or any part of it to show, and no one would believe me. I am going to maintain a discreet silence about the whole matter."

"But you have your photograph to show, Doctor, and you have my evidence and Lieutenant Leffingwell's."

"The photograph might have been faked and I might have doped both of you. In any case, your words are no better than mine. No, indeed, Carnes, when I failed to make the current strong enough to kill it outright I made the first of the moves which bind me to silence, although I thought that two hundred thousand volts would be enough.

"The second failure I made was when I missed him with my second grenade, although I doubt if all six would have stopped him. My third failure was when we failed to get a sufficient concentration of cyanide gas into that hole in a hurry. The thing is so badly crippled that it will die, but it may take hours, or even days, for it to do so. It has already made its way so far into the earth that we couldn't reach it by blasting without danger of bringing the whole place down on our heads. Even if we could blast our way into the place it came from I wouldn't dare open a path which would allow Lord only knows what terrible monsters to invade the earth. When the soldiers have finished stopping that crack with ten feet of solid masonry, I think the barrier will hold, even against that critter's papa and mamma and all its relatives. Then Mammoth Cave will be safe for visitors again. That latter fact is the only report which I will make."

"It is a dandy story to go to waste," said Carnes soberly.

"Tell it then, if you wish, and get laughed at for your pains. No, Carnes, you must learn one thing. A man

like Bolton, for instance, will implicitly believe that a four leaf clover in his watch-charm will bring him good luck, and that carrying a buckeye keeps rheumatism away from him; but tell him a bit of sober fact like this, attested by three reliable witnesses and a good photograph, and you'll just get laughed at for your pains. I'm going to keep my mouth shut."

"So be it, then!" replied Carnes with a sigh.

#03 Phantoms Of Reality, by Ray Cummings:

Red Sensua's knife came up dripping—and the two adventurers knew that chaos and bloody revolution had been unleashed in that shadowy kingdom of the fourth dimension.

Aproximate word count: 17,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: Wall Street—or the Open Road?

When I was some fifteen years old, I once made the remark, "Why, that's impossible."

The man to whom I spoke was a scientist. He replied gently, "My boy, when you are grown older and wiser you will realize that nothing is impossible."

Somehow, that statement stayed with me. In our

swift-moving wonderful world I have seen it proven many times. They once thought it impossible to tell what lay across the broad, unknown Atlantic Ocean. They thought the vault of the heavens revolved around the earth. It was impossible for it to do anything else, because they could see it revolve. It was impossible, too, for anything to be alive and yet be so small that one might not see it. But the microscope proved the contrary. Or again, to talk beyond the normal range of the human voice was impossible, until the telephone came to show how simply and easily it might be done.

I never forgot that physician's remark. And it was repeated to me some ten years later by my friend, Captain Derek Mason, on that memorable June night of 1929.

My name is Charles Wilson. I was twenty-five that June of 1929. Although I had lived all of my adult life in New York City, I had no relatives there and few friends.

I had known Captain Mason for several years. Like

myself, he seemed one who walked alone in life. He was an English gentleman, perhaps thirty years old. He had been stationed in the Bermudas, I understood, though he seldom spoke of it.

I always felt that I had never seen so attractive a figure of a man as this Derek Mason. An English aristocrat, he was, straight and tall and dark, and rather rakish, with a military swagger. He affected a small, black mustache. A handsome, debonair fellow, with an easy grace of manner: a modern d'Artagnan. In an earlier, less civilized age, he would have been expert with sword and stick, I could not doubt. A man who could capture the hearts of women with a look. He had always been to me a romantic figure, and a mystery that seemed to shroud him made him no less so.

A friendship had sprung up between Derek Mason and me, perhaps because we were such opposite types! I am an American, of medium height, and medium build. Ruddy, with sandy hair. Derek Mason was as meticulous of his clothes, his swagger uniforms, as the most perfect Beau Brummel. Not so

myself. I am careless of dress and speech.

I had not seen Derek Mason for at least a month when, one June afternoon, a note came from him. I went to his apartment at eight o'clock the same evening. Even about his home there seemed a mystery. He lived alone with one man servant. He had taken quarters in a high-class bachelor apartment building near lower Fifth Avenue, at the edge of Greenwich Village.

All of which no doubt was rational enough, but in this building he had chosen the lower apartment at the ground-floor level. It adjoined the cellar. It was built for the janitor, but Derek had taken it and fixed it up in luxurious fashion. Near it, in a corner of the cellar, he had boarded off a square space into a room. I understood vaguely that it was a chemical laboratory. He had never discussed it, nor had I ever been shown inside it. Unusual, mysterious enough, and that a captain of the British military should be an experimental scientist was even more unusual. Yet I had always believed that for a year or two Derek had been engaged in some sort of chemical or physical

experiment. With all his military swagger he had the precise, careful mode of thought characteristic of the man of scientific mind.

I recall that when I got his note with its few sentences bidding me come to see him, I had a premonition that it marked the beginning of something strange. As though the portals of a mystery were opening to me!

Nothing is impossible! Nevertheless I record these events into which I was plunged that June evening with a very natural reluctance. I expect no credibility. If this were the year 2000, my narrative doubtless would be tame enough. Yet in 1929 it can only be called a fantasy. Let it go at that. The fantasy of to-day is the sober truth of to-morrow. And by the day after, it is a mere platitude. Our world moves swiftly.

Derek received me in his living-room. He admitted me himself. He told me that his man servant was out. It was a small room, with leather-covered easy chairs, rugs on its hardwood floor, and sober brown portieres at its door and windows. A brown parchment shade shrouded the electrolier on the table. It was the only

light in the room. It cast its mellow sheen upon Derek's lean graceful figure as he flung himself down and produced cigarettes.

He said, "Charlie, I want a little talk with you. I've something to tell you—something to offer you."

He held his lighter out to me, with its tiny blue alcohol flame under my cigarette. And I saw that his hand was trembling.

"But I don't understand what you mean," I protested.

He retorted, "I'm suggesting that you might be tired of being a clerk in a brokerage office. Tired of this humdrum world that we call civilization. Tired of Wall Street."

"I am, Derek. Heavens, that's true enough."

His eyes held me. He was smiling half whimsically: his voice was only half serious. Yet I could see, in the smoldering depths of those luminous dark eyes, a deadly seriousness that belied his smiling lips and his

gay tone.

He interrupted me with, "And I offer you a chance for deeds of high adventuring. The romance of danger, of pitting your wits against villainy to make right triumph over wrong, and to win for yourself power and riches—and perhaps a fair lady...."

"Derek, you talk like a swashbuckler of the middle ages."

I thought he would grin, but he turned suddenly solemn.

"I'm offering to make you henchman to a king, Charlie."

"King of what? Where?"

He spread his lean brown hands with a gesture. He shrugged. "What matter? If you seek adventure, you can find it—somewhere. If you feel the lure of romance—it will come to you."

I said, "Henchman to a king?"

But still he would not smile. "Yes. If I were king. I'm serious. Absolutely. In all this world there is no one who cares a damn about me. Not in this world, but...."

He checked himself. He went on, "You are the same. You have no relatives?"

"No. None that ever think of me."

"Nor a sweetheart. Or have you?"

"No," I smiled. "Not yet. Maybe never."

"But you are too interested in Wall Street to leave it for the open road?" He was sarcastic now. "Or do you fear deeds of daring? Do you want to right a great wrong? Rescue an oppressed people, overturn the tyranny of an evil monarch, and put your friend and the girl he loves upon the throne? Or do you want to go down to work as usual in the subway to-morrow morning? Are you afraid that in this process of becoming henchman to a king you may perchance get

killed?"

I matched his caustic tone. "Let's hear it, Derek."

Chapter 2: The Challenge of the Unknown

Incredible! Impossible! I did not say it, though my thoughts were written on my face, no doubt.

Derek said quietly, "Difficult to believe, Charlie? Yes! But it happens to be true. The girl I love is not of this world, but she lives nevertheless. I have seen her, talked with her. A slim little thing—beautiful...."

He sat staring. "This is nothing supernatural, Charlie. Only the ignorant savages of our past called the unknown—the unusual—supernatural. We know better now."

I said, "This girl—"

He gestured. "As I told you, I have for years been working on the theory that there is another world, existing here in this same space with us. The Fourth Dimension! Call it that if you like. I have found it,

proved its existence! And this girl—her name is Hope—lives in it. Let me tell you about her and her people. Shall I?"

My heart was pounding so that it almost smothered me. "Yes, Derek."

"She lives here, in this Space we call New York City. She and her people use this same Space at the same time that we use it. A different world from ours, existing here now with us! Unseen by us. And we are unseen by them!

"A different form of matter, Charlie. As tangible to the people of the other realm as we are to our own world. Humans like ourselves."

He paused, but I could find no words to fill the gap. And presently he went on:

"Hope's world, co-existing here with us, is dependent upon us. They speak what we call English. They shadow us."

I murmured, "Phantoms of reality."

"Yes. A world very like ours. But primitive, where ours is civilized."

He paused again. His eyes were staring past me as though he could see through the walls of the cellar room into great reaches of the unknown. What a strange mixture was this Derek Mason! What a strange compound of the cold reality of the scientist and the fancy of the romantic dreamer! Yet I wonder if that is not what science is. There is no romantic lover gawping at the moon who could have more romance in his soul, or see in the moonlit eyes of his loved one more romance than the scientist finds in the wonders of his laboratory.

Derek went on slowly:

"A primitive world, primitive nation, primitive passions! As I see it now, Charlie—as I know it to be—it seems as though perhaps Hope's world is merely a replica of ours, stripped to the primitive. As though it might be the naked soul of our modern New York,

ourselves as we really are, not as we pretend to be."

He roused himself from his reverie.

"Hope's nation is ruled by a king. An emperor, if you like. A monarch, beset with the evils of luxury and ease, and wine and women. He is surrounded by his nobles, the idle aristocracy, by virtue of their birth proclaiming themselves of too fine a clay to work. The crimson nobles, they are called. Because they affect crimson cloaks, and their beautiful women, voluptuous, sex-mad, are wont to bedeck themselves in veils and robes of crimson.

"And there are workers, toilers they call them. Oppressed, down-trodden toilers, with hate for the nobles and the king smoldering within them. In France there was such a condition, and the bloody revolution came of it. It exists here now. Hope was born in the ranks of these toilers, but has risen by her grace and beauty to a position in the court of this graceless monarch."

He leaped from his chair and began pacing the room.

I sat silent, staring at him. So strange a thing! Impossible? I could not say that. I could only say, incredible to me. And as I framed the thought I knew its incredibility was the very measure of my limited intelligence, my lack of knowledge. The vast unknown of nature, so vast that everything which was real to me, understandable to me, was a mere drop in the ocean of the existing unknown.

"Don't you understand me now?" Derek added vehemently. "I'm not talking fantasy. Cold reality! I've found a way to transport myself—and you—into this different state of matter, into this other world! I've already made a test. I went there and stayed just for a few moments, a night or so ago."

It made my heart leap wildly. He went on:—

"There is chaos there. Smoldering revolution which at any time—to-night perhaps—may burst into conflagration and destroy this wanton ruling class." He laughed harshly. "In Hope's world the workers are a primitive, ignorant people. Superstitious. Like the peons of Mexico, they're all primed and ready to

shout for any leader who sets himself up. My chance
—our chance—"

He suddenly stopped his pacing and stood before me.
"Don't you feel the lure of it? The open road? 'The
road is straight before me and the Red Gods call for
me!' I'm going, Charlie. Going to-night—and I want
you to go with me! Will you?"

Would I go? The thing leaped like a menacing shadow
risen solidly to confront me. Would I go?

Suddenly there was before me the face of a girl.
White. Apprehensive. It seemed almost pleading. A
face beautiful, with a mouth of parted red lips. A face
framed in long, pale-golden hair with big staring blue
eyes. Wistful eyes, wan with starlight—eyes that
seemed to plead.

I thought, "Why, this is madness!" I was not seeing
this face with my eyes. There was nothing, no one
here in the room with me but Derek. I knew it. The
shadows about us were empty. I was conjuring the
face only from Derek's words, making real that which

existed only in my imagination.

Yet I knew that in another realm, with my thoughts now bridging the gap, the girl was real. Would I go into the unknown?

The quest of the unknown. The gauntlet of the unknown flung down now before me, as it was flung down before the ancient explorers who picked up its challenge and mounted the swaying decks of their little galleons and said, "We'll go and see what lies off there in the unknown."

That same lure was on me now. I heard my voice saying, "Why yes, I guess I'll go, Derek."

Chapter 3: Into the Unknown

We stood in the boarded room which was Derek's laboratory. Our preparations had been simple: Derek had made them all in advance. There was little left to do. The laboratory was a small room of board walls, board ceiling and floor. Windowless, with a single door opening into the cellar of the apartment house.

Derek had locked the door after us as we entered. He said, "I have sent my man servant away for a week. The people in the house here think I have gone away on a vacation. No one will miss us, Charlie—not for a time, anyway."

No one would miss me, save my employers, and to them I would no doubt be small loss.

We had put out the light in Derek's apartment and locked it carefully after us. This journey! I own that I was trembling, and frightened. Yet a strange eagerness was on me.

The cellar room was comfortably furnished. Rugs were on its floor. Whatever apparatus of a research laboratory had been here was removed now. But the evidence of it remained—Derek's long search for this secret which now he was about to use. A row of board shelves at one side of the room showed where bottles and chemical apparatus had stood. A box of electrical tools and odds and ends of wire still lay discarded in a corner of the room. There was a tank of running water, and gas connections, where no doubt bunsen

burners had been.

Derek produced his apparatus. I sat on a small low couch against the wall and watched him as he stripped himself of his clothes. Around his waist he adjusted a wide, flat, wire-woven belt. A small box was fastened to it in the middle of the back—a wide, flat thing of metal, a quarter of an inch thick, and curved to fit his body. It was a storage battery of the vibratory current he was using. From the battery, tiny threads of wire ran up his back to a wire necklace flat against his throat. Other wires extended down his arms to the wrists. Still others down his legs to the ankles. A flat electrode was connected to the top of his head like a helmet. I was reminded as he stood there, of medical charts of the human body with the arterial system outlined. But when he dressed again and put on his jaunty captain's uniform, only the electrode clamped to his head and the thin wires dangling from it in the back were visible to disclose that there was anything unusual about him.

He said smilingly, "Don't stare at me like that."

I took a grip on myself. This thing was frightening, now that I actually was embarked on it. Derek had explained to me briefly the workings of his apparatus. A vibratory electronic current, for which as yet he had no name, was stored in the small battery. He had said:

"There's nothing incomprehensible about this, Charlie. It's merely a changing of the vibration rate of the basic substance out of which our bodies are made. Vibration is the governing factor of all states of matter. In its essence what we call substance is wholly intangible. That is already proven. A vortex! A whirlpool of nothingness! It creates a pseudo-substance which is the only material in the universe. And from this, by vibration, is built the complicated structure of things as we see and feel them to be, all dependent upon vibration. Everything is altered, directly as the vibratory rate is changed. From the most tenuous gas, to fluids to solids—throughout all the different states of matter the only fundamental difference is the rate of vibration."

I understood the basic principle of this that he was explaining—that now when this electronic current

which he had captured and controlled was applied to our physical body, the vibration rate of every smallest and most minute particle of our physical being was altered. There is so little in the vast scale of natural phenomena of which our human senses are cognisant! Our eyes see the colors of the spectrum, from red to violet. But a vast invisible world of color lies below the red of the rainbow! Physicists call it the infra-red. And beyond the violet, another realm—the ultra-violet. With sound it is the same. Our audible range of sound is very small. There are sounds with too slow a vibratory rate for us to hear, and others too rapid. The differing vibratory rate from most tenuous gas to most substantial solid is all that we can perceive in this physical world of ours. Yet of the whole, it is so very little! This other realm to which we were now going lay in the higher, more rapid vibratory scale. To us, by comparison, a more tenuous world, a shadow realm.

I listened to Derek's words, but my mind was on the practicality of what lay ahead. An explorer, standing upon his ship, may watch his men bending the sails,

raising the anchor, but his mind flings out to the journey's end....

We were soon ready. Derek wore his jaunty uniform, I wore my ordinary business suit. A magnetic field would be about us, so that in the transition anything in fairly close contact with our bodies was affected by the current.

Derek said, "I will go first, Charlie."

"But, Derek—" A fear, greater than the trembling I had felt before, leaped at me. Left here alone, with no one on whom to depend!

He spoke with careful casualness, but his eyes were burning me. "Just sit there, and watch. When I am gone, turn on the current as I showed you and come after me. I'll wait for you."

"Where?" I stammered.

He smiled faintly. "Here. Right here. I'm not going away! Not going to move. I'll be here on the couch

waiting for you."

Terrifying words! He had lowered the couch, bending out its short legs until the frame of it rested on the board floor. He drew a chair up before it and seated me. He sat down on the couch.

He said, "Oh, one other thing. Just before you start, put out the light. We can't tell how long it will be before we return."

Terrifying words!

His right hand was on his left wrist where the tiny switch was placed. He smiled again. "Good luck to us, Charlie!"

Good luck to us! The open road, the unknown!

I sat there staring. He was partly in shadow. The room was very silent. Derek lay propped up on one elbow. His hand threw the tiny switch.

There was a breathless moment. Derek's face was set

and white, but no whiter than my own, I was sure. His eyes were fixed on me. I saw him suddenly quiver and twitch a little.

I murmured, "Derek—"

At once he spoke, to reassure me. "I'm all right, Charlie. That was just the first feel of it."

There was a faint quivering throb in the room, like a tiny distant dynamo throbbing. The current was surging over Derek; his legs twitched.

A moment. The faint throbbing intensified. No louder, but rapid, infinitely more rapid. A tiny throb, an aerial whine, faint as the whirring wings of a humming bird. It went up the scale, ascending in pitch, until presently it was screaming with an aerial microscopic voice.

But there seemed no change in Derek. His uniform was glowing a trifle, that was all. His face was composed now; he smiled, but did not speak. His eyes roved away from me, as though now he were seeing

things that I could not see.

Another moment. No change.

Why, what was this? I blinked, gasped. There was a change! My gaze was fastened upon Derek's white face. White? It was more than white now! A silver sheen seemed to be coming to his skin!

I think no more than a minute had passed. His face was glowing, shimmering. A transparent look was coming to it, a thinness, a sudden unsubstantiality! He dropped his elbow and lay on the couch, stretched at full length at my feet. His eyes were staring.

And suddenly I realized that the face that held those staring eyes was erased! A shimmering apparition of Derek was stretched here before me. I could see through it now! Beneath the shimmering, blurred outlines of his body I could see the solid folds of the couch cover. A ghost of Derek here. An apparition—fading—dissipating!

A gossamer outline of him, imponderable, intangible.

I leaped to my feet, staring down over him.

"Derek!"

The shape of him did not move. Every instant it was more vaporous, more unreal.

I thought, "He's gone!"

No! He was still there. A white mist of his form on the couch. Melting, dissipating in the light like a fog before sunshine. A wisp of it left, like a breath, and then there was nothing.

I sat on the couch. I had put out the light. Around me the room was black. My fingers found the small switch at my wrist. I pressed it across its tiny arc.

The first shock was slight, but infinitely strange. A shuddering, twitching sensation ran all over me. It made my head reel, swept a wave of nausea over me, a giddiness, a feeling that I was falling through darkness. I lay on the couch, bracing myself. The current was whining up its tiny scale. I could feel it

now. A tiny throbbing, communicating itself to my physical being.

And then in a moment I realized that my body was throbbing. The vibration of the current was communicating itself to the most minute cells of my body. An indescribable tiny quivering within me. Strange, frightening, sickening at first. But the sickness passed, and in a moment I found it almost pleasant.

I could see nothing. The room was wholly dark. I lay on my side on the couch, my eyes staring into the blackness around me. I could hear the humming of the current, and then it seemed to fade. Abruptly I felt a sense of lightness. My body, lying on the couch, pressed less heavily.

I gripped my arm. I was solid, substantial as before. I touched the couch. It was the couch which was changing, not I! The couch cover queerly seemed to melt under my hand!

The sense of my own lightness grew upon me. A

lightness, a freedom, pressed me, as though chains and shackles which all my life had encompassed me were falling away. A wild, queer freedom.

I wondered where Derek was. Had I arrived in the other realm? Was he here? I had no idea how much time had passed: a minute or two, perhaps.

Or was I still in Derek's laboratory? The darkness was as solid, impenetrable as ever. No, not quite dark! I saw something now. A glowing, misty outline around me. Then I saw that it was not the new, unknown realm, but still Derek's room. A shadowy, spectral room, and the light, which dimly illumined it, was from outside.

I lay puzzling, my own situation forgotten for the moment. The light came from overhead, in another room of the apartment house. I stared. Around me now was a dim vista of distance, and vague, blurred, misty outlines of the apartment building above me. The shadowy world I had left now lay bare. There was a moment when I thought I could see far away across a spectral city street. The shadows of the great city

were around me. They glowed, and then were gone.

A hand gripped my arm in a solid grip. Derek's voice sounded.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," I murmured. The couch had faded. I was conscious that I had floated or drifted down a few inches, to a new level. The level of the cellar floor beneath the couch. Cellar floor! It was not that now. Yet there was something solid here, a solid ground, and I was lying upon it, with Derek sitting beside me.

I murmured again, "Yes, I'm all right."

My groping hand felt the ground. It was soil, with a growth of vegetation like a grass sward on it. Were we outdoors? It suddenly seemed so. I could feel soft, warm air on my face and had a sense of open distance around me. A light was growing, a vague, diffused light, as though day were swiftly coming upon us.

I felt Derek fumbling at my wrist. "That's all, Charlie."

There was a slight shock. Derek was pulling me up beside him. I found myself on my feet, with light around me. I stood wavering, gripping Derek. It was as though I had closed my eyes, and now they were suddenly open. I was aware of daylight, color, and movement. A world of normality here, normal to me now because I was part of it. The realm of the unknown!

Chapter 4: "*Hope, I Came....*"

I think I was first conscious of a queer calmness which had settled upon me, as though now I had withdrawn contact with the turmoil of our world! Something was gone, and in its place came a calmness. But that was a mere transition. It had passed in a moment. I stood trembling with eagerness, as I know Derek was trembling.

A radiant effulgence of light was around us, clarifying, growing. There was ground beneath our feet, and sky overhead. A rational landscape, strangely familiar. A physical world like my own, but, it seemed, with a new glory upon it. Nature, calmly

serene.

I had thought we were standing in daylight. I saw now it was bright starlight. An evening, such as the evening we had just left in our own world. The starlight showed everything clearly. I could see a fair distance.

We stood at the top of a slight rise. I saw gentle, slightly undulating country. A brook nearby wound through a grove of trees and lost itself. Suddenly, with a shock, I realized how familiar this was! We stood facing what in New York City we call West. The contour of this land was familiar enough for me to identify it. A mile or so ahead lay a river; it shimmered in its valley, with cliffs on its further side. Near at hand the open country was dotted with trees and checkered with round patches of cultivated fields. And there were occasional habitations, low, oval houses of green thatch.

The faint flush of a recent sunset lay upon the landscape, mingled with the starlight. A road—a white ribbon in the starlight—wound over the countryside

toward the river. Animals, strange of aspect, were slowly dragging carts. There were distant figures working in the fields.

A city lay ahead of us, set along this nearer bank of the river. A city! It seemed a primitive village. All was primitive, as though here might be some lost Indian tribe of our early ages. The people were picturesque, the field workers garbed in vivid colors. The flat little carts, slow moving, with broad-horned oxen.

This quiet village, drowsing beside the calm-flowing river, seemed all very normal. I could fancy that it was just after sundown of a quiet workday. There was a faint flush of pink upon everything: the glory of the sun just set. And as though to further my fancy, in the village by the river, like an angelus, a faint-toned bell was chiming.

We stood for a moment gazing silently. I felt wholly normal. A warm, pleasant wind fanned my hot face. The sense of lightness was gone. This was normality to me.

Derek murmured, "Hope was to meet me here."

And then we both saw her. She was coming toward us along the road. A slight, girlish figure, clothed in queerly vivid garments: a short jacket of blue cloth with wide-flowing sleeves, knee-length pantaloons of red, with tassels dangling from them, and a wide red sash about her waist. Pale golden hair was piled in a coil upon her head....

She was coming toward us along the edge of the road, from the direction of the city. She was only a few hundred feet from us when we first saw her, coming swiftly, furtively it seemed. A low pike fence bordered the road. She seemed to be shielding herself in the shadows beside it.

We stood waiting in the starlight. The nearest figures in the field and on the road were too far away to notice us. The girl advanced. Her white arm went up in a gesture, and Derek answered. She left the road, crossing the field toward us. As she came closer, I saw how very beautiful she was. A girl of eighteen, perhaps, a fantastic little figure with her vivid

garments. The starlight illumined her white face, anxious, apprehensive, but eager.

"Derek!"

He said, "Hope, I came...."

I stood silently watching. Derek's arms went out, and the girl, with a little cry, came running forward and threw herself into them.

Chapter 5: Intrigue

"Am I in time, Hope?"

"Yes, but the festival is to-night. In an hour or two now. Oh Derek, if the king holds this festival, the toilers will revolt. They won't stand it—"

"To-night! It mustn't be held to-night! It doesn't give me time, time to plan."

I stood listening to their vehement, half-whispered words. For a moment or two, absorbed, they ignored me.

"The king will make his choice to-night, Derek. He has announced it. Blanca or Sensua for his queen. And if he chooses the Crimson Sensua—" She stammered, then she went on:

"If he does—there will be bloodshed. The toilers are waiting, just to learn his choice."

Derek exclaimed, "But to-night is too soon! I've got to plan. Hope, where does Rohbar stand in this?"

Strange intrigue! I pieced it together now, from their words, and from what presently they briefly told me. A festival was about to be held, an orgy of feasting and merrymaking, of music and dancing. And during it, this young King Leonto was to choose his queen. There were two possibilities. The Crimson Sensua, a profligate, debauched woman who, as queen, would further oppress the workers. And Blanca, a white beauty, risen from the toilers to be a favorite at the Court. Hope was her handmaiden.

If Blanca were chosen, the toilers would be appeased. She was one of them. She would lead this king from

his profligate ways, would win from him justice for the workers.

But Derek and Hope both knew that the pure and gentle Blanca would never be the king's choice. And to-night the toilers would definitely know it, and the smoldering revolt would burst into flame.

And there was this Rohbar. Derek said, "He is the king's henchman, Charlie."

I stood here in the starlight, listening to them. This strange primitive realm. There were no modern weapons here. We had brought none. The current used in our transition would have exploded the cartridges of a revolver. I had a dirk which Hope now gave me, and that was all.

Primitive intrigue. I envisaged this chaotic nation, with its toilers ignorant as the oppressed Mexican peons at their worst. Striving to better themselves, yet, not knowing how. Ready to shout for any leader who might with vainglorious words set himself up as a patriot.

This Rohbar, perhaps, was planning to do just that.

And so was Derek! He said, "Hope, if you could persuade the king to postpone the festival—if Blanca would help persuade him—just until to-morrow night...."

"I can try, Derek. But the festival is planned for an hour or two from now."

"Where is the king?"

"In his palace, near the festival gardens."

She gestured to the south. My mind went back to New York City. This hillock, where we were standing in the starlight beside a tree, was in my world about Fifth Avenue and Sixteenth Street. The king's palace—the festival gardens—stood down at the Battery, where the rivers met in the broad water of the harbor.

Derek was saying, "We haven't much time: can you get us to the palace?"

"Yes. I have a cart down there on the road."

"And the cloaks for Charlie and me?"

"Yes."

"Good!" said Derek. "We'll go with you. It's a long chance; he probably won't postpone it. If he does not, we'll be among the audience. And when he chooses the Red Sensua—"

She shuddered, "Oh, Derek—" And I thought I heard her whisper, "Oh, Alexandre—" and I saw his finger go to his lips.

His arm went around her. She huddled, small as a child against his tall, muscular body.

He said gently, "Don't be afraid, little Hope."

His face was grim, his eyes were gleaming. I saw him suddenly as an instinctive military adventurer. An anachronism in our modern New York City. Born in a wrong age. But here in this primitive realm he was at

home.

I plucked at him. "How can you—how can we dare plunge into this thing? Hidden with cloaks, yes. But you talk of leading these toilers."

He cast Hope away and confronted me. "I can do it! You'll see, Charlie." He was very strangely smiling. "You'll see. But I don't want to come into the open right away. Not to-night. But if we can only postpone this accursed festival."

We had been talking perhaps five minutes. We were ready now to start away. Derek said:

"Whatever comes, Charlie, I want you to take care of Hope. Guard her for me, will you?"

I said, "Yes, I will try to."

Hope smiled as she held out her hand to me. "I will not be afraid, with Derek's friend."

Her English was of different intonation from our own,

but it was her native language, I could not doubt.

I took her cold, slightly trembling hand. "Thank you, Hope."

Her eyes were misty with starlight. Tender eyes, but the tenderness was not for me.

"Yes," I repeated. "You can depend upon me, Derek."

We left the hillock. A food-laden cart came along the road. The driver, a boy vivid in jacket and wide trousers of red and blue, bravely worn but tattered, ran alongside guiding the oxen. When they had passed we followed, and presently we came to the cloaks Hope had hidden. Derek and I donned them. They were long crimson cloaks with hoods.

Hope said, "Many are gathering for the festival shrouded like that. You will not be noticed now."

Further along the road we reached a little eminence. I saw the river ahead of us, and a river behind us. And a few miles to the south, an open spread of water

where the rivers joined. Familiar contours! The Hudson River! The East River. And down at the end of the island, New York Harbor.

Hope gestured that way. "The king's palace is there."

We were soon passing occasional houses, primitive thatched dwellings. I saw inside one. Workers were seated over their frugal evening meal. Always the same vivid garments, jaunty but tattered. We passed one old fellow in a field, working late in the starlight. A man bent with age, but still a tiller of the soil. Hope waved to him and he responded, but the look he gave us as we hurried by shrouded in our crimson cloaks was sullenly hostile.

We came to an open cart. It stood by the roadside. An ox with shaggy coat and spreading horns was fastened to the fence. It was a small cart with small rollers like wheels. Seats were in it and a vivid canopy over it. We climbed in and rumbled away.

And this starlit road in our own world was Broadway! We were presently passing close to the river's edge.

This quiet, peaceful, starlit river! Why, in our world it was massed with docks! Great ocean liners, huge funneled, with storied decks lay here! Under this river, tunnels with endless passing vehicles! Tubes, with speeding trains crowded with people!

The reality here was so different! Behind us what seemed an upper city was strung along the river. Ahead of us also there were streets and houses, the city of the workers. A bell was tolling. Along all the roads now we could see the moving yellow spots of lights on the holiday carts headed for the festival. And there were spots of yellow torchlight from boats on the river.

We soon were entering the city streets. Narrow dirt streets they were, with primitive shacks to the sides. Women came to the doorways to stare at our little cart rumbling hastily past. I was conscious of my crimson cloak, and conscious of the sullen glances of hate which were flung at it from every side, here in this squalid, forlorn section where the workers lived.

Along every street now the carts were passing,

converging to the south. They were filled, most of them, with young men and girls, all in gaudy costumes. Some of them, like ourselves, were shrouded in crimson cloaks. The carts occasionally were piled with flowers. As one larger than us, and moving faster rumbled by, a girl in it stood up and pelted me with blossoms. She wore a crimson robe, but it had fallen from her shoulders. I caught a glimpse of her face, framed in flowing dark hair, and of eyes with laughter in them, mocking me, alluring.

We came at last to the end of the island. There seemed to be a thousand or more people arriving, or here already. The tip of the island had an esplanade with a broad canopy behind it. Burning torches of wood gave flames of yellow, red and blue fire. A throng of gay young people promenaded the walk, watching the arriving boats.

And here, behind the walk at the water's edge, was a garden of trees and lawn, shrubs and beds of tall vivid flowers. Nooks were here to shelter lovers, pools of water glinted red and green with the reflected torchlight. In one of the pools I saw a group of girls

bathing, sportive as dolphins.

To one side at a little distance up the river, banked against the water, was a broad, low building: the palace of the king. About it were broad gardens, with shrubs and flowers. The whole was surrounded by a high metal fence, spiked on top.

The main gate was near at hand; we left our cart. Close to the gate was a guard standing alert, a jaunty fellow in leather pantaloons and leather jacket, with a spiked helmet, and in his hand a huge, sharp-pointed lance. The gardens of the palace, what we could see of them, seemed empty—none but the favored few might enter here. But as I climbed from the cart, I got the impression that just inside the fence a figure was lurking. It started away as we approached the gate. The guard had not seen it—the drab figure of a man in what seemed to be dripping garments, as though perhaps he had swum in from the water.

And Derek saw him. He muttered, "They are everywhere."

Hope led us to the gate. The guard recognized her. At her imperious gesture he stood aside. We passed within. I saw the palace now as a long winged structure of timber and stone, with a high tower at the end of one wing. The building fronted the river, but here on the garden side there was a broad doorway up an incline, twenty feet up and over a small bridge, spanning what seemed a dry moat. Beyond it, a small platform, then an oval archway, the main entrance to the building.

Derek and I, shrouded in our crimson cloaks with hoods covering us to the eyes, followed Hope into the palace.

Chapter 6: The King's Henchmen

The long room was bathed in colored lights. There was an ornate tiled floor. Barbaric draperies of heavy fabric shrouded the archways and windows. It was a totally barbaric apartment. It might have been the audience chamber of some fabled Eastern Prince of our early ages. Yet not quite that either. There was a primitive modernity here. I could not define it, could

not tell why I felt this strangeness. Perhaps it was the aspect of the people. The room was crowded with men and gay laughing girls in fancy dress costumes. Half of them at least were shrouded in crimson cloaks, but most of the hoods were back. They moved about, laughing and talking, evidently waiting for the time to come for them to go to the festival. We pushed our way through them.

Derek murmured, "Keep your hood up, Charlie."

A girl plucked at me. "Handsome man, let me see." She thrust her painted lips up to mine as though daring me to kiss them. Hope shoved her away. Her parted cloak showed her white, beautiful body with the dark tresses of her hair shrouding it. Exotically lovely she was, with primitive, unrestrained passions—typical of the land in which she lived.

"This way," whispered Hope. "Keep close together. Do not speak!"

We moved forward and stood quietly against the wall of the room, where great curtains hid us partly from

view. Under a canopy, at a table on a raised platform near one end of the apartment, sat the youthful monarch. I saw him as a man of perhaps thirty. He was in holiday garb, robed in silken hose of red and white, a strangely fashioned doublet, and a close-fitting shirt. Bare-headed, with thick black hair, long to the base of his neck.

He sat at the table with a calm dignity. But he relaxed here in the presence of his favored courtiers. He was evidently in a high good humor this night, giving directions for the staging of the spectacle, despatching messengers. I stood gazing at him. A very kingly fellow this. There was about him, that strange mingled look of barbarism and modernity.

Hope approached him and knelt. Derek and I could hear their voices, although the babble of the crowd went on.

"My little Hope, what is it? Stand up, child."

She said, "Your Highness, a message from Blanca."

He laughed. "Say no more! I know it already! She does not want this festival. The workers,"—what a world of sardonic contempt he put into that one word!—"the workers will be offended because we take pleasure to-night. Bah!" But he was still laughing. "Say no more, little Hope. Tell Blanca to dance and sing her best this night. I am making my choice. Did you know that?"

Hope was silent. He repeated, "Did you know that?"

"Yes, Your Highness," she murmured.

"I choose our queen to-night, child. Blanca or Sensua." He sighed. "Both are very beautiful. Do you know which one I am going to choose?"

"No," she said.

"Nor do I, little Hope. Nor do I."

He dismissed her. "Go now. Don't bother me."

She parted her lips as though to make another

protest, but his eyes suddenly flashed.

"I would not have you annoy me again. Do you understand?"

She turned away, back toward where Derek and I were lurking. The chattering crowd in the room had paid no attention to Hope, but before she could reach us a man detached himself from a nearby group and accosted her. A commanding figure, he was, I think, quite the largest man in the room. An inch or two taller than Derek, at the least. He wore his red cloak with the hood thrown back upon his wide heavy shoulders. A bullet-head with close-clipped black hair. A man of about the king's age, he had a face of heavy features, and flashing dark eyes. A scoundrel adventurer, this king's henchman.

Hope said, "What is it, Rohbar?"

"You will join our party, little Hope?" He laid a heavy hand on her white arm. His face was turned toward me. I could not miss the gleaming look in his eyes as he regarded her.

"No," she said.

It seemed that he twitched at her, but she broke away from him.

Anger crossed his face, but the desirous look in his eyes remained.

"You are very bold, Hope, to spurn me like this." He had lowered his voice as though fearful that the king might hear him.

"Let me alone!" she said.

She darted away from him, but before she joined us she stood waiting until he turned away.

"No use," Hope whispered. "There is nothing we can do here. You heard what the king said—and the festival is already begun."

Derek stood a moment, lost in thought. He was gazing across the room to where Rohbar was standing with a group of girls. He said at last:

"Come on, Charlie. We'll watch this festival. This damn fool king will choose the Red Sensua." He shrugged. "There will be chaos...."

We shoved our way from the room, went out of the main doorway and hurried through the gardens of the palace. The red-cloaked figures were leaving the building now for the festival grounds. We waited for a group of them to pass so that we might walk alone. As we neared the gate, passing through the shadows of high flowered shrubs, a vague feeling that we were being followed shot through me. In a moment there was so much to see that I forgot it, but I held my hand on my dirk and moved closer to Hope.

We reached the entrance to the canopy. A group of girls, red-cloaked, were just coming out. They rushed past us. They ran, discarding their cloaks. Their white bodies gleamed under the colored lights as they rushed to the pool and dove.

We were just in time. Hope whispered, "The king will be here any moment."

Beneath the canopy was a broad arena of seats. A platform, like a stage, was at one end. It was brilliantly illuminated with colored torches held aloft by girls in flowing robes, each standing like a statue with her light held high. The place was crowded. In the gloom of the darkened auditorium we found seats off to one side, near the open edge of the canopy. We sat, with Hope between us.

Derek whispered, "Shakespeare might have staged a play in a fashion like this."

A primitive theatrical performance. There was no curtain for interlude between what might have been the acts of a vaudeville. The torch girls, like pages, ranged themselves in a line across the front of the stage. They were standing there as we took our seats. The vivid glare of their torches concealed the stage behind them.

There was a few moments wait, then, amid hushed silence, the king with his retinue came in. He sat in a canopied box off to one side. When he was seated, he raised his arm and the buzz of conversation in the

audience began again.

Presently the page girls moved aside from the stage. The buzz of the audience was stilted. The performance, destined to end so soon in tragedy, now began.

Chapter 7: The Crimson Murderess

Hope murmured. "The three-part music comes first. There will first be the spiritual."

An orchestra was seated on the stage in a semi-circle. It was composed of men and women musicians, and there seemed to be over a hundred of them. They sat in three groups; the center group was about to play. In a solemn hush the leaderless choirs, with all its players garbed in white, began its first faint note. I craned to get a clear view of the stage. This white choir seemed almost all wood-wind. There were tiny pipes in little series such as Pan might have used. Flutes, and flageolets; and round-bellied little instruments of clay, like ocarinas. And pitch-pipes, long and slender as a marsh reed.

In a moment I was lost in the music. It began softly, with single muted notes from a single instrument, echoed by the others, running about the choir like a will-o'-the-wisp. It was faint, as though very far away, made more sweet by distance. And then it swelled, came nearer.

I had never heard such music as this. Primitive! It was not that. Nor barbaric! Nothing like the music of our ancient world. Nor was it what I might conceive to be the music of our future. A thing apart, unworldly, ethereal. It swept me, carried me off; it was an exaltation of the spirit lifting me. It was triumphant now. It surged, but there was in its rhythm, the beat of its every instrument, nothing but the soul of purity. And then it shimmered into distance again, faint and exquisite music of a dream. Crooning, pleading, the speech of whispering angels.

It ceased. There was a storm of applause.

I breathed again. Why, this was what music might be in our world but was not. I thought of our blaring jazz.

Hope said, "Now they play the physical music. Then Sensua will dance with Blanca. We will see then which one the king chooses."

On the stage all the torches were extinguished save those which were red. The arena was darker than before. The stage was bathed with a deep crimson. Music of the physical senses! It was, indeed, no more like the other choir than is the body to the spirit.

There were stringed instruments playing now; deep-toned, singing zithers, and instruments of rounded, swelling bodies, like great viols with sensuous, throbbing voices. Music with a swift rhythm, marked by the thump of hollow gourds. It rose with its voluptuous swell into a paeon of abandonment, and upon the tide of it, the crimson Sensua flung herself upon the stage. She stood motionless for a moment that all might regard her. The crimson torchlight bathed her, stained crimson the white flush of her limbs, her heavy shoulders, her full, rounded throat.

A woman in her late twenties. Voluptuous of figure, with crimson veils half-hiding, half-revealing it. A face

of coarse, sensuous beauty. A face wholly evil, and it seemed to me wholly debauched. Dark eyes with beaded lashes. Heavy lips painted scarlet. A pagan woman of the streets. One might have encountered such a woman swaggering in some ancient street of some ancient city, flaunting the finery given her by a rich and profligate eastern prince.

She stood a moment with smoldering, passion-filled eyes, gazing from beneath her lowered lids. Her glance went to the king's canopy, and flashed a look of confidence, of triumph. The king answered it with a smile. He leaned forward over his railing, watching her intently.

With the surge of the music she moved into her dance. Slowly she began, quite slowly. A posturing and swaying of hips like a nautch girl. She made the rounds of the musicians, leering at them. She stood in the whirl of the music, almost ignoring it, stood at the front of the stage with a gaze of slumberous, insolent passion flung at the king. A knife was in her hand now. She held it aloft. The red torchlight caught its naked blade. With shuddering fancy I seemed to see it

dripping crimson. She frowned, and struck it at a phantom lover. She backed away. She stooped and knelt. She knelt and seemed with her empty arms to be caressing a murdered lover's head. She kissed him, rained upon his dead lips her macabre kisses.

And then she was up on her bare feet, again circling the stage. Her anklets clanked as she moved with the tread of a tigress. The musicians shrank from her waving blade.

A girl in white veils was suddenly disclosed standing at the back of the stage.

Derek whispered, "Is that Blanca?"

"Yes," whispered Hope.

Blanca stood watching her rival. The crimson Sensua passed her, took her suddenly by the wrist, drew her forward. For an instant I thought it might have been rehearsed. I saw Blanca as a slim, gentle girl in white, with a white head-dress. A dancer who could symbolize purity, now in the grip of red passion.

An instant, and then horror struck us. And I could feel it surge over the audience. A gasp of horror. The frightened girl in white tried to escape. The musicians wavered and broke. I stared, stricken, with freezing blood. Upon the stage the knife went swiftly up; it came down; then up again. The red Sensua stood gloating. The knife she waved aloft was truly dripping crimson now.

With a choked, gasping scream the white girl of the toilers crumpled and fell.... She lay motionless, at the feet of the crimson murderess.

Chapter 8: "Why, This Is Treason!"

There was a gasp. The audience sat frozen. On the stage, with no one lifting a hand to stop her, the crimson murderess made a leap and vanished. A moment, and then the spell broke. A girl in the audience screamed. Some one moved to stand up and overturned a seat with a crash.

The amphitheater under the canopy broke into a pandemonium. Screams and shouts, crashing of seats,

screaming, frightened people struggling to get out of the darkness. The torches on the stage were dropped and extinguished. The darkness leaped upon us.

Derek and I were gripping Hope. We were struck by a bench flung backward from in front. People were rushing at us. We were swept along in the panic of the crowd.

I heard Derek shout, "We must keep together!"

We fought, but we were swept backward. We found ourselves outside the canopy. Torchlight was here. It glimmered on the pool of water. People were everywhere rushing past us, some one way, some another. Aimless, with the shock of terror upon them. Under the canopy they were still screaming.

I was momentarily separated from Derek and Hope. I very nearly stumbled into the pool. A girl was here, crouched on the stone bank. Her wet crimson veils clung to her white body. Her long, wet hair lay on her. I stumbled against her. She raised her face. Eyes, wide with terror. Mute, painted red lips....

I heard Derek calling again, "Charlie!" I shoved my way back to him. The crowd was thinning out around us. Girls were climbing from the pool, rushing off in terror, to mingle with the milling throng. Among the crowd now, down by the edge of the bay, I saw the sinister figures of men come running. The toilers, miraculously appearing everywhere! I saw, across the pool, a terrified girl crouching. A huge man in a black cloak came leaping. The colored lights in the trees glittered on his upraised knife blade as it descended. The girl fell with a shuddering scream. The murderer turned and whirled away into the crowd.

"Charlie!"

I was back with Derek and Hope. Hope stood trembling, with her hand pressed against her mouth. Derek gripped me.

"That cloak, get it off!" He ripped his crimson cloak from him and tossed it away. He jerked mine off. "Too dangerous! That's the crimson badge of death tonight."

We stood revealed in the clothes of our own world. My business suit, in which that day I had worked in Wall Street. Derek in his swagger uniform. He stood drawn to his full height, a powerful figure. The wires of our mechanism showed at his wrists. They dangled at the back of his neck, mounting to that strangely fashioned electrode clamped to his head. Strange, awe-inspiring figure of a man!

We were momentarily alone under the colored lights of the trees. Hope murmured, "But they will see us—see you...."

Derek's face was grim, but at her words he laughed harshly. "See us! What matter?" He swung on me. "It forces our hand; we've got to come out in the open now! This murder—this king! My God, what a fool to let himself get into such a condition as this! His people—this chaos—what a fool!"

He had drawn his dirk. I realized that I was holding mine. Near us the body of a crimson noble was lying under a tree. A sword was there on the ground. Derek sprang for it, waved it aloft.

I think that no more than a minute or two had passed since the murder. Down by the water the boats were hastily loading and leaving the dock. One of them overturned. There were screams everywhere. Red forms lay inert upon the ground where they had been trampled, or stabbed. But the prowling figures of the toilers now seemed to have vanished.

Derek gestured. "Look at the palace! The garden!"

Beyond the canopy I could see the dim gardens surrounding the palace. I glimpsed the high fence, and the gateway in front. A mob of toilers was there. The guard at the gate had fled. The mob was surging through. Men and women in the vivid garments of the fields, armed with sticks and clubs and stones and the implements of agriculture. They milled at the gate; rushed through; scattered over the garden. Their shouts floated back to us in a blended murmur.

We were standing only a dozen feet from the edge of the pavilion. No one seemed yet to have noticed us. A few straggling lights had come on under the canopy. I could see the dead lying there in the wreckage of

overturned seats.

Derek said, "We can't help it—it's done. Look at them! They're attacking the palace!"

This mob springing miraculously into existence! I realized that the toilers had planned that if Sensua were chosen they would attack the festival. The murder of Blanca had come as big a surprise to them as to us....

"Come on! Can you get into the palace, Hope? The king must have gotten back there. Get your wits, girl!" Derek stood gripping her, shaking her.

"Yea, there's an underground passage. He probably went that way."

From the palace gardens the shouts of the mob sounded louder now. And from within the building there was an alarm bell tumultuously clanging.

Hope gasped, "This way."

She led us back into the pavilion. We clambered over its broken seats, past its grewsome huddled figures. Some were still moving.... We went to a small door under the platform. A dim room was here, deserted now. Against the wall was a large wardrobe closet; stage costumes were hanging in it. The closet was fully twenty feet deep. We pushed our way through the hanging garments. Hope fumbled at the blank board wall in the rear. Her groping fingers found a secret panel. A door swung aside and a rush of dank cool air came at us. The dark outlines of a tunnel stretched ahead.

"In, Charlie!"

I crouched and stepped through the door. Hope closed it behind us. The tunnel passage was black, but soon we began to see its vague outlines. Derek, sword in hand, led us. I clutched my dirk. We went perhaps five hundred feet. Down at first, then up again. I figured we were under the palace gardens now, as the tunnel was winding to the left. There were occasional small lights.

Derek whispered to Hope, "The toilers don't know of this?"

"No."

"Where does it bring us out?" I whispered.

"Into the lower floor of the castle. The king must have gone this way. There might be a guard, Derek. What will you do?"

He laughed. "I can handle this mob. Disperse it! You'll see! And handle the king." He laughed again grimly. "There is no Blanca to choose now."

The tunnel went round a sharp angle and began steeply ascending. Derek stopped.

"How much further, Hope?"

"Not far," she whispered.

We crept forward. The tunnel was more like a small corridor now. Beyond Derek's crouching figure, in the

dimness I could see a doorway. Derek turned and gestured to us to keep back. A palace guard was standing there. His pike went up.

"Who are you?"

"A friend."

But the man lunged with his pike. Derek leaped aside. His sword flashed; the flat of it struck the fellow in the face. Derek, with incredible swiftness, was upon him. They went down together and before the man could shout, Derek had struck him on the head with the sword hilt. The guard lay motionless. Derek climbed up as we ran forward to join him.

I noticed now, for the first time, that in his left hand Derek held a small metal cylinder. A weapon, strange to me, which he had brought with him. He had not mentioned it. He had produced it, when menaced by this guard. Then he evidently decided not to use it.

He shoved it back in his pocket. He whirled on us, panting. "Hurry! Close that door!"

We closed the door of the tunnel.

"Charlie, help me move him!"

We dragged the prostrate figure of the unconscious guard aside into a shadow of the wall. We were in a lower room of the palace. It seemed momentarily unoccupied. Overhead we could hear the footsteps of running people. A confusion in the palace, and outside in the garden the shouts of the menacing throng of toilers. And above it all, the wild clanging of the alarm bell from the palace tower.

Derek said swiftly, "Get us to the king!"

Hope led us through the castle corridors, and up a flight of steps to the main floor. The rooms here were thronged with terrified people—crimson nobles in their bedraggled finery of the festival. In all the chaos no one seemed to notice us.

We mounted another staircase. We found a vacant room; through its windows we looked a moment, gazing into the garden. It was jammed with a

menacing mob, which milled about, leaderless, waving crude weapons, shouting imprecations at the palace. At the foot of the main steps the throng stood packed, but none dared to mount. A group of the palace guards stood on the platform over the moat.

Derek turned away impatiently. "Let's get to the king."

We mounted to the upper story. The castle occupants stared at Derek and me as we passed them. A group of girls at the head of the staircase fled before us.

"The king," Derek demanded, "Which is his apartment? Hurry, Hope, we've no time now!"

We found the frightened king seated on a couch with his counsellors around him. It was a small room in this top story of the castle, with long windows to the floor. I saw that they gave onto a balcony which overlooked the gardens. There were perhaps twenty or thirty people huddled in the room. A confusion existed here as everywhere else—no one knowing what to do in this crisis. And that cursed alarm bell

wildly adding to the turmoil. We paused at the doorway.

"Now," whispered Derek. He drew himself to his full height. His eyes were flashing. It was a Derek I had not seen before; he wore an air of mastery. As though he, and not the frightened, trembling monarch on the couch, were master here. And as I stared at him that instant in this primitive chaotic environment, the power of him swept me. A conqueror. The strange electrode clamped to his head gave him an aspect miraculous, awe inspiring.

He strode forward across the apartment. The king was just giving some futile, vague command to be transmitted to his guards down below. A hush fell over the room at our appearance. The king half stood up, then sank back.

"Why—why—who—"

I saw Rohbar here. His long crimson cloak hung from his shoulders, with its hood thrown back. Beneath it, as it parted in front, his leather uniform was visible. A

sword was strapped to his waist. He was striding back and forth with folded arms, frowning, but his gaze was very keen. Rohbar was not frightened. He seemed rather to be gauging the situation, pondering how he might turn it to his own ends. He stopped short and swung about to face us. His jaw dropped with surprise, amazement, at our strangeness.

Derek confronted him. His bulk, and huge weight towered even over Derek. The king gasped and sat helplessly staring.

Rohbar spoke first. "Who are you?"

"This mob must be dispersed. Don't stand looking at me like that, man!"

Derek spoke in friendly fashion, but vehemently. "This is no time for explanations."

They were menacing each other. Rohbar's heavy hand fell to his sword, but Derek boldly pushed him away. He faced the king.

"Your Majesty...."

The king stared blankly at him. The title was no doubt strange to this realm, but no stranger than Derek's aspect.

"Your Majesty...."

But the noise from the garden, the confusion which now broke out in the room, and that damnable clattering bell, drowned his words.

The king found his voice. "Be quiet, all of you!" He was on his feet. He demanded of Derek again, "Who are you?"

Derek said swiftly, "I'll show you. I can disperse this mob! Charlie, come."

It seemed as though the gaze of everyone in the room went to me. I drew myself up and flashed defiance back at them. And I followed Derek to one of the balcony windows. He went through it, with me after him. I stood at the threshold, watchful of the room

behind us. Rohbar was standing aside, and I saw now the woman Sensua with him. They were whispering, staring at me and Derek.

I had been wondering why, when Sensua must have known that the king would choose her—why she had dared to murder her rival. I thought now—as I saw her with Rohbar—that I could guess the reason. She loved Rohbar, not the king. Rohbar was plotting to put himself on the throne, using Sensua as a lover to that end. He had doubtless persuaded her to this murder, knowing it would arouse the toilers, precipitate this chaos which was what he wanted. Scheming scoundrel! I could not forget the look of desire on his face as he had accosted Hope....

And now Derek appeared, to add an unknown element to Rohbar's plans. There was no way he could guess who or what we were. I saw that he was puzzled, was whispering to Sensua about us, doubtless wondering how to handle us.

I saw too, that there were half a dozen crimson cloaked men here who were not frightened. They had

gathered in a group. They stood with hands upon their swords, eyeing me, and watching Rohbar—as though at a sign from him they would rush me.

On the balcony Derek stood with the light from the room upon him. The crowd saw him. The main gateway of the palace was just under his balcony. The crowd had now started up the steps to where the guards were standing at the top. At the sight of Derek the mob let out a roar, and those on the steps retreated down again.

Derek stood at the balcony rail, silent, with upraised arms, gazing down upon the menacing throng. There was a moment of startled silence as he appeared. Then the shout broke out louder than before. The crowd was milling and pushing, but still leaderless. An aimless activity. Someone threw a stone. It came hurtling up. It missed Derek and struck the castle wall, falling almost at my feet.

Derek did not move. He stood calmly gazing down; stood like an orator waiting for the confusion to die before he would speak.

From the platform, just beneath Derek, the guards were staring wonderingly up, awed, startled. To the right a wing of the building turned an angle. The castle tower was there: it rose perhaps a hundred feet higher than our balcony. On the railed platform-balcony girding its top I saw the figures of other guards standing, gazing down at Derek. The clanging bell up there was suddenly stilled.

I became aware of the king close behind me. His voice rang out: "What are you doing? How dare you?"

Derek whirled, "You fool! To what a pass you have come! Your people in arms against you...."

His violent words brought the king's anger. "How dare you! This is treason!"

I stood alert, with my hand upon my dirk.

There would be conflict here, I felt that we could not hold it off more than a moment longer. My mind leaped to that metal cylinder Derek had concealed. A weapon? Then why did he not have it out now? His

eyes were flashing. The aspect of power, of confidence, upon him was unmistakable. It heartened me. I took a step toward him.

He smiled faintly. "Wait, Charlie."

The king gasped again. "How dare you? Why, this is treason! Rohbar, seize him!"

Hope was beside me, her eyes watching the room. Rohbar came striding forward. Derek rasped, "You perhaps have some sense! Lead His Majesty away. Take care of him until this is over."

They stood with crossing glances. And upon Rohbar's face a look, queerly sinister, had come. A smile, sardonic.

He said abruptly to the king, "I think we should let him have his way. What harm?"

He gestured and Sensua came forward. The crimson murderess! Her voluptuous figure was shrouded in a crimson cloak. Her heavy painted lips smiled at the

King. Her rounded white arms went over his shoulders.

"Leonto, do as Rohbar says. Let this stranger try. It can do no harm."

The king yielded to her; I watched as she and Rohbar urged him through an archway that gave into the adjoining apartment.

No wonder Rohbar was sardonically smiling! Derek had played into his hand. We did not know it then, but we were soon to find it out.

Chapter 9: "Alexandre—"

Derek turned back to the balcony. It had been a brief interlude. The mob in the garden, the soldiers at the top of the stairway, and the other guards high on the bridge of the tower were all standing gazing. Shouts again arose as Derek appeared. Again he raised his arms. This time his voice rang out.

"Silence all of you! I am a friend! Silence!"

At first they did not heed him; then someone shouted:

"Quiet! Listen to him! Let him talk!"

The crowd was bellowing, and then they ceased. The bell was still. In the hush came Derek's voice:

"I am a friend. I come from foreign lands, from distant lands of strange people and strange magic."

For answer the crowd shouted and milled in confusion. A stone came up and then another. Derek stood immovable, like a statue gazing down at them.

"I command you to disperse. You will not? Then look at me! Look at me, all of you. My will is law beyond this king—beyond these palace soldiers—beyond any power you have ever known."

Then I knew a part of Derek's purpose! He had pressed the mechanism at his wrist. He stood imperious with upraised arms. The garden was in a tumult, but in a moment it died. A wave of horror swept the crowd. A freezing, incredulous horror. They

stood staring, incredulous, silent, swept with a widening wave of horror.

The figure of Derek on the balcony was fading, turning luminous. A wraith, a ghost of his menacing shape standing there. It faded until it was almost gone, and then, as he reversed the mechanism, it materialized again. A moment passed, then he stood again solid before them.

His voice rang out, "Will you obey me now? I am a friend of the toilers!"

They were prostrate before him. There is no fear more terrible than the fear of the supernatural. In all of history there has been in our world no worship more abject than the worship and fear of a primitive people for its supernatural God. On the platform beneath the balcony, the palace soldiers stared up, horrified. Then they too were prostrate before Derek's threatening gestures and commanding voice.

I stood watching, listening. And suddenly, from the prostrate crowd, a man leaped up. In the silence his

amazed voice carried over the garden.

"Alexandre! It is our Prince Alexandre! Our lost prince!"

He stood staring at Derek, his arms gesturing to his comrade around him. He shouted it again:

"Our rightful king, come back to us! Don't you recognize him? *I* saw him go! He went like that—fading into a ghost. Ten years ago, when Leonto killed his father and would have killed him had he not escaped!"

The crowd was standing up now. They recognized Derek! There was no doubt of it. The garden was ringing with the tumultuous shouts,

"Alexandre! Our lost prince has come back to us!"

My head was whirling with it. Derek, prince of this realm? I could see that it was true. Escaped from here as a young lad, when his throne was usurped. Returning now, a man, to claim his own.

And suddenly he turned and flashed me his smile.

The din from the garden drowned his words. The crowd was shouting: "Alexandre! Our lost prince!"

The king's guards on the lower platform stood sullen, confused. I heard footsteps behind me. I whirled around.

From the room, the group of Rohbar's crimson nobles were rushing toward me! Their swords were out. One of them shouted, "Kill them now! We must kill them and have done!"

There were five or six men in the group. They were no more than ten feet away from me. They came leaping.

I stood in the window opening, with only my dirk to oppose them. I shouted, "Derek! Derek!"

I think I took a step backward. I was out on the balcony. It flashed over me—Derek and I were caught out here!

The first of the red cloaked figures came hurtling through the doorway. I leaped to avoid his sword. I saw the others crowding behind him.

Then I felt Derek shove me violently aside. I half fell, but recovered myself at the balcony rail. Five of the crimson nobles were on the balcony. Derek confronted them. His aspect made them pause. They stood, with outstretched swords. The garden was silent; the crowd stared up. And in the silence Derek roared,

"Get back! All of you, go back inside! Back, or I'll kill you!"

In Derek's right hand he held the cylinder outstretched, leveled at the menacing nobles.

"Back, I say!"

But instead they rushed him. There was a flash. From the cylinder it seemed that a ray spat out, a flash of silver light. It caught the three men who were in advance of the others. Their swords dropped with a

clatter to the balcony floor. They stood, transfixed.

An instant. Derek's silver ray played upon them. Their red cloaks were painted with its silver sheen.

They were shimmering! I gasped, staring. The other nobles, beyond the ray, had fallen back. And they too stood staring in horror.

Another instant The three figures wavered. I saw the face of one of them, with the shock of incredulous horror still upon it. A face turning luminous! A face, erased, with only the staring eyes to mark where it had been!

There was a moment when the three stricken men stood like shimmering ghosts, with Derek's deadly ray upon them. Then they were gone! It seemed, just as they vanished, that they were falling through the balcony floor....

Derek snapped off his ray. He rasped, "Back into that room, I tell you!"

The remaining nobles fled before him. He turned again to the balcony rail.

"My people—yes, I am Alexandre—I had not thought you would recognize me so soon. But you are right—the time has come for me to claim my inheritance. And I will rule you justly."

His cylinder was still in his hand; he swept a watchful glance behind him. I thought of Rohbar. He was in the next room, with the king. Had they seen this attack upon Derek? They must have heard the crowd shouting, "Alexandre!" It seemed strange they did not appear.

I recall now, as I look back to this moment on the balcony, that I suddenly thought of Hope. She had been beside me just before the nobles attacked. I did not see her now. I was startled, but thought of her was driven from my mind. From within the palace a scream sounded. A girl screaming.

But it was not Hope's voice. A girl, screaming, and then shouting:

"The king is dead!"

Derek came rushing at me. "Charlie, that—"

We heard it again. "The king is dead!"

We hurried into the adjoining room. There was no one to stop us—no one up here now who dared oppose Derek. The terrified nobles in the room fell cringing before him.

"Alexandre—spare us! We are loyal to you!"

He strode past them. In the adjacent apartment we found the king lying upon the floor. A wound in his throat welled crimson. He had evidently been lying here alone, and had just now been found by a girl who had entered. He was not quite dead. Derek bent over him. He opened his eyes.

He gasped faintly: "Rohbar—killed me. Rohbar and that—accursed crimson Sensua...."

His voice trailed away. The light went out of his

staring eyes. Derek laid him gently back on the floor.

And as though already the news of his death had miraculously spread, the bell in the castle tower began tolling. Not clanging now. Tolling, with slow, solemn accent. The crowd evidently recognized it. We could hear the shouts: "Death! Death has come!"

Derek's eyes were blazing as he stood up. "The end, Charlie! I would not have planned this, and yet...."

He did not finish. He whirled, rushed back to the other room and to the balcony. The scene was again in confusion the crowd milling, voices shouting:

"The king is dead!"

At the edge of the garden a woman's shrill, hysterical laughter rose over the din.

Derek called, "Yes, the king is dead!" He paused. Then he added, "If you want me—if I have your loyalty—I will claim my throne."

A tumult interrupted him. "Alexandre! King Alexandre!"

He spread his arms, but he could not silence them.

"The king is dead. Long live King Alexandre!"

A wave of it swept over the garden, engulfing the castle. At the main entrance Leonto's soldiers stood sullen, listening to it.

Derek stood triumphant. His hands were outstretched, palms down. But up on the circular bridge at the top of the tower there was a sudden commotion. The soldiers up there had vanished, moved back within the tower to make room for other figures. I stared amazed, transfixed. A huge man in leather garments was there, with a sword stuck in his wide belt. A man with a bullet head, a heavy face, gazing down....

Rohbar!

And held in front of him the slender figure of a girl.

Hope! He clutched her, his thick arm encircling her breast. With sinking heart I realized what had happened. Hope had moved away from me. Every one in the room had been intent upon Derek. Rohbar had come quietly in, after murdering the king, had seized Hope, stifled her outcry, and had taken her up into the tower.

And I had promised Derek that I would shield this girl from harm! The horror of it—the self-condemnation of it—swept me, froze me to numbness. I could not think; I could only stand and stare. Rohbar held Hope like a shield before him. The low railing hardly reached her knees. A sheer drop to the garden beneath. He held her tightly, and in his free hand I saw his dirk come up menacingly against her white throat. His voice called:

"Silent, down there! Alexandre, you traitor! Silence!"

Derek stared up. The triumph faded from him. He stared, stricken. The crowd stared. The soldiers on the lower platform ceased their shouting and gazed up at these new actors, come so unexpectedly upon

the stage. Again Rohbar called, to the guards this time:

"I represent your King Leonto. This Alexandre is a traitor to us all. And he cannot harm me! I defy him. Look at him! I defy him to use his evil weapon upon me!"

Derek was silent. A single adverse move and Rohbar's knife would stab into Hope's throat. Derek's ray was powerless. A flash from it would have killed Hope, not Rohbar.

The king's soldiers saw Derek's indecision. One of them shouted, "He cannot harm us! Look, he is frightened!"

The crowd recognized Hope. They began calling her name. And calling, "Master Rohbar, do not harm our Hope!"

"I will not harm her! Not if you do what I tell you! Leave the garden—go quietly! I will deal with this traitor!"

He added to the guards, "Go up and seize him! He cannot hurt you! Traitor! Seize him! If he does not yield—if any of this crowd attacks you—then I will kill Hope."

Derek stood clinging to the balcony rail. With Rohbar's watchful gaze upon him he did not dare turn or move. I was standing back from the balcony, behind Derek and partly in the room. No one thought of me. No one from outside could see me. And I, who had played no part in this, save that one I had neglected, suddenly saw my role. My cue was sounding. My role to play, here upon this tumultuous stage.

I turned back into the dim room. A few frightened men and girls were here. They were all crowding forward, gazing through the windows at the scene outside. No one noticed me, but I saw, with sudden realization, my role to play.

I darted across the room, out into the dim, deserted corridor of the castle.

Chapter 10: My Role to Play

I slipped like a shadow through the almost empty corridors. Down on the lower floor I found that many of the soldiers were on the inside, standing about the corridors in groups, waiting for word from their comrades on the platform to indicate what action they should take. My time was short; I knew that within a few minutes they would be rushing up to overpower Derek.

I stood unseen against the wall near the main entrance. I could not get outside. There were too many soldiers there.

I tried to keep my sense of direction. The wing upon which the tower stood was about two hundred feet from me here. If I could not get outside I would have to try the inside, along this corridor. I prayed that I might not make an error. I tried to gauge exactly where the tower would be.

The hallway was almost dark and in this wing there chanced to be no one at the moment. I came to the

angle and turned it to the left. I was unarmed save my dirk. I drew it. But I encountered no one. I passed the doors of many empty rooms. The windows were all barred on this lower floor. I could hear the shouts of the crowd outside.

I came at last to the end of the wing. A staircase here led upward. I guessed that I was directly under the tower now, and that this staircase undoubtedly led upward into it. I mounted a few steps to verify what I was sure would be the condition. It was as I thought. Rohbar had won over the soldiers who were here. He had sent them down from the tower bridge. They were guarding this staircase.

I crept up another few steps, very cautiously. I could hear their voices on the stairs. A light was up there. I could see the legs of some of them as they crowded the stairs. I softly retreated.

There was no way of getting up into the tower here. Alone and armed only with my dirk, I could not mount these stairs and assail a dozen armed men standing above me; especially when, if I raised an alarm,

Rohbar overhead might be startled into killing Hope.

I stood another moment, thinking, planning my actions. I was trembling. Everything depended upon me now. I must get up into the tower. And, above everything, haste was necessary.

I retreated back to the lower floor. I was still some twenty feet above the ground, I judged. That was too far. A dozen paces along the hall I saw a stairway leading downward into the ground level cellar of the castle. I marked in my mind exactly in which direction I turned, and how far. I went down the stairs.

There was an empty lower room. It was pitch black. I lay down on its earthen floor. Above me, a few paces off to one side I could visualize the tower. A hundred and fifty feet above me, at least, up to that bridge balcony, where Rohbar stood with Hope. I kept my mind on it and prayed that I might not be making an error, a miscalculation.

I prayed, too, that luck would be with me. A desperate chance, yet I thought I knew what was here, or about

here, in New York City. I lay on my side, alone in the blackness, and pressed the switch at my wrist....

The familiar sensation of the transition began. The darkness grew luminous. Around me shadows were taking form. My body was humming, thrilling with the vibrations within it. I could feel the ground under me seeming to melt. My head was reeling. Nausea swept me, but with it all I tried to keep my wits. I must watch this new Space into which I was going. Space? I prayed that here on this spot in New York City there would be empty space! If not, at the first warning, I was prepared to stop my mechanism.

The shadows grew around me. There was a moment or two when I felt as though I were floating. Weightless. The sense of my body hovering in a void, intangible, imponderable, with only my struggling mentality holding it together....

And then I felt myself materializing. Around me walls were taking form. I floated down a foot or two and came to rest upon a new floor. My hand brushed it. My physical senses were returning. I could feel a floor

of concrete. A vague, shimmering light was near me. It seemed to outline the rectangle of a window. All around was darkness. Empty darkness. Soundless, with only the throbbing hum of the mechanism....

I was indoors, in a room. I felt suddenly almost normal, except for the whirring vibration. I flung the switch again. There was a shock. A whirling of my senses. Then I sat up; my head steadied. The nausea passed.

I was back in my own world, in New York City. This was night: I tried to calculate the time. Derek and I had departed about midnight. This would be, then some time before dawn. I was in a cellar room, lying on its cement floor. There was a window, with a faint light outside it. A window up near the ceiling. A straggling illumination showed me a bin, a few barrels, a door leading into another room which looked as though it might be a machine shop.

I sat up, calculating. I was a thousand feet perhaps from the Battery wall, two hundred feet from the Hudson River. This was an office building, and I was

in one of its cellar rooms, at the ground level.

Near dawn? I tried to calculate what might be overhead. A deserted office building. Too early yet for the scrub-women. The elevator would not be running. I laughed to myself. Of what use to me an elevator, if it had been running? How could I, a midnight prowler, appear from the cellar of this building, and demand to be taken upstairs! There would be no elevator, but there would be watchmen. I would avoid them.

I found a door. My heart leaped with a sudden fear that it would be locked, but it was not. I went through it into a passage and found the staircase. I made two turns. I tried again to keep my mind on this Space here. I stood, carefully thinking. I had it clear. I had made no move without careful thought. The tower with Rohbar was still to my left, and about directly above me.

I went up the short stone staircase, opened another door carefully. I was in the dim lower hall of the office building. I found myself beside the deserted elevator shaft. A light was burning on the night attendant's

table in an alcove, on the other side of the shaft. He sat there with his back to me. I closed the door soundlessly.

The stairway upward beside the elevator was here. I watched my chance. I darted around the angle and went up. I met no one. The concrete staircase had a light at each floor. Four floors up. No, not enough! I opened the fourth floor door. The marble hall of the office building was empty and silent. Rows of locked office doors with their gold-leaf names and numbers. A single dim light to illumine the silent emptiness....

I retreated into the staircase shaft and mounted higher. My dirk was in my hand. Charlie Wilson, the Wall Street brokerage clerk, prowling here! And upon what a strange adventure!

I came to what I thought was the proper floor. In the hall I selected a room. The door was securely locked. I had no way of breaking the lock, but the panel was of opaque glass. I would have to chance the noise. I rushed the length of the hall, to where a red fire-ax hung in a bracket. I came back with it. I smashed the

glass panel of the door.

Would a watchman hear me? I did not wait to find out. With the ax I scraped away the splinters of glass. I climbed through the opening. My hand was cut, but I did not heed it.

I was in a dim, silent office, with rugs on the floor, desks standing about, filing cases, a water-cooler, and a safe in the corner. I rushed to one of the windows. It looked over Battery Park and the upper bay. The stars were shining, but to the east over Brooklyn I could see them paling with the coming dawn. I gazed down to try and calculate my height. Yes, this would be about right. And my position. I could see the outline of the shore, the trees of Battery Park, the busy harbor, even at this hour before dawn, thronged with the moving lights of its boats.

I saw all this with my eyes, but with my mind I saw the wrecked, deserted pavilion, and the gardens of Leonto's castle. The threatening mob would be below me. The palace entrance would be here to my left, down in the street where those taxis were parked.

There was a commotion down there by the office building entrance. I know now what caused it, but at the time I did not notice. The wing of the castle was under me. This would be the tower. Its upper room, or the balcony, just about where I was standing. I prayed that it might be so. I seemed with my mind to see it all.

I lay down on the floor by the window. Out in the office building hallway I heard heavy footsteps come running. One of the night watchmen had evidently heard the glass crashed.

I laughed. I pressed the switch at my wrist....

Chapter 11: The Fight on the Tower Balcony

The sensations swept me again. The room faded. Whether the watchmen came in to see a ghost of me lying there on the floor I did not know, nor did I care. I whirled into the shadows. And came in a moment out of the black silence. The office room was gone. I seemed to have fallen or floated down—how far I do not know. A triumph swept me. I was lying on another

floor. I could see a doorway materializing. I was not upon the balcony as I had calculated, but within the tower room. New walls sprang around me.



[ID: A black and white illustration showing the protagonist starting to sit up from the floor, wearing a black business suit, looking ahead of him, with the background a combination of the castle tower, with the balcony visible through a doorway, and the office building, fading together, with a still partially transparent guard standing directly in front of the narrator, looking straight ahead, unable to see him yet. On the balcony, Rohbar stands, clutching Hope, a

knife raised in threat. Image description end.]

I did not heed it, this time, the sensation, of the transition. I was too alert to what new situation might come upon me. The tower room. I could see it. I could see its oval windows close at hand. The doorway to its balcony. Sounds flooded me, mingled with the humming within me. Familiar sounds. The crowd shouting. And a single voice—the voice of Rohbar. Vague and blurred, but as I materialized it became clearer.

I was suddenly aware that there was a man beside me. One of the palace soldiers. He saw me materialize. He leaped backward in horror. I flung my switch. I was on my feet, swaying, and then I leaped upon him. My dirk plunged downward into his chest.

The thing made me shudder. I reeled with the sickness of it, but as he fell I clung to the dirk and ripped it out of him. It was dripping with his blood.

I stood trembling. The small tower room had no other occupants. I turned toward the door. I could see a

patch of stars, paling with the coming dawn. I crouched in the small doorway which gave onto the balcony, staring, swiftly calculating. The scene had scarcely changed. But, some of the soldiers had left the entrance platform, gone, no doubt, into the castle on their way upstairs to seize Derek.

On this upper balcony, no more than ten feet before me, Rohbar still stood gripping Hope. She was in front of him. His back was to me. A sudden jump, and I could plunge my dagger into his back.

Rohbar was shouting, "King Leonto is dead. If you should want me to succeed him, I will take this girl Hope for my queen. You all love her...."

I was tense to spring. Then out in the balcony, to one side, I saw Sensua crouching. Her crimson robe fell away to bare her white limbs. Her hand fumbled in her robe. She had been Rohbar's dupe, and now she knew it. Her knife was in her hand. Frenzied with jealousy and rage she sprang upon Rohbar's back, trying to stab at Hope.

Perhaps he sensed her coming, heard her; or perhaps she was unskilful. Her knife only grazed Hope's shoulder. He released Hope. He roared. He turned and gripped his murderous assailant. A second or two while I stood watching. He caught Sensua's wrist, twisted the knife from it and plunged the knife into her breast. She sank with a scream at his feet, and as he straightened he saw me.

But I had leaped. I was upon him. His own knife had remained in Sensua's breast. As I raised mine in my leap, he caught at my wrist; twisted it, but I flung the knife away before he could get it. The knife fell over the balcony rail. The weight of my hurtling body flung him backward, but the rail caught him. His arms went around me. Powerful arms, crushing me. I gripped at his throat.

There was an instant when I thought that we would both topple over the railing. I felt Hope beside us. I heard her scream. We did not go over the rail, for Rohbar lurched and flung us back. We dropped to the balcony floor, rolling, locked together. He was far stronger and heavier than I. He came uppermost. He

lunged and broke my hold upon his throat, but I was agile: I squirmed from under him. I almost regained my feet. He got up on one knee. He was trying to draw his sword. Then again I bore into him, kicking and tearing. He roared like a bull. And ignoring my plucking fingers, my flailing fists, he lunged to his feet with me gripping again at his throat.

His huge height swung me off the ground. I was aware that he had drawn his sword, but I was too close for him to use it. He swayed drunkenly with my weight; he was confused. I felt the rail behind us. We lunged again into it. Again I heard Hope scream in terror, and saw her leap at us. Rohbar stooped, trying to clutch the low rail. His bending down brought my feet to the balcony floor. With a last despairing effort I shoved him backward. And as he toppled at the rail, I fought to break his hold upon me. I felt us going and then I felt Hope reach me. Her arms flung about my waist. Her hold tore me loose. Rohbar's huge body fell away....

For an instant Rohbar seemed balanced upon the rail; then he went over. He gave a last long, agonized

scream as he fell. I did not look down. I crouched by the rail. The crowd in the garden; Derek standing on the other balcony; the soldiers who now had appeared behind him—all were silent, and in the silence I heard the horrible thud of Rohbar's body as it struck....

I clung to Hope for an instant, and she shuddered against me. The scene broke again into chaos. I cast Hope away and leaped up. I stood at the balcony rail. My arms went up and gestured to Derek. Amazement was on his face, but he answered my gesture. Behind him the soldiers who had come to seize him were standing in a group, stricken at this new tragedy.

Derek swung on them. He was not powerless now!
"Away with you!"

His cylinder menaced them, and they fell back in terror before him.

He darted past them and disappeared into the castle.

I felt Hope plucking at me. "I want to talk to the people."

She stood beside me, leaning over the rail. Gentle little figure. Familiar figure to them all. Their beloved Hope. Her voice rang out clearly through the hush.

"My people, we all want our beloved Alexandre—he has come back to us. He is our rightful king."

"King Alexandre! Long live King Alexandre!"

Derek in a moment appeared behind us. "My God, Charlie, I can't understand—"

I told him how I had done it. He gripped me. "I'll never be able to repay you for this!"

I pushed him forward and he joined Hope at the rail. Held her, and her arms went around his neck as she returned his kisses. The crowd gaped, then cheered.

I shouted, "Hope will be your queen—The reign of the crimson nobles is at an end!"

The wild cheering of the people, in which now the castle guards were joining, surged up to mingle with

my words.

Chapter 12: One Tumultuous Night

I come now with very little more to record.

I returned to my own world. And Derek stayed in his. Each to his own; one may rail at this allotted portion—but he does not lightly give it up.

The scientists who have examined the mechanism with which I returned very naturally are skeptical of me. Derek feared a further communication between his world, and mine. He smiled his quiet smile.

"Your modern world is very aggressive, Charlie. I would not want to chance having my mechanism duplicated—a conquering army coming in here."

And so he adjusted the apparatus to carry me back and then go dead. I have wires and electrodes to show in support of my narrative. But since they will not operate I cannot blame my hearers for smiling in derision.

Yet there is some contributing evidence. Derek Mason has vanished. A watchman in an office building near Battery Park reports that at dawn of that June morning he heard splintering glass. He found the office door with its broken panel, and the ax lying on the hall floor. He even thinks he saw a ghost stretched out by the window. But he is laughed at for saying it.

And there is still another circumstance. If you will trouble to examine the newspaper files of that time, you will find an occurrence headed "Inexplicable Tragedy at Battery Park." You will read that near dawn that morning, the bodies of three men in crimson cloaks came hurtling down through the air and fell in the street near where several taxis were parked. Strange, unidentified men. Of extraordinary aspect. The flesh burned, perhaps. All three were dead; the bodies were mangled by falling some considerable height.

An inexplicable tragedy. Why should anyone believe that they were the three crimson nobles whom Derek attacked with his strange ray?

I am only Charles Wilson, clerk in a Wall Street brokerage office. If you met me, you would find me a very average, prosaic sort of fellow. You would never think that deeds of daring were in my line at all. Yet I have lived this one strange tumultuous night, and I shall always cherish the memory.

#04 The Stolen Mind, by M. L. Staley (full name unknown):

What would you do, if, like Quest, you were tricked, and your very mind and will stolen from your body?

Aproximate word count: 9,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"What caused you to answer our advertisement?"

Owen Quest felt the steel of the quick gray eyes that jabbed like gimlets across the office table.

"Why does any man apply for a job?" he bristled.

Keane Clason gave an impatient smile.

"Come!" he said. "I'm not trying to snare you. But there were unusual features to my ad, and they were put there to attract an unusual type of man. To judge

your qualifications, I must know just why this proposition appeals to you."

"I can tell you that," nodded Quest, "but there's nothing unusual about it. In the first place, I knew that the Clason Research Corporation is the leading concern of its kind in the country. In the second place, this seemed to offer a way to obtain a substantial sum of money quickly."

"Good," said Clason. "And you feel that you have all the necessary qualifications?"

"Decidedly. I am 24 years old, athletic, and of an earnest and determined nature. Moreover, I have no family ties, and I'm willing to run any reasonable risk in order to improve the condition of my fellow men."

Clason smiled his approval.

"You say you need money. How much immediately?"

Quest was unprepared for the question.

"A thousand dollars," he ventured.

Without hesitation Clason counted out ten one-hundred-dollar notes from his wallet and laid them on the table.

"There's your advance fee. You're ready to go to work immediately, I hope?"

"Certainly," stammered Quest.

Stunned by the swiftness of the transaction, he sat staring at the money that lay untouched before him.

To accept it would be like signing an unread contract. But he had asked for it; to refuse it was impossible. Even to delay about picking it up might arouse Clason's suspicion. Already the latter had turned away and was opening the door of a steel cabinet. Quest had one second in which to reach a decision.... He crammed the currency into his pocket.

With delicate care Clason set two objects on the table. One looked to Quest like a miniature broadcasting

tower or a mooring mast for lighter than air craft. The other was a circular vat of some black material, probably carbon. Within it a series of concentric tissues were suspended from metal rings, and in a trough outside ranged four stoppered flasks containing liquids of as many different colors.

"Look at these models carefully," said Clason. "They represent two of the most remarkable discoveries of all time. The one on your left is the most *destructive* weapon known to man. The other I consider the most *constructive* discovery in the history of science. It may even lead to an understanding of the nature of life, and of the future of the spirit after death.

"Both of these were developed by my brother Philip and me together—but we have disagreed about the use to which they shall be put.

"Philip"—the inventor dropped his voice to a whisper—"wants to sell the secret of the Death Projector—the tower, there—as an instrument of war. If I should permit him to do that, it might lead to the destruction of whole nations!"

"How?" demanded Quest "I've heard of a device called the Death Ray. Is this it?"

"No, no," said Clason contemptuously. "Even in a perfected state the Ray would be a child's toy compared to the Projector. This is based on our discovery that invisible light rays of a certain wavelength, if highly concentrated, destroy life—and our additional discovery that if these are synchronized with short radio waves the effect is absolutely devastating.

"We obtain the desired concentration of invisible light by using a tellurium current-filter under the influence of alternate flashes of red and blue light. The projector can literally blanket vast areas with death, up to a top range of at least five hundred miles.

"Just picture to yourself what this means! In a space of ten minutes two men can lay down a circle of destruction a thousand miles in diameter; or they can cut a swath five hundred miles long in any desired direction."

"Have you ever proved it?" demanded Quest skeptically.

"Yes, young man, we have," snapped Clason. "Right here in the laboratory—but on a minute scale, of course. However, there's no time to demonstrate now. The point is that my brother is determined to sell if he can obtain his price for the invention. He argues that instead of bringing disaster upon the world, this machine will forever discourage war by making it too terrible for any civilized nation to consider. In spite of my opposition he has opened negotiations with an ambitious Balkan power. He may actually close the sale at any moment!

"However," Clason drew a deep breath "you see this other device? Simple as it appears, it is the key to the whole situation. We can use it—you and I—to overcome Philip's will and prevent this unthinkable transaction. The two of us can do it. Alone I would be virtually helpless."

"Why not have the Projector confiscated or destroyed by our own Government?" suggested Quest. "That

seems to me the only safe and sure way out of the difficulty."

"You simply do not understand," frowned Clason impatiently. "Philip is selling the plans and descriptions of the machine, not the machine itself. Even if this model and the larger test machine that we have built were destroyed—even if I were willing to have Philip sent to Leavenworth for life—he could still sell the Projector.

"But this other invention, our Osmotic Liberator, makes it possible for me to gain control of Philip and actually *change his mind*, through the medium of an agent. I have hired you to act as my Agent, Quest, because I can see that you are a young man of unusual character and vitality. And by way of reward I can promise you both money and a brilliant future."

The inventor poised in a tense attitude on the edge of his chair as though his body were charged with electricity. His eyes seemed to dart out emanations that set Quest's blood to tingling. Then for a moment the latter lost consciousness of his physical self. It

was as though he had opened a door and found himself suddenly on the brink of a new and totally strange world. He dispelled this fancy by a quick effort of the will, for he knew that he had a delicate problem on his hands and that it must be solved within a very few minutes. However he proceeded, he must act without disloyalty to his Government, and at the same time without injustice to Keane Clason.

"Tell me," he said in a husky voice, "how do you intend to use me? I do not believe in Spiritualism. I would be a poor medium."

Clason gave a short laugh.

"You are not to be a medium in that sense at all. Spiritualism as practiced is just a blind sort of groping and hoping. Osmotic Liberation, on the other hand, is an exact and opposite physico-chemical science. Here—I will show you."

Into the outer cell of the Liberator he emptied the purple vial, and so on to the innermost, which he filled with a golden-green liquid like old Chartreuse.

"The separating membranes, you understand, are permeable by these complicated solutions. Each liquid has a different osmotic pressure and therefore should, under normal conditions, interchange with the others through the membranes until all pressures are equalized. I prevent such interchange, however, by maintaining an anti-electrolysis which retards ionization and thus builds up what might be called osmotic potential.

"Now if an Agent—yourself for instance—submerges himself in the central cell, at the same time maintaining a physical contact with his Control at the surface of the liquid, and if then the osmotic potential is suddenly released by throwing the electrolytic switch, the host of ions thus turned loose in the outer compartments make one grand rush for the center solution, which contains the cathode.

"Under these conditions your body becomes a sort of sixth cell, and your skin another membrane in the series. Properly speaking, however, you are not a part of the electrolytic circuit but are merely present in the action. Your body acts as a catalyser, hastening

the chemical action without itself being affected in any way. Physically you undergo no change whatever; but in some strange way which is, like life, beyond analysis, your mind flows out into the solution, while your unaltered body remains at the bottom of the tank in a state of suspended animation.

"If no Control is present, all that is needed to return your mind into your body is a throw of the electrolytic switch back to negative, whereupon you emerge from the tank exactly as you entered it. But with your Control present and in contact with your submerged body, your mind, instead of remaining suspended in the solution, flows instantly into his body and resides there subject to his will.

"This can not be done, however, unless the wills of Control and Agent have first been brought into accord. To accomplish that, we clasp hands"—Quest grasped Clason's extended hand—"and look steadily into each other's eyes.

"Now, it is well known that the vibrations of an individual's will are as distinctive as the sworls of his

finger-prints. What is not so well known is that the frequency of vibration in one person can be brought into accord with that in another.

"You consciously retract your will by concentrating your mind upon the thing which you know I wish to accomplish. Gradually while we continue in this position your vibrations speed up or slow down until they acquire exactly the same frequency as my own. We are then in accord, and when your mind is liberated in the tank it is in a state which admits absorption into my body. And it is subject to my will because you have purposely attuned it to my peculiar frequency. Immediately after the transfer there will be a brief conflict, due to the instinctive desire of your will to obtain the ascendancy. But of course mine will gain the upper hand at once, since both wills will be in my frequency."

Quest felt, rather than saw, a wall of alarm closing in on him. He tried to avert his eyes, to withdraw his hand from Clason's grasp. With a nostalgic pang in the pit of his stomach he suddenly realized that he could not do so. He had gone too far—farther than

any man in his position had a right to go. Having deliberately weakened his will, it seemed now to have deserted him entirely. A prickling sensation coursed up his spine, his extended arm went numb, his hand trembled violently.

"Splendid!" said Clason, suddenly releasing both eye and hand. "Just as I foresaw, you will be able to attune yourself to my vibration-frequency with hardly an effort. Now please remain seated; I'll be back in a moment."

For a second after the door closed, Quest remained slumped in his chair. Then he was on his feet, shaking himself like a wet dog to free himself from the spell under which he had fallen. Something about Clason attracted and at the same time repelled him, fraying his nerves like an irritant drug and confusing his mind at the moment when he needed the full alertness of every faculty.

Invisible light—disembodied minds—will vibrations! Nothing there to get hold of. Were these things real or imaginary? Was Keane Clason a great inventor, or a

madman? Would Philip prove to be a real or an imaginary scoundrel? Should he summon help, or go on alone?

Professional pride said: wait, don't be an alarmist! With his knuckles Quest tapped the table, half expecting it to melt under his fingers. The feeling and sound of the contact gave him a peculiar start. On the farther end of the table stood a letter-box—an invitation. From his pocket Quest snatched a slip of paper, and wrote:

6 stroke 4—9:45A—Hired. If no report in 48 hours, clamp down hard.

To address a stamped envelope and slip it in with the outgoing mail was the work of seconds. But he was none too quick. He had just dropped back into a lounging attitude when the door burst open and Clason flew into the room?

"We must act instantly," hissed the inventor. "Philip plans to close the transaction within a day."

In spite of himself, Quest jumped upright in his chair. Clason tapped him on the shoulder reassuringly.

"It's all right," he smiled, "I'm ready for him. We'll make our move this afternoon and beat him by eighteen hours.

"Let's see." He paused. "Oh! yes. I was about to explain to you that as soon as the will of the Agent enters the body of his Control, the latter can again transfer it into the body of still another person.

"Now you understand why I advertised for a man of exceptional character? As my Agent, I want you to enter the body of Philip, and your will must be strong enough to conquer his in the battle for mastery which will begin the instant you intrude into his body. You will still be under my control, but your will must be strong enough on its own merits to overcome his. I can direct you, but your strength must be your own. That's clear, isn't it?"

"I think so," said Quest slowly. "But what becomes of me after you have frustrated Philip's plot?"

"That's the easy part of the process," smiled Clason; "but naturally you feel some anxiety about it. I simply withdraw your will from Philip, return it to your own body, and pay you a reward of ten thousand dollars."

"You're sure you can?"

"Perfectly. I have merely to touch Philip's hand to recapture your will. Then I immerse myself in the tank with the switch at plus. The osmotic action will extract both wills momentarily from my body. But the presence of two bodies and two wills in the solution together forces a balance, and each will seeks out and enters its own body. Then you and I climb out of the tank exactly as we are this minute."

"If it weren't for my belief that anything is possible," Quest shook his head, "I'd say that your claims for this invention were ridiculous."

"And you couldn't be blamed," admitted Clason readily. "This toy of a model is hardly convincing. But come along with me and I'll show you how the Liberator looks in actual operation."

The office rug concealed a trap door which gave upon a spiral stair. Below, Clason unlocked another door and led the way through a narrow and tremendously long passage lighted at intervals by small electric bulbs. Presently another door yielded to the inventor's deft touch and closed behind them with a portentous chug. Here the darkness was so utter and intense that Quest imagined he could feel the weight of it on his shoulders. From the slope of the passageway and the muffled beat of machinery that had come to his ears on the way along, he guessed that he was below ground in some chamber at the rear of the factory.

He gave a low exclamation as Clason switched on the toplight. No wonder the darkness had seemed of almost supernatural quality! Even the hard white glare of the daylight arc was grisly. Its rays rebounded from the liquids of the great circular tank in a blinding dazzle of color, while the dull black walls and ceiling were so perfectly absorptive that beyond arm's length they became to all effects invisible. Even the ledge on which he stood—the shoulder of the vat

—gave Quest the feeling that to move would be to step off into a bottomless pit.

But Clason took his attention at once, pointing here and there in his quick, nervous way to indicate how faithfully the Liberator had been reproduced from the model. In all respects the arrangements were the same, with the addition that here a long plank like a spring-board extended out from a wall-mount as far as the central compartment of the tank, and that from its end a narrow ladder hung down to the surface of the Chartreuse liquid. A double-throw switch fixed to the wall above the base of the plank was evidently the source of electrolytic control.

"When you throw the switch to plus," said Clason, pointing to the chalk-marked sign above, "you produce the violent electrolytic action needed to bring about a liberation. All the rest of the time it should be closed at minus, in order to maintain the anti-action which I explained to you.

"Now let's rehearse, so that when the time for the real performance arrives we can be sure of running it

off without a hitch."

"All right, sir," nodded Quest, so dazed by the glittering light that he was hardly conscious of what he said.

"First," said Clason, running lightly up the steps to the plank, "you walk out to the end, like this, and start down the ladder. Then you lower yourself into the tank. The liquid is at body temperature; it's neither strongly acid nor caustic; it will cause you no injury or discomfort whatever.

"Meanwhile I keep in contact with your hand until the instant that you become submerged. Now your mind is in me, see?—ready for transfer into Philip, where it will act as my Agent. That's how simple it is! Come on up and we'll go through the motions."

Quest experienced a shiver as he mounted the bridge. Annoyed with himself, he shrugged the feeling off. There was no risk here. Moreover, it was a part of his daily work to take chances; he had done so a hundred times without hesitation. Now he moved all the more

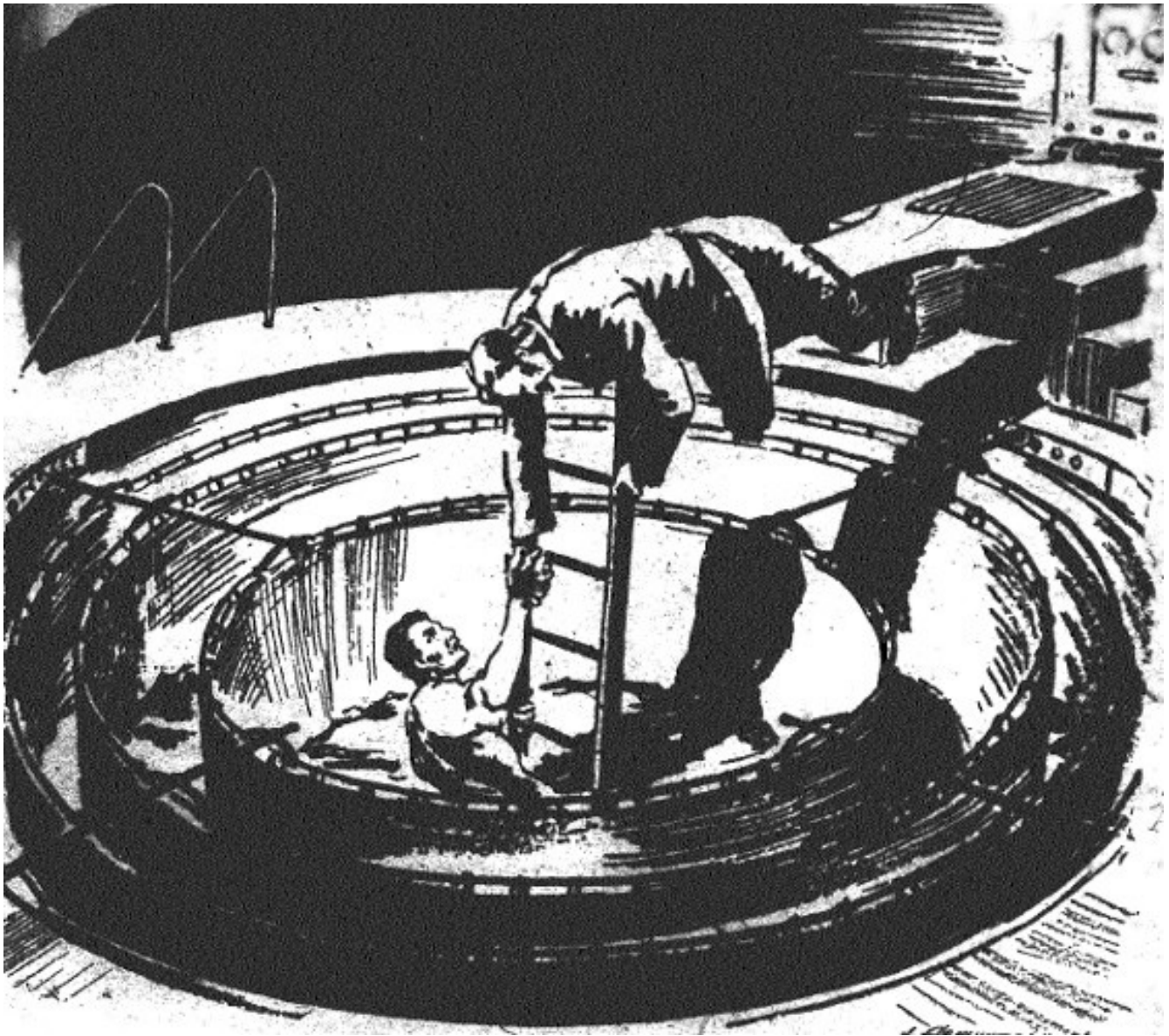
quickly, as if to belie the squeamishness that possessed him in spite of himself.

Swinging past Clason on the plank, he lowered himself without a pause to the bottom rung of the ladder, while the inventor, hanging head down, maintained contact with him.

"No need to stay here," he said in sudden irritation. "I understand perfectly what I am to do."

"I'm testing my own acrobatic ability," grunted Clason amiably. "Just a minute now."

He wriggled as if trying to adjust himself to a better balance, but in reality to mask the motion of his free hand with which he reached up and pressed a button in the side of the plank. Instantly the structure, pivoting downward on its wall-socket, plunged Quest to his waist in the osmotic solution.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration, showing Owen inside the vat of liquid up to his waist, clinging to the ladder with one hand, with Clarson holding his other hand from above.

Image description end.]

"For God's sake get out of the way!" he shouted, trying to wrench his hand out of Clason's sinewy grip.

"Let go, I tell you!"

But Clason clung like a leech, his teeth gritted under the strain. Again the plank lurched downward, and with a violent splash Quest vanished below the surface.

Quick as a cat, Clason scrambled up the ladder and back to the base of the plank, where he erased and interchanged the chalk-marked signs with which he had misled Quest. Then with a sinister twist of a smile he threw the switch to minus, and turned to watch as the plank slowly righted itself and the vacant ladder came clear of the liquid.

For some time he stood staring at the gleaming colored rings of his dissociation-vat like some witch over her cauldron, his lips working, his hands clasping and unclasping like the tentacles of some sub-sea monster. Then, as if the spell had suddenly broken, he turned on his heel and switched off the light. As he hastened down the passageway toward his office, the airlock sucked the door against its jamb with an ominous whistle.

In a twinkling, as Quest's shackled spirit writhed in its new housing, he knew that he was in bondage to a scoundrel. Formless and voiceless, he still fought madly for the freedom which the instinct of ten thousand generations made necessary to him.

At the same time he was furious at himself for having been tricked like an innocent schoolboy. The plank socket, the button which had tripped the supporting spring, the fake rehearsal, the tuning of his will to that of Clason—step by step the whole cunning scheme unfolded itself to him now.

But what could be the purpose behind this villainy? Only one answer seemed possible. Keane must be the one bent on selling the Death Projector, Philip the one who wished to frustrate the fiendish transaction! And Quest of the Secret Service—he was to be the tool to force the sale.

With the soundless scream of rage Quest's will hurled itself against Keane's. The two met like infuriated bulls, and for an instant too brief to be pictured as a lapse of time they poised immovable. But two wills

can not exist on equal terms in a single body, and in this case the vibration of both was that of Clason. Quest had challenged the Master Will. He could do no more. It hurled him back, crushed him like foam, compressed him to the proportions of an atom in the background of his consciousness. So brief and unequal was the conflict that in the next breath Clason had all but forgotten the presence of the stolen will within him. When he was ready to use his Agent, that would be time enough to summon him!

Despite this suppression, Quest began to see dimly through strange eyes, and to hear vaguely with ears that were not his own. Feelers, tentacles, some intangible kind of conduits carried thought impulses to him from the Master Will. He received these impressions vividly, but those which he gave off in return were so weak, due to the subjection of his will, that Clason was entirely unconscious of any response. Quest was not enough of a scientist to be astonished at the ability of a disembodied mind to experience sense impressions in the body of another. He was only glad that the darkness and silence were growing less.

Very, very slowly he was awakening to a new kind of consciousness—the consciousness of another person's Self. He hated and loathed that Self, yet it was better than the awful blankness that had gone before.

Suddenly, as light grew brighter and sound more clear and definite, a new element entered—the element of hope. At first it was feeble: its only suggestion was that sometime, somehow, he might escape this prison. But it was like water to a parched plant. It caused his will to expand, to extend its feelers, to press up a little more bravely against the crushing pile of the Master Will.

Now another surprise sprang upon him. He was moving! That is, Clason's body was moving in some kind of a conveyance, which was threading its way through crowded streets. Stores, buildings, buses, people—Quest remembered them all distantly as things he had known thousands of years ago. The driver turned his head, and his profile seemed vaguely familiar.

Now a rush of foreign thoughts drowned out his own.

They were a sort of overflow from the mind of Clason. They thronged along the conduits that bound the two wills together, but only Quest was conscious of the movement.

Keane's mind was on his brother Philip: that much was particularly clear. And there was something about a telephone call. Yes, Keane had telephoned to the police, disguising his voice, refusing to divulge his name. He had said that a man by the name of Philip Clason was in trouble and had told them where to find him. Then the police had telephoned the factory, and Keane had pretended astonishment and alarm at the news. That's why he was here now—he was on the way to confer with the police. And he was chuckling—chuckling because he had fooled Quest and the police, and because now the hundred million dollars was almost in his grasp.

Cutting in close, the car turned a corner and drew up before one of a row of loft buildings in a section of the city which Quest failed to recognize. As Clason stepped to the sidewalk, Quest was more painfully aware than ever of his powerlessness to influence by

so much as the twitch of a muscle the behavior of this hostile body in which he had permitted himself to be trapped. In his weakness he felt himself shrinking, contracting almost to nothingness under the careless pressure of the Master Will.

Clason glanced casually at his watch, and three men converged toward him from as many directions. There was nothing to distinguish them from anyone else in the street, but along the conduits it came to Quest that they were detectives and that they were there by appointment with Keane Clason.

"What floor?" asked the latter, with an excitement which Quest felt instantly was pure pretense. "Are you sure they haven't spirited him away?"

"Don't worry," replied the leader of the detectives. "The alley and roof are covered. We'll take care of the rest ourselves."

On tiptoe they climbed three long flights of stairs in the half-light. Clason held back as if in fear. He was a good actor, and Quest felt the shrinking and

hesitation of his body as he crouched and slunk along in the wake of the detectives, pretending terror at what was about to happen, though he knew—and Quest knew he knew—that there would be no resistance up there—that Philip would be found alone exactly as he had been left by Keane's hired thugs.

On the top landing Burke, the leader, paused to count the doors from front to rear.

"This is it," he whispered to the bull-necked fellow just behind him.

The other nodded, and crouched back against the opposite wall while his companions placed themselves in position to cross-fire into the room the moment the door gave way.

Quest longed for the power to kick his hypocrite of a master as he still held back, cowering on the stairs, playing his fake to the limit. Then the door flew in with a splintering shriek under the charge of the human battering ram, and across it hurtled the other two detectives in a cloud of ancient dust.

"Here he is!" someone shouted.

"Phil! Phil!" Keane Clason's voice fairly quavered with sham emotion as he ran into the room and threw himself at a man tightly bound to an upholstered chair, which in turn was wedged in among other articles of stored furniture.

But Philip was too securely gagged to reply, and as Burke slashed the ropes from across his chest he dropped forward in a state of collapse. Stretched on a couch, he soon gave signs of response as a brisk massage began to restore the circulation to his cramped limbs. Suddenly he sat up and thrust his rescuers aside.

"What time is it?" he demanded with an air of alarm.

"One o'clock," replied Keane before anyone else could answer, patting his brother affectionately on the shoulder while within him Quest writhed with indignation. "By Jove! Phil, it's wonderful that we got to you in time. Really, how—you're not injured?"

"No," grunted Philip, "just lamed up. I'll be as fit as ever by to-morrow."

"If you feel equal to it," suggested Burke, "I wish you'd tell me briefly how you arrived here. Do you know the motive behind this affair? Did you recognize any of the body-snatchers?"

Philip frowned and shook his head.

"Yesterday noon," he said slowly, "I took the eight-passenger Airline Express to Cleveland on business. There were three other passengers in the cabin—two men and a woman. Right away I got out a correspondence file and was running over some letters. The next thing I knew I was approaching the ground in the strangest state of mind I ever experienced. My head was splitting, and everything looked unreal to me. Seemed as if I was coming down on some new planet."

"You mean the ship was gliding down to land?"

"No, no. I was dangling from a parachute.... By the

way, where am I now?"

"In a Munson Avenue loft."

"In Chicago?"

Burke nodded.

"I guessed as much," frowned Philip. "You see, I came down in a field, and then before I could free myself from my trappings I was pounced on—trussed up and blindfolded—by a gang of men. I knew they had taken me a long distance by automobile, but I saw nothing more until they tore the blindfold from my eyes when they left me here."

"And they were all strangers to you?"

"Yes—those that I saw."

"Isn't this enough for just now, Burke?" interrupted Keane, and Quest received an impression of uneasiness that was not apparent in the inventor's tone. "After a good rest he's sure to recall things that

escape him now."

"Just one minute," nodded the detective, turning back to Philip. "Can you think of no plausible reason for this attack? Is there no one who might possibly benefit by putting you temporarily out of the way?"

Philip gave a frightened start. Then he was on his feet, clutching at his brother's arm.

"Keane!" he pleaded, "Keane! What's happened? I know, I know! It's the Projector."

"Water!" roared Keane, and Quest felt the panic that coursed through him as he tried to drown out his brother. "Somebody bring water! He needs it!"

At the same time he snatched up Philip's hand in a grip of steel. Instantly the latter's wild eyes became calm, the flush passed from his relaxing face, and he slumped down weakly on the couch.

In that fleeting moment Quest surged into the body of Philip and confronted his will with a fierce and

triumphant ardor. For now his will would have command of a body with which to fight his fiend of a Control.

With a sensation of contempt he met Philip's resistance and buffeted him ruthlessly backward, crushed down and compressed his feebly struggling will. And as Philip yielded, Quest felt his own will expanding to normal, taking possession of the borrowed body with hungry greed, and flashing from its faded eyes the spark of youth.

Burke stared in amazement at the kaleidoscopic rapidity of the changes in the rescued man's expression. Strange lights and shadows continued to flit across Philip's face as Quest's invasion of him proceeded, but with a diminishing frequency which soon assured Keane that his Agent was tightening his command.

The younger of Burke's aides stood fascinated, his mouth agape. The other spoke guardedly to his superior:

"Dope, eh!"

"Nah!" replied Burke, shrugging himself out of his trance. "Shock."

The actual duration of the conflict in Philip was something less than three seconds. It would have been more brief if Quest had exerted himself to the utmost. But his sensations as he first surged into this new habitat under Keane's propulsion were so weird and unearthly that for the moment he was lost in the wonder of the experience. For that short time, therefore, Philip was able to fight back against the onrush of the invading will.

In the next second Quest became conscious of the resistance. Urged on by his Control, he must push Philip back and quell him; but his sympathy for his opponent and his hatred of Keane roused him to sudden revolt. He wanted to disobey the Master Will, retreat, leave Philip in command of himself. But he could only go on, unwillingly thrusting back Philip's will despite the indescribable torment and confusion in his own. Then, with the feeling that he was ten

times worse than the most inhuman ghoul, he took full possession of his borrowed body.

"I'll take him home now," said Keane composedly to Burke. "As you see, he needs a little extra sleep. Meanwhile, if you have any occasion to call me, I will be at the factory."

To the youthful mind of the Agent, used to the lightness of an athletic physique, the body in which it moved down the stairs to the limousine seemed strangely heavy and awkward.

"I'm badly done up, Keane," he said with Philip's lips as the car got under way.

"Bah!" snorted Keane, "you've had a scare, that's all. Go to bed when you get home and sleep till nine this evening. At ten a man named Dr. Nukharin will call for you. He will drive you to a garage, leave the car, and transfer to another one a few blocks away.

"Out near Marbleton you will find an airplane staked in an open field. Nukharin is a capable pilot. He will

fly back southeast along the lakeshore to the meeting place. You should arrive about twelve-thirty. The test is set for one o'clock."

Quest listened in a state of abject rage. Lacking the power to resist his Control, he could only boil away in Philip's body like a wild creature hemmed in by bars of steel.

"Bring with you," continued Keane venomously, "the set of papers that you took from the safe in my office. Hold the other set in readiness to deliver to Nukharin to-morrow, after he has studied the results of the test and has notified Paris to release a hundred million dollars in cash for delivery at your Loop office at 3 p. m."

The murderous greed of the man maddened Quest. He tried to revolt, his will squirming like a physical thing, threshing the ether like a wounded shark in the sea. For a moment he felt that he was about to burst the bonds that his demon of a Control had woven around him. So violently did he resist that the immured and sporelike will of Philip forged up fitfully

out of the blackness and joined his in the hopeless struggle. But along the attenuated conduits that still chained Quest to the Master Will Keane caught the impulse of the mutiny, and his eyes darted flame as he countered with a will-shock that paralyzed his unruly Agent.

"Listen! you whimpering dog," he snarled. "Think as I tell you—and nothing more! You are going to apologize to Dr. Nukharin for your previous unwillingness to sell the Projector. You are going to tell him that I am at fault—that I held out—but that you found a way to force my compliance. You understand?"

Quest could find no words. With Philip's head he nodded meekly. Just then the car stopped and the chauffeur threw open the door.

Dr. Nukharin flew high despite the masses of cumulus cloud which frequently reduced visibility to zero. He had merely to follow the rim of the lake to his destination, and an occasional glimpse of the water was sufficient to hold him on his course.

In the back seat hunched Philip, his body crumbling under the weight of Quest's despair. For hours the latter had gone on vaguely, hoping somehow to thwart this horrible transaction that was rushing the world to its doom, thinking he might grow strong enough to wrench himself free and so liberate Philip from the dominance of his conscienceless brother. Even though such a move should leave his own will forever separate from his body, he was ready and anxious to make the sacrifice.

Suddenly the crash of the motor ceased and Nukharin banked the ship up in a spiral glide. Quest had never been in the air before, and the long whirl down into the darkness on this devil's errand was to him as eery as a ride to perdition in a white-hot projectile.

His mind seemed to trail out in a great nebular helix behind the descending ship. He felt that he had suddenly crossed some cosmic meridian into a new plane of existence, where he was changed to a gas, yet continued capable of thought. But even here his obsession remained the same. Keane Clason—trickster, traitor, arch-criminal—must be destroyed!

"I'll get him!" vowed Quest in words that were no less real for being soundless. "I'll trail him to the end of space and bring him to account!"

Then wheels touched earth and the cold, bare facts of his destiny rushed in on him with redoubled force. He felt the nearness of his Control seconds before he perceived him through the eyes of Philip. With a sensation like a stab he realized that now he must speak, play his part, be any bloodless hypocrite that Keane Clason chose to make him. The silent order surged down the conduits promptly enough; he responded as an automaton obeys the pressure of a button.

"Well, Doctor," chuckled Philip with a cunning leer, "here's the magic tower, just as I promised you. We'll run it up in a jiffy. This test is going to be so vivid and conclusive that not even a hard-headed skeptic like you can raise a question."

"You misunderstand me," returned Nukharin in an injured tone. "So far as I am concerned this procedure is only a formality, but it is none the less

necessary. Suppose that I should spend a hundred million of my government's money and the purchase prove worthless? You may guess that my folly would cost me dear."

Keane Clason was waiting on the platform of a giant truck, the motor of which was idling. All the apparatus was in readiness except that the three demountable sections of the tower had yet to be run up into position.

"One of the beauties of the D. P.," said Philip gleefully to the Doctor, while Keane smiled slyly to himself, "is that this pint-size dynamo provides all the current needed for the test. We pick the power for our radio right out of the air by means of a wave trap and mensurator invented by this bright little brother of mine," and he clapped Keane patronizingly on the back.

"Yes, ah—Dr. Nukharin," ventured Keane timidly, and at that moment Quest experienced the raging red hatred that causes men to murder. "Philip has promised me that you will employ this device only as

a threat to hold the ambitions of the larger powers in check."

"Of course, of course!" replied the Doctor heartily.

"But now let's have the test. Even at night I'm not too fond of these open-air performances."

The height of the tower as they ran the upper sections into place was forty feet. When all connections had been inspected, first by Keane, then by Philip, the former led Nukharin aloft.

As the climax of his plot approached, Keane's excitement bordered on a cataleptic state, hints of which came confusedly through the conduits to Quest. With a peculiar satisfaction he felt that Keane was suffering. The inventor's jaws became rigid, as though his blood had changed to liquid air and frozen him, and he had difficulty in controlling the movements of his arms.

Now he was afraid! Genuinely afraid, this time. Quest caught the impulse too clearly to doubt its meaning. This was no sham! Keane was doubting his own

machine, fearing that in the crisis some element in the finely calculated mechanism might fail to operate, thus cheating him of the blood-money on which his heart was set. Then he was speaking, and even Nukharin noticed the tremor in his voice:

"These nine tubes, which look like a row of gun barrels, are molded from silicon paste. Each shoots a beam of invisible light and a radio dart of precisely the same wave length. The destructive effect depends chiefly upon this exactness of synchronization."

"A question occurs to me," said the Doctor: "will others be able to manipulate the machine as successfully as you can?"

"It's fool-proof," chattered Keane, almost losing control of his voice, "absolutely fool-proof. Surely you have scientists in your country who can follow written directions! Nothing more is necessary."

"Very well," shrugged Nukharin. "I only want to be sure that no unforeseen difficulties may arise in an emergency."

"See this range-setter?" continued Keane. "The thread on the vertical shaft enables us not only to limit the range by angling the beams into the ground, but it can also be disengaged and the Projector revolved in a flat circle for maximum ranges."

"And is there no danger of the machine going wrong—of destroying itself and us?" suggested Nukharin.

"None whatever, Doctor. There is no explosive force and no great electrical voltage involved. As long as we stand back of the muzzles we have nothing to fear.

"Now look. I have set the micrometer at three hundred yards, which will just about cover the stretch between ourselves and the lake. I will cut a swath for you—and every bush, every blade of grass, every insect in this swath will be withered to ash in the twinkling of an eye. The destruction will be absolute."

"Please proceed," said Nukharin grimly.

Keane pulled a lever in its slot, then pressed it down into its lock as his projection battery swung lakeward

at the desired angle. Then with one hand poised on another lever, he pressed an electric button.

At the controls below, a bulb flashed on and off. The signal was superfluous, for already Quest had received his silent command from the Master Will. An icy dread fastened on him. He must obey the unspoken command; he had no will of his own with which to resist. The test would be a success; the Projector would be sold; the world would be turned into a shambles. And he, Owen Quest, would be the destroyer, the murderer, the weak fool who made this horror possible.

All this flashed through the Agent's mind in the fraction of a second that it took him to extend Philip's hand, close the switch of the dynamo, and snap on the alternating lights in the housing over the tellurium filter.

For an interminable five seconds he waited, in a ferment of revolt which the paralysis of his will made it impossible to put into action. Then again the command pulsed within him, the signal bulb flashed,

and he reversed his motions of the moment before.

Cold sweat cascaded down Philip's face as Quest felt the ladder vibrating under descending feet. He longed for the power to hurl Keane Clason to the ground and turn the Projector upon him. But with an awful irony the Master Will forced him to his feet, and to speak in a tone that withered the manhood within him.

"Come," said Philip in a triumphant tone to Nukharin, "and I will show you that Clason inventions perform as well as they sound."

Flashlight in hand, he started toward the lake with Nukharin and his brother close behind him. Twenty paces, and the long meadow grass suddenly vanished from beneath their feet.

"See that!" whispered Philip excitedly, waving the light from side to side to show the forty-foot swath that stretched away before them. "Not a trace of life left, not a blade of grass—nothing but dust!"

The only response was a gurgling sound that issued

from Nukharin's throat.

"Look!" Quest formed the word with Philip's lips under the urge of the Master Will. "Here was a tall bush. What do you see now? Just a teaspoonful of ash. When you examine the remains by daylight, you will find that even the root has disintegrated to a depth of two feet."

"Enough of this," croaked Nukharin in horror. "The deal is closed."

His face was convulsed with fear. Without another word he whirled about and fled toward his airplane. Philip gave a start as if to follow.

"Halt! you slob," growled Keane, whose composure had returned with the successful outcome of the test. "I have use for your company, even though you are as great a coward as our Slavic friend."

Coward! The epithet stung Quest like a flaming goad. One of the fine, intangible lines that bound him under the will of Keane Clason severed, and his own will

exploded into action like a thunderbolt. With startling agility he whirled Philip about, the flashlight clubbed in his hand. But Keane was quicker still. A clip on the wrist sent the weapon flying. Then Philip reeled backward from a kick in the stomach, and his clutching hands beat the air as he sank unconscious in the dust.

With a violent tug, Quest lifted Philip's body to a sitting posture. The phone was ringing, and by the pull on the will-fibers he knew that Keane was at the other end of the wire. Philip's body was failing under the strain of the part it was forced to play, and the blow of the night before had further weakened it. Now he sat rocking his head painfully between his hands. But Quest lifted him to his feet by sheer will, and he staggered across the room.

"Hello!", he said in a hoarse voice.

"Get the hell out here to the factory!" rasped Keane, and the crash of the receiver emphasized the command.

It was one o'clock as Philip whirled his sedan into Olmstead Avenue. At three, reflected Quest as the car scorched over the pavements, he must be at the downtown office to deliver the papers and receive the money.

Then he was face to face with Keane, reeling dizzily at the hatred that blazed from the latter's accusing eyes.

"Double-crossed me, eh!" The voice was a low snarl, and as he spoke Keane thumped the extra outspread on his desk. "But you're not going to get away with it—neither of you!"

Dismay, hope, dread, wonder robbed Quest of the power to speak. But he whirled around behind the desk with such unexpected violence that Keane staggered back in alarm. Then he was devouring the screaming headlines of the newspaper. Three seconds, like a slow exposure, and every word of the Record's great scoop was etched upon his mind as if with caustic:

DOOM LAUNCH ADRIFT ON LAKE

Physician Baffled by Condition of Five Bodies Found in Craft

Blighted Area on Shore Said to Have Bearing on Tragedy

THAW HARBOR, IND., June 6.—Five Chicago sportsmen, most of them prominent in business and society, perished in the early hours this morning while returning in the launch of A. Gaston Andrews from a weekend camping party near Hook Spit on the Michigan shore.

The boat was towed into this port at daybreak by the Interlake Tug Mordecai after being found adrift less than a mile off shore. According to Captain Goff of the Mordecai the death craft carried no lights and he barely avoided running her down. The weather along the Indiana shore was perfect throughout the night and there is nothing to indicate that the launch was in trouble at any time. The bodies are unmarked, and this little community is agog with rumors ranging all the way from murder and suicide to the supernatural.

Dr. J. M. Addis of Thaw Harbor, the first physician to examine the bodies, says that they appear to have suffered some violent electro-chemical action the nature of which cannot be determined at the moment. This statement is considered significant in view of the reported discovery ashore of a large blighted area almost directly opposite the point where the launch was found. Joseph Sleichert, a farmer who lives in that vicinity, reports that this patch of ground extending back from the lakeshore was completely stripped of vegetation overnight. He ascribes the damage to some unknown insect pest. Others say that the condition of the ground indicates that it has been burned at incinerator temperatures. Nothing is left of the soil but a blue powder.

Philip faced his brother with eyes that were dull with agony.

"You have made me a murderer!" Quest forced out the words in painful gasps.

But Keane snapped back at him like a rabid dog.

"You did it—you did it yourself! You tampered with the Projector. You tried to spoil the test. You changed the range. You tried to kill me, and instead you killed these others. And you're going to pay—both of you. You hear me?—you're going to pay!"

His voice mounted the scale to a scream. It was a wail of unreasoning terror, of the dread of exposure, of the fear that he would fail to collect the fortune now so nearly in his grasp. The accident that had jarred his well-laid plans had unnerved him.

Frantically Quest strove to answer him, to explain his utter subjection, as Agent, to say that if he had possessed the will to oppose or trick him he would have turned him over to the police, or might even have killed him, at the very outset. But in his frenzy, Keane had so tightened his control that Quest was speechless. Now he tried to substitute gesture for words, but Philip was rooted to the spot like a statue; even his hands were immovable.

He might have remained in this state indefinitely had not Keane's fears withdrawn his mind from his

immediate surroundings. Momentarily he forgot Quest, Philip—everything but himself and his predicament. And in the instant that his vigilance relaxed, Quest's enslaved will experienced a sudden lease of strength and hope. Independently of his Control, he found that he could move Philip's hand, could take a faltering step.

But now, what to do? How might he fan this feeble spark of volition to sufficient strength for decisive resistance? The idea came to him: if only he could place distance between himself and Keane, perhaps with one titanic effort he might launch himself against the Master Will, take him by surprise, crush him down, and reverse him to the status of Agent instead of Control.

With infinite effort Quest forced Philip's body step by step across the room. He must reach that window, get a signal of distress to someone in the street.

But Keane began to sense a mutiny. He followed. He crossed the floor with slinking, tigerish steps and snaking body. His wet lips writhed back over his

teeth, and his contorted features wove the leer of the abyss. Now as his Control drew physically near, Quest felt his mite of strength ebbing fast. Slowly Keane reached up with his clawed fingers and grasped his Agent by the arm.

"Remember!" he hissed, "if these deaths are traced to us, you break down—you confess—you take the blame—you paint me lily white—you describe the cowardly means by which you moulded me to your will—you plead only for a quick trial and the full penalty of the law. You understand?"

Quest made no reply, but he understood all too well the hideous intention of his betrayer. What a fool he had been to imagine that Keane Clason would ever restore him to his body! Philip to the chair, Quest a homeless spirit wandering in space, and for the body at the bottom of the tank, the brief regrets of the Department!

A sudden rushing sound filled the air with a sense of action and alarm.

Two—three—four speeding automobiles swung in recklessly to the curb and shrieked to a standstill under smoking brakes. Men leaped out and deployed on the run to surround the factory. Keane darted to the door and twisted the key.

"Come on!" he spat at Philip as he snatched back the rug and threw open the trap door.

The command galvanized Quest to action. In two bounds he had Philip on the stairs. A heavy impact rattled the office door just as he dropped the trap into place over his head. Then, infected with Keane's panic, he was running down the passageway like mad.

Inside the tank chamber the brilliantly colored rings of liquid flashed back the rays of the arclight. Half crazed with anxiety, Keane danced on the black ledge like a monkey on a griddle. His face was ashen, drool ran from his twisted mouth, his eyes were two black pools of terror.

Again Quest experienced the peculiar sensation which came with the slackening of control. New hope

sprang up in his agonized being as heavy blows boomed against the air-locked door. Great waves of fear poured along the conduits, betraying to the Agent the state of mind of his Control. Now what would Keane do? What could he do? Why, of all places, had he fled down into this blind burrow?

Thud, thud! Then came a series of sharp reports. Outside, they were trying to shoot away the deep-sunk disk hinges.

Still the door stood fast, but the fury of the assault on it whipped the faltering Keane to action. In a bound he was on the platform. With a lightning hand he threw the switch to plus, starting electrolytic action in the tank. Then he pressed a button concealed under the edge of the switch-mount and a panel slid silently aside in the wall, revealing a narrow outlet.

To Quest everything went a flaming red. He might have known that this fox would have something in reserve—a way of escape when danger threatened!

But his Control gave him no time for independent

thought. He forced Quest to turn Philip's eyes up to his own. Without disconnecting that grip of his glittering eyes, Keane leaped back to the ledge. Quest felt the silent order:

"Get up on that plank! Dive into the tank! Get back into your own body, let Philip have his! Then come up—the two of you—and face the music. For I'll be gone, and your story will sound like the ravings of a maniac."

Quest took an obedient step toward the platform. But at the same instant a tremendous crash shivered the door. It seemed to unnerve Keane Clason. With a gasp he sank down upon the steps, his body doubled in pain, his hand clutching at his heart. Another crash followed, and he shuddered and cried out.

Instantly Quest felt an expansion of the will. Keane's sudden physical weakness had loosened his control. Philip's lips worked painfully as Quest forced him to pause, to disobey the command of the Master Will. In a spasm of will he fought to wrench himself free from the countless clinging tentacles of his Control. In

great surges, Quest's reviving volition pounded against the walls of his borrowed body. Now he sought to force this sluggish body back to the wall, so that he might release the airlock and spring the door. But Philip seemed to ossify, every cord and muscle of his body frozen to stone by the conflict that raged within him.

Braced against the wall, Keane was rising slowly to his feet. His seizure was easing, and so he was able to exert a better pressure upon his rebellious Agent.

"Come!" he gasped, realizing that he lacked the strength to escape alone and must therefore change his plan. "Lift me—quick! Carry me out! Slide the panel back into place. We will escape together!"

The spoken command turned the balance against Quest. His will yielded to the master. At the same instant Philip's body relaxed like an object relieved of a great excess of electrical potential. Suddenly strong and supple, he lifted the trembling Keane and tossed him across his shoulder.

For a moment there had been a lull in the assault on the door. Now the battering resumed with a fury that jarred the whole chamber and sent ripples dancing across the varicolored liquids in the osmotic tank.

"Quick!" gasped Keane. "Move! I say. Carry me out."

But he was in a fainting condition. Crash after crash rocked the chamber, and with every blow Quest's will felt a stimulation that enabled him to stand off the commands of his Control. Then a wave of nausea swept over him and left him reeling. It seemed that Philip's blood had turned to boiling oil. A dazzling mist swallowed him up, and with a weird sense of inflation he felt full strength returning to his will.

A booming blow that bulged the door inward acted upon him like a stage player's cue. He leaped to the platform. The gurgling sound of remonstrance rattled from Keane's throat. But Quest paid no heed. Philip was walking the plank—away from the open panel—out over the tank.

Rapidly he dropped down the ladder to the bottom

rung, snatched Keane's wrist in a gorillalike grip, and hurled him down into the vat.

Then Philip was clinging desperately to the ladder, his strength gone, his body shivering as if with ague.

"Go on up!" came a strange, impatient voice from below him. "For heaven's sake let me out of here!"

A downward glance, and with a shout of alarm Philip was scrambling up the ladder, for there was a head down there, and a pair of naked shoulders, and the face of a man he had never seen before. Hand over hand Quest followed. Philip had collapsed and lay prone on the plank. Quest lifted him to his feet and shook him anxiously.

"Philip!" he urged. "Philip! Can you walk?"

The tattoo on the battered door helped to revive the older man.

"Quick!" whispered Quest, kneading Philip's arms.

"There's barely an hour left. Get to your office. Burn

the papers. Refuse the money. Do you hear me?"

Philip nodded dazedly.

"Hurry!" puffed Quest, thrusting him through the opening that Keane had reserved for his own escape, and sliding the panel back into place.

Quest was himself now—young, strong, free. Instantly he threw the electrolytic switch to minus. For Keane had failed to emerge from the tank, and since he was submerged alone, he could not escape until electrolysis was halted.

Just as Quest leaped from the platform to release the airlock, the door burst in and three men with drawn guns rushed into the chamber.

The leader stopped with a startled oath and stood blinking his unbelieving eyes. Quest was poised like a statue, his naked body gleaming an unearthly white against the lusterless black of the wall.

"Quest," came from the three in chorus. Then a rush

of questions: "What's the matter? What's happened to you? Where are the Clasons?"

Quest turned toward the platform, expecting to see Keane.

"Something's wrong!" he shouted. "Quick! Somebody get Philip. He's gone to his Loop office. Keane Clason's at the bottom of this tank. I'm not sure how this thing works, but Philip can get him out! I'm sure of it!"

Despite the confident predictions of both Quest and Philip Clason, osmotic association failed to restore Keane to life, and at last the coroner ordered the removal of the body. The autopsy revealed heart disease as the cause of his death.

For reasons best understood at Washington, the cause of the five launch deaths was withheld from the public. Quest's punishment for his part in the crime consisted of a promotion and a warm personal letter from the President of the United States.

#05 Compensation, by Charles Victor Tench:

Professor Wroxton Had Disappeared—But in the
Bottom of the Mysterious Crystal Cage Lay the
Diamond from His Ring!

Aproximate word count: 4,500

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"Why, John!" Involuntarily I halted at the entrance to my snug bachelor quarters as the flood of light my turning of the switch produced revealed a huddled figure slumped in an easy chair.

"Aye, sir, 'tis me." The man got to his feet, gnarled hands rubbing at his eyes. "An' 'tis all day that I've been waiting for you, sir. The caretaker said you'd be back soon so let me in. I must have fell asleep, an' no wonder, what with the strain an' no sleep or rest all last night."

"Strain? No rest?" I stared my bewilderment, trying at the same time to conceal the vague apprehensions occasioned by the fact that the trusted servitor of my friend, Professor Wroxton, should wait all day for me.

Hastily shedding my outer things, I bade him again be seated, sat down facing him, and asked him to explain.

"'Tis the professor, sir." The old chap peered at me with anxious, wrinkled eyes. "'Tis common enough for him to send me here on messages, sir, but to-day I've come on my own, because, sir," answering the question in my eyes, "I haven't seen sight of him since last night."

"Why—" I began.

"That's just it, sir." John took the words out of my mouth. "For twenty years my wife an' me have looked after the professor at The Grange. In all that time he's never been away at night. Whenever he had to come to town he'd tell us. Most times I'd drive him myself in the old car. But that was very seldom, sir, for

Professor Wroxton had few interests outside."

"But, John," I protested "is there no other reason for your agitation? He might have had an urgent call, or gone out for a walk or drive by himself."

"No, sir. If you'll pardon me, sir, you're wrong. The professor was fixed in his habits. He would not go away without tellin' me. Think back, sir, you know the professor as well as me. Better, because you are his friend and I am only a servant. Although, sir," this proudly, "he always treated me as a friend."

"Go on," I urged, seeing he was not finished.

"Well, sir, a few minutes back you asked me if there was no other reason for my being upset like. There is, sir. You know, sir, that for more'n twenty years the professor has led a retired sort of life; the life of a—a —"

"Recluse," I suggested.

"That's it, sir. He only left The Grange when he had

to. He was all wrapped up in some weird-like thing he was inventing. In all those years, sir, you were the only visitor who ever went into his laboratory, or stayed at The Grange for a night or more. That is, sir, until three days ago."

"Go on," I again urged, some of his perturbation communicating itself to me.

"The Grange, sir, lying as it does, fifteen miles from town an' back in its own grounds away from the road, isn't noted by many. When strangers do get into the grounds I usually gets 'em out again in short order. Three days ago, sir, a stranger drove up to the door in a fine car. He told me he was wantin' to purchase a country home. I told him The Grange was not for sale an' turned 'im away. He was turning his car to leave when my master came out. To my surprise, sir, he invited the stranger in. An' I'm sure, sir, because he looked so taken aback like, that the stranger had never seen the professor before."

"And after that?" I asked, now feeling decidedly uneasy.

"The stranger, sir—a Mr. Lathom he called himself—stayed on. He was in the study with the master last night. This morning there was no trace of either of them."

"But—good God, John!" I jerked to my feet, a fresh dread clutching at my heart. "What are you trying to get at? The professor and Mr. Lathom might possibly have driven away somewhere last night."

"Both cars, sir," the servant answered, "are in the garage. I bolt all the doors in the house myself every night. They were still fastened this morning. My wife an' me searched the house from cellar to garret an' hunted all over the grounds. We couldn't find a trace of the master or his guest."

"You mean to suggest then," I shot at him, "that two full grown men have completely vanished? It's absurd, John, absurd!"

I paced the floor thinking desperately for a few minutes, conscious of the ancient's anxious eyes. I half smiled. The thing was too ridiculous for anything.

Old John had grown morbid from living away from the outer world. Also, I had to admit that the atmosphere of The Grange, impregnated as it was with the lethal scientific dabblings of my friend, was exactly suited to the conjuring up of unhealthy forebodings in uneducated minds. I'd drive out to the home of my friend at once. No doubt I'd find him fit and well. He had refused to install a phone, so drive it had to be.

"John." I stopped my pacing and patted him on the shoulder. "I'm coming out to The Grange at once." His face showed his thankfulness. "I am sure," I went on as I struggled into my coat, "that we shall find the professor and his guest awaiting us. Anyway, it's time you got back to your wife and had some food."

"I hope to Heaven, sir, that you're right." With that we left the building and entered my car.

Although I had tried to dispel my fears, although I had tried to banter John out of his dread, I drove that evening as I had never driven before or since. Barely fifteen minutes later I halted my roadster at the short flight of steps leading to the main door of The Grange.

Even as we stepped from the machine the door flung open and an agitated woman hurried towards us. She was Mary, John's wife.

"Sir!" She gripped my arm and stared anxiously into my face. "'Tis glad I am that you've come. The Grange is a house of death."

In spite of myself a chill shook my whole body. Gently handing her to John, I strode up the steps.

At the open doorway I halted, the aged couple crowding on my heels, the woman still babbling about death. I couldn't blame her. All day she had been alone in that gloomy, rambling old building, wondering, no doubt, why John and I had not returned sooner.

And gloomy the house was. Always, even when staying there at the professor's request, I had found it to be somber and depressing, as if there lurked within its walls the shadowy wings of the years-old tragedy that had caused my friend to retire to such a God-forsaken place, and there become absorbed in his

scientific experiments.

Even now, as I gazed into the dimly-lighted hallway, the air seemed charged with that same malignant something I cannot describe.

Pulling myself together I strode quickly along the corridor, and flung open the study door. The lights being full on, one glance sufficed to show me that my friend was not there. Swinging on my heel, the horror I saw in the eyes of the servants, honest, healthy folks not easily frightened, conveyed itself to me. Somehow, the sight of that room, lights on, chairs drawn up to the burnt-out fire, brought home to me the fact that something serious was amiss. I chided myself for thinking John had been unduly agitated.

For a moment I stood, trying to conceal the chill coursing through my veins, puzzling what to do next. I decided to search the house thoroughly. If I found no sign of the professor or his guest, I would call in the police.

Fearfully yet willingly the aged couple led me from

room to room, from attic to basement, until but one place remained—the laboratory. I hesitated for several seconds at the closed door of my friend's workroom. Not that I had never entered the—to a layman's eyes—weirdly-appointed place. I had been in many times with the professor. But this time I dreaded what I might find.

Pulling myself together, I gently tried the door. To my horror it yielded to my touch. Alive, the professor always kept it locked. A new dread assailed me, as, flinging the door wide open, I blinked in the sudden glare of powerful globes. Someone had left the lights full on!

Horried I stood and stared, knowing by their heavy breathing that the aged couple were also staring with fright-widened eyes. Afraid of what? I did not know. I only knew that the atmosphere had become even more sinister. I knew that something dreadful had taken place in that room.

Trembling with consternation I forced myself to take a few steps forward, then I again stared about me. At

one end of the large room something shone brightly in the glow of the lights. Slowly I walked across to examine it: it appeared to be a glass case, almost like a show-case, about eight feet square and seven feet in height. With the mechanical actions of the mentally distraught I walked all around it. Not the slightest sign of an entrance could I see. The fact intrigued me. I tapped lightly on the highly polished surface with my fingers. It rang to my touch like cut glass.

Through the transparent surface I could see John and his wife. They were watching me furtively, wondering, no doubt, why I lingered. As I looked at them John suddenly lumbered up to the case on the opposite side. Dropping to his knees, he stared. Turning an imploring gaze to me, he pointed. His lips moved soundlessly. I followed the pointing finger with my eyes; gasped at what I saw.

Near the center of the cage, on the floor constructed of the same crystalline substance, something glittered, its brilliance almost dazzling as the light rays struck it. My face pressed close to the cold outer surface of the structure, my shocked intelligence

gradually realized what that small sparkling object was. It was a magnificent diamond—and the professor had always worn a diamond ring!

In a sudden frenzy of horror I pawed my way around the cage to where John still knelt. As I reached him he jerked his head in a numb way as he croaked, "It's a diamond, sir! The professor's!"

"But how?" I implored. "How can it be? There's no way into this thing. Perhaps he was working here, and the stone came loose from its setting. He couldn't have dropped it after the cage was completed."

"It's his diamond, sir," intoned the old man, dully. "I know it is."

Then a sudden unreasoning terror filled me. I shrank away from that shining box. It seemed to be mocking me, gloatingly, malevolently.

"Quickly!" I threw at the aged couple. "Let us get out of here! Now! At once!" They needed no second urging. I knew that they felt as I felt: the laboratory

was a sepulcher!

Five minutes later I was guiding my car over the narrow road to town. I did not pause until I drew up at police headquarters. I suppose my appearance was distraught, for I was ushered into the presence of the chief without delay. In a few moments I had poured out my story. He listened with a polite calmness I found almost maddening. Leaning back in his chair, he reviewed, audibly, the facts.

"Some twenty-odd years ago your friend, Professor Wroxton, married. He was so absorbed in the pursuit of some weird invention that he neglected his bride. She ran away with another man. This man deserted her, and disappeared. The professor found her many months later, in desperate health. Shortly afterwards she died. Your friend tried to trail the man, but failed. Shocked and saddened beyond measure, he retired to a place known as The Grange."

He suddenly straightened up in his seat, and pointed at me a thick forefinger.

"How long have you known Professor Wroxton?"

"About ten years," I answered.

"What was he trying to invent?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"And yet you had his confidence in other matters?"

"But what has all this to do with finding out what has become of my friend?" I blurted out. "Perhaps every moment counts."

"A lot." The chief eyed me in a way I did not like.

"Solely because your friend has not been seen by his servants for nearly twenty-four hours, merely because you saw what you believe to be his diamond in some kind of a glass compartment in his laboratory, you come here as distraught as a man who has something terrible on his mind. Why?"

"I can't say." I shifted uneasily under that direct stare.

"Somehow I *feel* that something dreadful has

happened to my friend."

"We do not go by *feelings*." The chief got to his feet.

"But you have told me enough to warrant action. I want you to guide me and a couple of men to this house. Please wait here until I return." He left the room.

Sitting there awaiting his return, I tried to ponder the matter reasonably. After all, perhaps the chief was right. Merely because the professor had been absent for a few hours and I had seen what I thought to be his diamond in the laboratory, I had worked myself into a perfect fever of anxiety. I almost smiled to myself. In that businesslike office the whole affair did seem absurd. After all the professor did not have to answer to his servants for his actions.

Heavy footsteps, announcing the chief's return, caused me to rise to my feet. A few minutes later, in company with the three officers, I was driving again towards The Grange.

We made the return journey in almost complete

silence. Occasionally the chief would shoot a question at me; but, the night air cooling my fevered brain, my replies were guarded. He realized that fact, for I felt his eyes upon me all the way. What was going on behind that broad forehead, I wondered.

Then we reached The Grange. As we mounted the steps, John, his wife herding behind him, flung wide the door. He answered the question in my eyes with a negative shake of his head, and the words, "Nothing fresh, sir."

The chief eyed him keenly, then curtly bade him lead the way to the laboratory. John hung back, his face blanched. "I can't, sir," he faltered. The chief turned to me, and, although I wanted to follow John's example, although the atmosphere of the house had again filled me with an unshakable dread, I led the way, standing back at the door to allow the officers to enter first.

With calculating gaze the chief slowly took in every detail of the stone apartment. He turned to me.

"What is there here to be afraid of?" I pointed hesitatingly towards the crystalline cage. The chief and his men strode across to it.

"You don't know how to open this?" the chief shot at me after a brief examination.

"No," I replied. "It was not here on my last visit."

"When was that?"

"Some two or three months ago", I answered. "My work occasions much traveling on my part."

The chief and his men turned again to the cage, talking in undertones. He turned again to me.

"You notice that this thing is built in sections. One of them must be movable. Perhaps—" He paused as his eyes fell upon some wires and tubes that trailed across the floor from underneath the cage to a switchboard fastened to the wall.

"Perhaps," he repeated, "it is worked from that

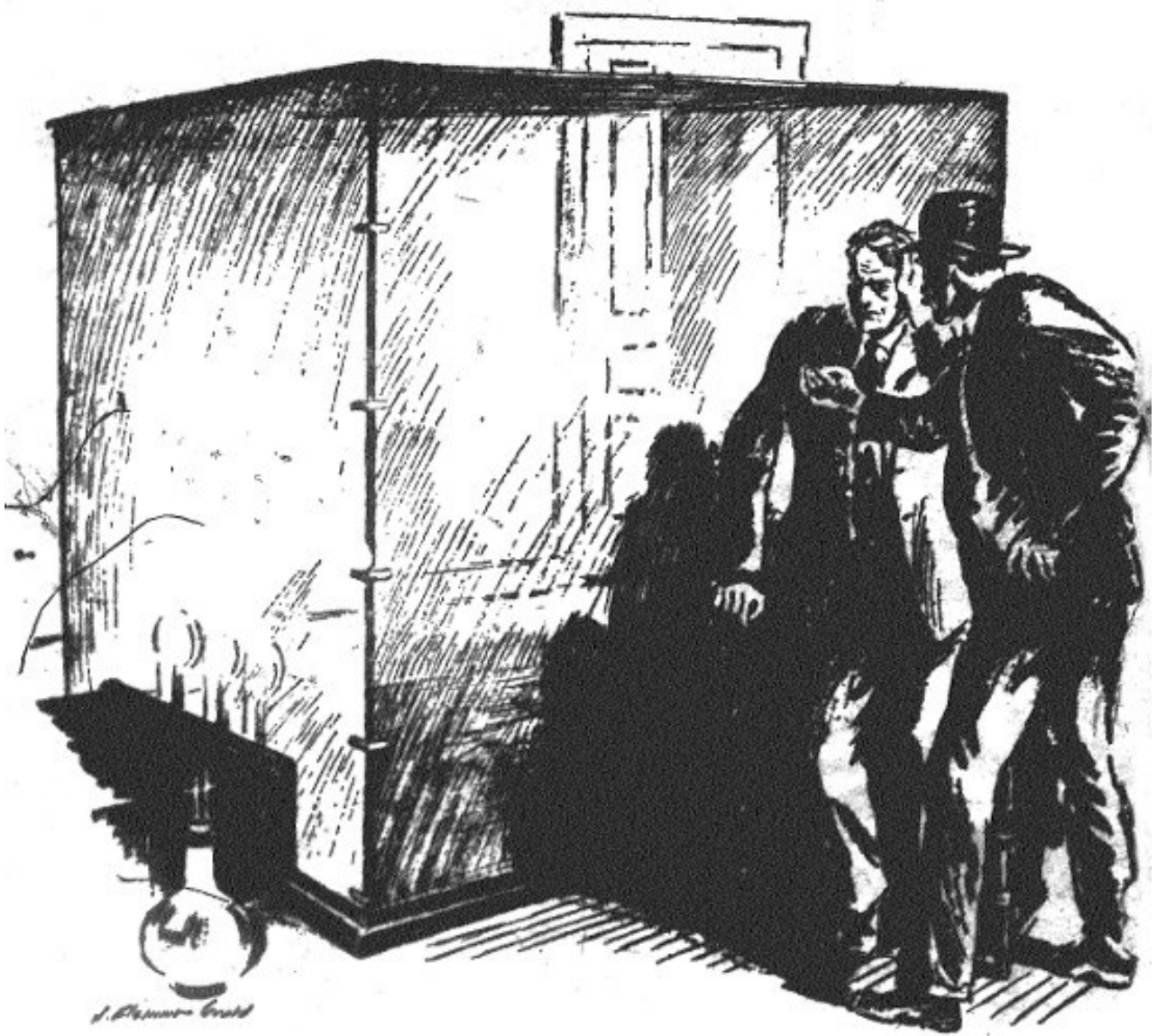
board." He crossed over, stared thoughtfully at the shining levers for some seconds, and moved one slightly. The result was astounding. All four of us stared with unbelieving eyes as slowly, without the faintest sound, a section of one wall slid inwards, as if guided by invisible tracks on floor and ceiling.

"Guess that's enough for now." With the words the chief backed away, almost timidly, I thought, from the switchboard, and walked to the cage. For a moment he hesitated, but he entered, and emerged with the sparkling object in his hand.

"It's the professor's," I choked, crowding close to him.

"How'd you know?" he shot back. "All unset stones look pretty much alike."

"I just know," was all I could falter.



[ID: A black and white illustration showing the narrator standing with one of the police in front of the crystal box as the narrator gestures towards it. Image description end.]

"You 'just know'." The chief sat down on a stool and regarded me searchingly. "Mr. Thornton, when I started out with you, I thought I was on a wild goose chase or the trail of a confession. You looked exactly like a man who had either committed a serious crime,

or was getting over a bad drunk. I feel sure now"—he again regarded the diamond—"that your story was not the product of an alcohol-crazed brain. Come on!" He lurched to his feet, and grasped me by the shoulder. "Come through!"

Without answering, I wrenched myself free. Over my shoulder I saw one of the policemen at the door. In the hand of the other a revolver suddenly appeared. Good God! I glared in bewilderment from one to another. Was I going mad? Surely this was some awful nightmare! What had I said to make them suspect me of having committed a revolting crime?

"Sit down!" The command came from the chief. Mechanically I found a stool, and obeyed him. "Hold your stations, boys, and listen carefully," he ordered his men. Then he turned to me.

"Professor Wroxton was a wealthy man without kith or kin?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the nature of his will?"

"Yes." Chilled to the heart, I felt the circumstantial net tightening.

"What is its nature?"

"This house and an annuity to John and his wife," I explained. "The residue of his wealth to me."

"Humph!" The chief stared at me piercingly. "And how has business been with you lately?"

Damn the man! What right had he to put me through the third degree? I felt my state of dazed horror slowly giving way to anger. I glanced around. The pistol still menaced; the man at the door had not moved. It was useless to try and evade the questions.

"For the past year," I replied, "business has been very poor. In fact, the professor advanced me some money."

"Humph!" Again that irritating, non-committal grunt.

The chief turned in his seat and stared thoughtfully at the crystalline cage.

"And you don't know what the professor was trying to invent?"

"Only its nature," I began.

"Ah! That's better. Why didn't you tell me that before?" The chief leaned forward.

"Well," I explained, "the whole thing seems so absurd. When the professor told me how his married life had been broken up, he told me that at that time he reached the utmost depths of human suffering. Absolute zero, he called it."

"Ah!"

"The experiments he indulged in," I continued, trying to hide the shiver pimpling my flesh, "were to produce an actual state of absolute zero. It is years since he told me this. I had almost forgotten it."

"And exactly what is an absolute zero?" The chief's eyes never left mine.

"Well," I protested, "please understand that I also am a layman in these matters. According to my friend, an absolute zero has been the dream of scientists for ages. Once upon a time it was attained, but the secret became lost."

"And exactly what is an absolute zero?"

Curse the man! I could have struck him down for the chilling level of his tone. I forced myself to go on, realizing that I was damning myself at every step.

"An absolute zero is a cold so intense it will destroy flesh, bone and tissue. Remove them," my voice rose in spite of myself, "leaving absolutely no trace."

No trace! Something attracted my eyes. The chief had opened his hand. The diamond there flashed and sparkled as if mocking me. I pulled myself together, and went on.

"It all comes back to me now. One day I came out here and found the professor terribly distraught. He told me that, with the aid of electric currents he had been able to invent the absolute zero, but he could not invent a *container*."

"Why?" Those eyes continued to bore into mine.

"Because—remember it is years since he told me this—there was difficulty in controlling the power. Besides destroying living things, it would destroy bricks and mortar, stone and iron. Only one substance it could not wipe out—crystalline of diamond hardness.

"I know, now!" I jumped to my feet and grabbed the chief's arm. "I know now what he meant. Fool, fool! Why did I not think of it before? This—" I swung towards the cage—"is compensation." Almost panting in my eagerness I went on:

"My friend told me that the law of compensation would atone to him for the tragedy of his youth. Absolute zero in suffering would be atoned for by a

real state of absolute zero. Chief!" I whirled on him. "Don't you understand? This is the perfected dream of my friend. It is the absolute zero."

"Humph! Plausible but not convincing." I slumped back at the officer's words. "That does not explain the professor's disappearance. Even if it did, what about Mr. Lathom? And don't forget this contrivance is worked from outside. We found the diamond inside. Of course, he might have placed it there himself to test the machine," he concluded.

"Of course, that's it," I commenced. But I regretted the words when I saw suspicion flicker again in the chief's eyes. Lamely I finished, "And he has probably rushed off, in an ecstasy of triumph, to acquaint professional colleagues."

"Without unlocking any doors or taking a car, eh?"

"Mr. Thornton." The chief stood up and regarded me sternly. "As a sensible man, don't you think yourself that your story is a bit thin? The professor has disappeared. Here is a strange-looking case which

you say is an absolute zero container. Whether you know, or are just jumping at conclusions, remains to be proved. But even if it is, do you think that, after perfecting such a tremendous invention, the professor would commit suicide?"

"On the contrary," I gasped, "my friend was a man of gentle, kindly disposition, but strong purpose. I should think his first action on attaining his life's ambition would be to notify me, his closest friend."

"And he didn't." Every word condemned me, and roused me to retaliate.

"Chief, I know enough of the law to know that, before you can try a man for murder, you must prove that murder has been committed." I grinned savagely. "You must have the corpus delicti. Go ahead! Find my friend or his remains, or else withdraw your charges." I grinned again, with shocked mirthlessness.

Then I buried my head in my hands. I had called in the police to help find the professor, and they had only blundered around and asked a lot of stupid

questions. The chief had practically accused me of murder—something I knew he could not prove, yet feared he might. Because I had told the chief of the locked doors and unused cars, he had confined his investigations to the house itself.

He interrupted my thoughts.

"Mr. Thornton, I am going back to town. You will remain here with my men. I advise you to get some sleep, as I shall not be able to carry out certain investigations until the morning. One of my men will spend his time searching the house and patrolling the grounds, the other one will stay here with you."

He turned away, whispered some instructions to his men, and, followed by one of them, silently left the laboratory. I started to protest, tried to follow him; the man at the door stopped me. Silently, almost grimly, he indicated a narrow cot at one end of the room. For a moment I hesitated, feeling the man's eyes upon me.

Sleep on my dead—I felt sure he was dead—friend's

cot! Sleep in that fearful place! My whole being crawled with horror. I turned again to the man. His features were unyielding. Perhaps this was more third degree. Limp with weakness and weariness, I dragged my lagging feet towards the cot.

As long as I live I shall never forget my awakening. A uniformed figure, the chief, shaking me by the shoulder. Two other uniformed men silently watching. I sat up and gazed about me, dazedly. Bright sunlight streamed through the windows. A stray gleam struck the cage. I shrank back, trembling. And yet I had slept soundly.

"Mr. Thornton," the chief said, "I have serious news for you. I have positive proof your friend is dead."

"Dear God!" The exclamation was wrung from me as recollection returned with a rush. "Where? You can't have!"

"Here." He thrust a bundle of letters into my hands. "You acted so strangely last night you caused me to suspect you of a serious crime. Also, you overlooked

several important points. You got back from a trip only last night."

Last night! Surely it was years.

"You had left instructions to have your mail forwarded," the level voice went on. "These letters were evidently one day behind you. I picked them up at your rooms this morning. I took the liberty of opening them. Read this one." He selected it.

With trembling fingers I extracted from the envelope a single written page. I recognized the handwriting as the professor's. I read with feverish intensity, each single word burning itself into my consciousness:

Dear Thornton:

I am writing this in anticipation. I will see that it is mailed when my plans are completed. Too late, dear friend, for you to attempt, with the best intentions in the world, to frustrate them.

You will, perhaps, recall that many years ago,

when I gave you my full confidence, I told you that I felt sure that the law of compensation would atone in some measure for my loss. Thornton, old friend, I believe that, in more ways than one, my hour has arrived. Two days ago I completed the absolute zero. But even better!

A man called here to-day. Although he did not recognize me, I saw through the veneer of added years with ease. Fate, call it what you will, my visitor is the man who wrecked my happiness.

Under pretext I shall detain him. I shall induce him to enter the crystalline cage. I have already arranged a dual control which the power will destroy when I apply it from *the inside of the cage*.

Please destroy the cage. It will have brought compensation to me before you read this.

Good-by, dear friend!

Wroxton.

"I apologize, Mr. Thornton." The chief offered a hand which I clutched in mingled sorrow and relief. The world had lost a genius. I had lost a dear friend. But he was right. It was compensation.

#06 Tanks, By Murray Leinster:

Two miles of American front had gone dead. And on two lone infantrymen, lost in the menace of the fog-gas and the tanks, depended the outcome of the war of 1932.

Aproximate word count: 9,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The persistent, oily smell of fog-gas was everywhere, even in the little pill-box. Outside, all the world was blotted out by the thick gray mist that went rolling slowly across country with the breeze. The noises that came through it were curiously muted—fog-gas mutes all noises somewhat—but somewhere to the right artillery was pounding something with H E shell, and there were those little spitting under-current explosions that told of tanks in action. To the right

there was a distant rolling of machine-gun fire. In between was an utter, solemn silence.

Sergeant Coffee, disreputable to look at and disrespectful of mien, was sprawling over one of the gunners' seats and talking into a field telephone while mud dripped from him. Corporal Wallis, equally muddy and still more disreputable, was painstakingly manufacturing one complete cigarette from the pinched-out butts of four others. Both were rifle-infantry. Neither had any right or reason to be occupying a definitely machine-gun-section post. The fact that the machine-gun crew was all dead did not seem to make much difference to sector H.Q. at the other end of the telephone wire, judging from the questions that were being asked.

"I tell you," drawled Sergeant Coffee, "they're dead.... Yeah, all dead. Just as dead as when I told you the first time, maybe even deader.... Gas, o'course. I don't know what kind.... Yeh. They got their masks on."

He waited, looking speculatively at the cigarette Corporal Wallis had in manufacture. It began to look

imposing. Corporal Wallis regarded it affectionately. Sergeant Coffee put his hand over the mouthpiece, and looked intently at his companion.

"Gimme a drag o' that, Pete," he suggested. "I'll slip y' some butts in a minute."

Corporal Wallis nodded, and proceeded to light the cigarette with infinite artistry. He puffed delicately upon it, inhaled it with the care a man learns when he has just so much tobacco and never expects to get any more, and reluctantly handed it to Sergeant Coffee.

Sergeant Coffee emptied his lungs in a sigh of anticipation. He put the cigarette to his lips. It burned brightly as he drew upon it. Its tip became brighter and brighter until it was white-hot, and the paper crackled as the line of fire crept up the tube.

"Hey!" said Corporal Wallis in alarm.

Sergeant Coffee waved him aside, and his chest expanded to the fullest limit of his blouse. When his

lungs could hold no more he ceased to draw, grandly returned about one-fourth of the cigarette to Corporal Wallis, and blew out a cloud of smoke in small dribblets until he had to gasp for breath.

"When y' ain't got much time," said Sergeant Coffee amiably, "that's a quick smoke."

Corporal Wallis regarded the ruins of his cigarette with a woeful air.

"Hell!" said Corporal Wallis gloomily. But he smoked what was left.

"Yeah," said Sergeant Coffee suddenly, into the field telephone, "I'm still here, an' they're still dead.... Listen, Mr. Officer, I got me a black eye an' numerous contusions. Also my gas-mask is busted. I called y'up to do y' a favor. I aim to head for distant parts.... Hell's bells! Ain't there anybody else in the army—" He stopped, and resentment died out in wide-eyed amazement. "Yeh.... Yeh.... Yeh.... I gotcha, Loot. A'right, I'll see what I c'n do. Yeh.... Wish y'd see my insurance gets paid. Yeh."

He hung up, gloomily, and turned to Corporal Wallis.

"We' got to be heroes," he announced bitterly. "Sit out here in th' stinkin' fog an' wait for a tank t' come along an' wipe us out. We' the only listenin' post in two miles of front. That new gas o' theirs wiped out all the rest without report."

He surveyed the crumpled figures, which had been the original occupants of the pill-box. They wore the same uniform as himself and when he took the gas-mask off of one of them the man's face was strangely peaceful.

"Hell of a war," said Sergeant Coffee bitterly. "Here our gang gets wiped out by a helicopter. I ain't seen sunlight in a week, an' I got just four butts left. Lucky I started savin' 'em." He rummaged shrewdly. "This guy's got half a sack o' makin's. Say, that was Loot'n't Madison on the line, then. Transferred from our gang a coupla months back. They cut him in the line to listen in on me an' make sure I was who I said I was. He recognized my voice."

Corporal Wallis, after smoking to the last and ultimate puff, pinched out his cigarette and put the fragments of a butt back in his pocket.

"What we got to do?" he asked, watching as Sergeant Coffee divided the treasure-trove into two scrupulously exact portions.

"Nothin'," said Coffee bitterly, "except find out how this gang got wiped out, an' a few little things like that. Half th' front line is in th' air, the planes can't see anything, o'course, an' nobody dares cut th' fog-gas to look. He didn't say much, but he said for Gawd's sake find out somethin'."

Corporal Wallis gloated over one-fourth of a sack of tobacco and stowed it away.

"Th' infantry always gets th' dirty end of the stick," he said gloomily. "I'm goin' to roll me a whole one, pre-war, an' smoke it, presently."

"Hell yes," said Coffee. He examined his gas-mask from force of habit before stepping out into the fog

once more, then contemptuously threw it aside. "Gas-masks, hell! Ain't worth havin'. Come on."

Corporal Wallis followed as he emerged from the little round cone of the pill-box.

The gray mist that was fog-gas hung over everything. There was a definite breeze blowing, but the mist was so dense that it did not seem to move. It was far enough from the fog-flares for the last least trace of striation to have vanished. Fifteen miles to the north the fog-flares were placed, ranged by hundreds and by thousands, burning one after another as the fog service set them off, and sending out their incredible masses of thick gray vapor in long threads that spread out before the wind, coalesced, and made a smoke-screen to which the puny efforts of the last war—the war that was to make the world safe for democracy—were as nothing.

Here, fifteen miles down wind from the flares, it was possible to see clearly in a circle approximately five feet in diameter. At the edge of that circle outlines began to blur. At ten feet all shapes were the faintest

of bulks, the dimmest of outlines. At fifteen feet all was invisible, hidden behind a screen of mist.

"Cast around," said Coffee gloomily. "Maybe we'll find a shell, or tracks of a tank or somethin' that chucked the gas here."

It was rather ludicrous to go searching for anything in that mass of vapor. At three yards distance they could make each other out as dim outlines, no more. But it did not even occur to them to deplore the mist. The war which had already been christened, by the politicians at home, the last war, was always fought in a mist. Infantry could not stand against tanks, tanks could not live under aircraft-directed artillery fire—not when forty guns fired salvos for the aircraft to spot—and neither artillery nor aircraft could take any advantage of a victory which either, under special conditions, might win. The general staffs of both the United States and the prominent nation—let us say the Yellow Empire—at war with it had come to a single conclusion. Tanks or infantry were needed for the use of victories. Infantry could be destroyed by tanks. But tanks could be hidden from aerial spotters

by smoke-screens.

The result was fog-gas, which was being used by both sides in the most modern fashion when, their own unit wiped out and themselves wandering aimlessly in the general direction of the American rear, Sergeant Coffee and Corporal Wallis stumbled upon an American pill-box with its small garrison lying dead. For forty miles in one direction and perhaps thirty in the other, the vapor lay upon the earth. It was being blown by the wind, of course, but it was sufficiently heavier than air to cling to the ground level, and the industries of two nations were straining every nerve to supply the demands of their respective armies for its material.

The fog-bank was nowhere less than a hundred feet thick—a cloud of impalpable particles impenetrable to any eye or any camera, however shrewdly filtered. And under that mattress of pale opacity the tanks crawled heavily. They lurched and rumbled upon their deadly errands, uncouth and barbarous, listening for each other by a myriad of devices, locked in desperate, short-range conflict when they came upon

each other, and emitting clouds of deadly vapor, against which gas-masks were no protection, when they came upon opposing infantry.

The infantrymen, though, were few. Their principal purpose was the reporting of the approach or passage of tanks, and trenches were of no service to them. They occupied unarmed little listening-posts with field telephones, small wireless or ground buzzer sets for reporting the enemy before he overwhelmed them. They held small pill-boxes, fitted with anti-tank guns which sometimes—if rarely—managed to get home a shell, aimed largely by sound, before the tank rolled over gun and gunners alike.

And now Sergeant Coffee and Corporal Wallis groped about in that blinding mist. There had been two systems of listening-posts hidden in it, each of admittedly little fighting value, but each one deep and composed of an infinity of little pin-point posts where two or three men were stationed. The American posts, by their reports, had assured the command that all enemy tanks were on the other side of a certain definite line. Their own tanks, receiving recognition

signals, passed and repassed among them, prowling in quest of invaders. The enemy tanks crawled upon the same grisly patrol on their own side.

But two miles of the American front had suddenly gone silent. A hundred telephones had ceased to make reports along the line nearest the enemy. As Coffee and Wallis stumbled about the little pill-box, looking for some inkling of the way in which the original occupants of the small strong-point had been wiped out, the second line of observation-posts began to go dead.

Now one, now another abruptly ceased to communicate. Half a dozen were in actual conversation with their sector headquarters, and broke off between words. The wires remained intact. But in fifteen nerve-racking minutes a second hundred posts ceased to make reports and ceased to answer the inquiry-signal. G.H.Q. was demanding explanations in crisp accents that told the matter was being taken very seriously indeed. And then, as the officer in command of the second-line sector headquarters was explaining frenziedly that he was

doing all any man could do, he stopped short between two words and thereafter he, also, ceased to communicate.

Front-line sector headquarters seemed inexplicably to have escaped whatever fate had overtaken all its posts, but it could only report that they had apparently gone out of existence without warning. American tanks, prowling in the area that had gone dead, announced that no enemy tanks had been seen. G-81, stumbling on a pill-box no more than ten minutes after it had gone silent, offered to investigate. A member of her crew, in a gas-mask, stepped out of the port doorway. Immediately thereafter G-81's wireless reports stopped coming in.

The situation was clearly shown in the huge tank that had been built to serve as G.H.Q. That tank was seventy feet long, and lay hidden in the mist with a brood of other, smaller tanks clustered near it, from each of which a cable ran to the telephones and instruments of the greater monster. Farther off in the fog, of course, were other tanks, hundreds of them, fighting machines all, silent and motionless now, but

infinitely ready to protect the brain of the army.

The G.H.Q. maneuver-board showed the battle as no single observer could ever have seen it. A map lay spread out on a monster board, under a pitiless white light. It was a map of the whole battlefield. Tiny sparks crawled here and there under the map, and there were hundreds of little pins with different-colored heads to mark the position of this thing and that. The crawling sparks were the reported positions of American tanks, made visible as positions of moving trains had been made visible for years on the electric charts of railroads in dispatcher's offices. Where the tiny bulbs glowed under the map, there a tank crawled under the fog. As the tank moved, the first bulb went out and another flashed into light.

The general watched broodingly as the crawling sparks moved from this place to that place, as varicolored lights flashed up and vanished, as a steady hand reached down to shift tiny pins and place new ones. The general moved rarely, and spoke hardly at all. His whole air was that of a man absorbed in a game of chess—a game on which the

fate of a nation depended.

He was thus absorbed. The great board, illuminated from above by the glaring bulb, and speckled with little white sparks from below by the tiny bulbs beneath, showed the situation clearly at every instant. The crawling white sparks were his own tanks, each in its present position. Flashing blue sparks noted the last report of enemy tanks. Two staff officers stood behind the general, and each spoke from time to time into a strapped-on telephone transmitter. They were giving routine orders, heading the nearest American patrol-tanks toward the location of the latest reported enemies.

The general reached out his hand suddenly and marked off an area with his fingers. They were long fingers, and slender ones: an artist's fingers.

"Our outposts are dead in this space," he observed meditatively. The use of the word "outposts" dated him many years back as a soldier, back to the old days of open warfare, which had only now come about again. "Penetration of two miles—"

"Tank, sir," said the man of the steady fingers, putting a black pin in position within that area, "let a man out in a gas-mask to examine a pill-box. The tank does not report or reply, sir."

"Gas," said the general, noting the spot. "Their new gas, of course. It must go through masks or sag-paste, or both."

He looked up to one of a row of officers seated opposite him, each man with headphones strapped to his ears and a transmitter before his lips, and each man with a map-pad on his knees, on which from time to time he made notations and shifted pins absorbedly.

"Captain Harvey," said the general, "you are sure that dead spot has not been bombarded with gas-shells?"

"Yes, General. There has been no artillery fire heavy enough to put more than a fraction of those posts out of action, and all that fire, sir, has been accounted for elsewhere."

The officer looked up, saw the general's eyes shift, and bent to his map again, on which he was marking areas from which spotting aircraft reported flashes as of heavy guns beneath the mist.

"Their aircraft have not been dropping bombs, positively?"

A second officer glanced up from his own map.

"Our planes cover all that space, sir, and have for some time."

"They either have a noiseless tank," observed the general meditatively, "or...."

The steady fingers placed a red pin at a certain spot.

"One observation-post, sir, has reopened communication. Two infantrymen, separated from their command, came upon it and found the machine-gun crew dead, with gas-masks adjusted. No tanks or tracks. They are identified, sir, and are now looking for tank tracks or shells."

The general nodded emotionlessly.

"Let me know immediately."

He fell back to the ceaseless study of the board with its crawling sparks and sudden flashes of light. Over at the left, there were four white sparks crawling toward a spot where a blue flash had showed a little while since. A red light glowed suddenly where one of the white sparks crawled. One of the two officers behind the general spoke crisply. Instantly, it seemed, the other three white sparks changed their direction of movement. They swung toward the red flash—the point where a wireless from the tank represented by the first white flash had reported, contact with the enemy.

"Enemy tank destroyed here, sir," said the voice above the steady fingers.

"Wiped out three of our observation posts," murmured the general, "His side knows it. That's an opportunity. Have those posts reoccupied."

"Orders given, sir," said a staff officer from behind.
"No reports as yet."

The general's eyes went back to the space two miles wide and two miles deep in which there was only a single observation-post functioning, and that in charge of two strayed infantrymen. The battle in the fog was in a formative stage, now, and the general himself had to watch the whole, because it was by small and trivial indications that the enemy's plans would be disclosed. The dead area was no triviality, however. Half a dozen tanks were crawling through it, reporting monotonously that no sign of the enemy could be found. One of the little sparks representing those tanks abruptly went out.

"Tank here, sir, no longer reports."

The general watched with lack-luster eyes, his mind withdrawn in thought.

"Send four helicopters," he said slowly, "to sweep that space. We'll see what the enemy does."

One of the seated officers opposite him spoke swiftly. Far away a roaring set up and was stilled. The helicopters were taking off.

They would rush across the blanket of fog, their vertical propellers sending blasts of air straight downward. For most of their sweep they would keep a good height, but above the questionable ground they would swoop down to barely above the fog-blanket. There their monstrous screws would blow holes in the fog until the ground below was visible. If any tanks crawled there, in the spaces the helicopters swept clear, they would be visible at once and would be shelled by batteries miles away, batteries invisible under the artificial cloud-bank.

No other noises came through the walls of the monster tank. There was a faint, monotonous murmur of the electric generator. There were the quiet, crisp orders of the officers behind the general, giving the routine commands that kept the fighting a stalemate.

The aircraft officer lifted his head, pressing his headphones tightly against his ears, as if to hear

mores clearly.

"The enemy, sir, has sent sixty fighting machines to attack our helicopters. We sent forty single-seaters as escort."

"Let them fight enough," said the general absently, "to cause the enemy to think us desperate for information. Then draw them off."

There was silence again. The steady fingers put pins here and there. An enemy tank destroyed here. An American tank encountered an enemy and ceased to report further. The enemy sent four helicopters in a wide sweep behind the American lines, escorted by fifty fighting planes. They uncovered a squadron of four tanks, which scattered like insects disturbed by the overturning of a stone. Instantly after their disclosure a hundred and fifty guns, four miles away, were pouring shells about the place where they had been seen. Two of the tanks ceased to report.

The general's attention was called to a telephone instrument with its call-light glowing.

"Ah," said the general absently. "They want publicity matter."

The telephone was connected to the rear, and from there to the Capital. A much-worried cabinet waited for news, and arrangements were made and had been used, to broadcast suitably arranged reports from the front, the voice of the commander-in-chief in the field going to every workshop, every gathering-place, and even being bellowed by loud-speakers in the city streets.

The general took the phone. The President of the United States was at the other end of the wire, this time.

"General?"

"Still in a preliminary stage, sir," said the general, without haste. "The enemy is preparing a breakthrough effort, possibly aimed at our machine-shops and supplies. Of course, if he gets them we will have to retreat. An hour ago he paralyzed our radios, not being aware, I suppose, of our tuned earth-induction

wireless sets. I daresay he is puzzled that our communications have not fallen to pieces."

"But what are our chances?" The voice of the President was steady, but it was strained.

"His tanks outnumber ours two to one, of course, sir," said the general calmly. "Unless we can divide his fleet and destroy a part of it, of course we will be crushed in a general combat. But we are naturally trying to make sure that any such action will take place within point-blank range of our artillery, which may help a little. We will cut the fog to secure that help, risking everything, if a general engagement occurs."

There was silence.

The President's voice, when it came, was more strained still.

"Will you speak to the public, General?"

"Three sentences. I have no time for more."

There were little clickings on the line, while the general's eyes returned to the board that was the battlefield in miniature. He indicated a spot with his finger.

"Concentrate our reserve-tanks here," he said meditatively. "Our fighting aircraft here. At once."

The two spots were at nearly opposite ends of the battle field. The chief of staff, checking the general's judgment with the alert suspicion that was the latest addition to his duties, protested sharply.

"But sir, our tanks will have no protection against helicopters!"

"I am quite aware of it," said the general mildly.

He turned to the transmitter. A thin voice had just announced at the other end of the wire, "The commander-in-chief of the army in the field will make a statement."

The general spoke unhurriedly.

"We are in contact with the enemy, have been for some hours. We have lost forty tanks and the enemy, we think, sixty or more. No general engagement has yet taken place, but we think decisive action on the enemy's part will be attempted within two hours. The tanks in the field need now, as always, ammunition, spare tanks, and the special supplies for modern warfare. In particular, we require ever-increasing quantities of fog-gas. I appeal to your patriotism for reinforcements of material and men."

He hung up the receiver and returned to his survey of the board.

"Those three listening-posts," he said abruptly, indicating a place near where an enemy tank had been destroyed. "Have they been reoccupied?"

"Yes, sir. Just reported. The tank they reported rolled over them, destroying the placement. They are digging in."

"Tell me," said the general, "when they cease to report again. They will."

He watched the board again and without lifting his eyes from it, spoke again.

"That listening-post in the dead sector, with the two strayed infantrymen in it. Was it reported?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Tell me immediately it does."

The general leaned back in his chair and deliberately relaxed. He lighted a cigar and puffed at it, his hands quite steady. Other officers, scenting the smoke, glanced up enviously. But the general was the only man who might smoke. The enemy's gases, like the American ones, could go through any gas-mask if in sufficient concentration. The tanks were sealed like so many submarines, and opened their interiors to the outer air only after that air had been thoroughly tested and proven safe. Only the general might use up more than a man's allowance for breathing.

The general gazed about him, letting his mind rest from its intense strain against the greater strain that

would come on it in a few minutes. He looked at a tall blond man who was surveying the board intently, moving away, and returning again, his forehead creased in thought.

The general smiled quizzically. That man was the officer appointed to I. I. duty—interpretative intelligence—chosen from a thousand officers because the most exhaustive psychological tests had proven that his brain worked as nearly as possible like that of the enemy commander. His task was to take the place of the enemy commander, to reconstruct from the enemy movements reported and the enemy movements known as nearly as possible the enemy plans.

"Well, Harlin," said the general, "Where will he strike?"

"He's tricky, sir," said Harlin. "That gap in our listening-posts looks, of course, like preparation for a massing of his tanks inside our lines. And it would be logical that he fought off our helicopters to keep them from discovering his tanks massing in that area."

The general nodded.

"Quite true," he admitted. "Quite true."

"But," said Harlin eagerly. "He'd know we could figure that out. And he may have wiped out listening posts to make us think he was planning just so. He may have fought off our helicopters, not to keep them from discovering his tanks in there, but to keep them from discovering that there were no tanks in there!"

"My own idea exactly," said the general meditatively. "But again, it looks so much like a feint that it may be a serious blow. I dare not risk assuming it to be a feint only."

He turned back to the board.

"Have those two strayed infantrymen reported yet?" he asked sharply.

"Not yet, sir."

The general drummed on the table. There were four

red flashes glowing at different points of the board—four points where American tanks or groups of tanks were locked in conflict with the enemy. Somewhere off in the enveloping fog that made all the world a gray chaos, lumbering, crawling monsters rammed and battered at each other at infinitely short range. They fought blindly, their guns swinging menacingly and belching lurid flames into the semi-darkness, while from all about them dropped the liquids that meant death to any man who breathed their vapor. Those gases penetrated any gas-mask, and would even strike through the sag-pastes that had made the vesicatory gases of 1918 futile.

With tanks by thousands hidden in the fog, four small combats were kept up, four only. Battles fought with tanks as the main arm are necessarily battles of movement, more nearly akin to cavalry battles than any other unless it be fleet actions. When the main bodies come into contact, the issue is decided quickly. There can be no long drawn-out stalemates such as infantry trenches produced in years past. The fighting that had taken place so far, both under the fog and

aloft in the air, was outpost skirmishing only. When the main body of the enemy came into action it would be like a whirlwind, and the battle would be won or lost in a matter of minutes only.

The general paid no attention to those four conflicts, or their possible meaning.

"I want to hear from those two strayed infantrymen," he said quietly, "I must base my orders on what they report. The whole battle, I believe, hinges on what they have to say."

He fell silent, watching the board without the tense preoccupation he had shown before. He knew the moves he had to make in any of three eventualities. He watched the board to make sure he would not have to make those moves before he was ready. His whole air was that of waiting: the commander-in-chief of the army of the United States, waiting to hear what he would be told by two strayed infantrymen, lost in the fog that covered a battlefield.

The fog was neither more dense nor any lighter

where Corporal Wallis paused to roll his pre-war cigarette. The tobacco came from the gassed machine-gunner in the pill-box a few yards off. Sergeant Coffee, three yards distant, was a blurred figure. Corporal Wallis put his cigarette into his mouth, struck his match, and puffed delicately.

"Ah!" said Corporal Wallis, and cheered considerably. He thought he saw Sergeant Coffee moving toward him and ungenerously hid his cigarette's glow.

Overhead, a machine-gun suddenly burst into a rattling roar, the sound sweeping above them with incredible speed. Another gun answered it. Abruptly, the whole sky above them was an inferno of such tearing noises and immediately after they began a multitudinous bellowing set up. Airplanes on patrol ordinarily kept their engines muffled, in hopes of locating a tank below them by its noise. But in actual fighting there was too much power to be gained by cutting out the muffler for any minor motive to take effect. A hundred aircraft above the heads of the two strayed infantrymen were fighting madly about five helicopters. Two hundred yards away, one fell to the

earth with a crash, and immediately afterward there was a hollow boom. For an instant even the mist was tinged with yellow from the exploded gasoline tank. But the roaring above continued—not mounting, as in a battle between opposing patrols of fighting planes, when each side finds height a decisive advantage, but keeping nearly to the same level, little above the bank of cloud.

Something came down, roaring, and struck the earth no more than fifty yards away. The impact was terrific, but after it there was dead silence while the thunder above kept on.

Sergeant Coffee came leaping to Corporal Wallis' side.

"Helicopters!" he barked. "Huntin' tanks an' pill-boxes! Lay down!"

He flung himself down to the earth.

Wind beat on them suddenly, then an outrageous blast of icy air from above. For an instant the sky lightened.

They saw a hole in the mist, saw the little pill-box clearly, saw a huge framework of supporting screws sweeping swiftly overhead with figures in it watching the ground through wind-angle glasses, and machine-gunners firing madly at dancing things in the air. Then it was gone.

"One o' ours," shouted Coffee in Wallis' ear. "They' tryin' to find th' Yellows' tanks!"

The center of the roaring seemed to shift, perhaps to the north. Then a roaring drowned out all the other roarings. This one was lower down and approaching in a rush. Something swooped from the south, a dark blotch in the lighter mist above. It was an airplane flying in the mist, a plane that had dived into the fog as into oblivion. It appeared, was gone—and there was a terrific crash. A shattering roar drowned out even the droning tumult of a hundred aircraft engines. A sheet of flame flashed up, and a thunderous detonation.

"Hit a tree," panted Coffee, scrambling to his feet again. "Suicide club, aimin' for our helicopter."

Corporal Wallis was pointing, his lips drawn back in a snarl.

"Shut up!" he whispered. "I saw a shadow against that flash! Yeller infantryman! Le's get 'im!"

"Y'crazy," said Sergeant Coffee, but he strained his eyes and more especially his ears.

It was Coffee who clutched Corporal Wallis' wrist and pointed. Wallis could see nothing, but he followed as Coffee moved silently through the gray mist. Presently he too, straining his eyes, saw an indistinct movement.

The roaring of motors died away suddenly. The fighting had stopped, a long way off, apparently because the helicopters had been withdrawn. Except for the booming of artillery a very long distance away, firing unseen at an unseen target, there was no noise at all.

"Aimin' for our pill-box," whispered Coffee.

They saw the dim shape, moving noiselessly, halt. The dim figure seemed to be casting about for something. It went down on hands and knees and crawled forward. The two infantrymen crept after it. It stopped, and turned around. The two dodged to one side in haste. The enemy infantryman crawled off in another direction, the two Americans following him as closely as they dared.

He halted once more, a dim and grotesque figure in the fog. They saw him fumbling in his belt. He threw something, suddenly. There was a little tap as of a fountain pen dropped upon concrete. Then a hissing sound. That was all, but the enemy infantryman waited, as if listening....

The two Americans fell upon him as one individual. They bore him to the earth and Coffee dragged at his gas-mask, good tactics in a battle where every man carries gas-grenades. He gasped and fought desperately, in a seeming frenzy of terror.

They squatted over him, finally, having taken away his automatics, and Coffee worked painstakingly to get

off his gas-mask while Wallis went poking about in quest of tobacco.

"Dawggone!" said Coffee. "This mask is intricate."

"He ain't got any pockets," mourned Wallis.

Then they examined him more closely.

"It's a whole suit," explained Coffee. "H-m.... He don't have to bother with sag-paste. He's got him on a land diving-suit."

"S-s-say," gasped the prisoner, his language utterly colloquial in spite of the beady eyes and coarse black hair that marked him racially as of the enemy, "say, don't take off my mask! Don't take off my mask!"

"He talks an' everything," observed Coffee in mild amazement. He inspected the mask again and painstakingly smashed the goggles. "Now, big boy, you take your chance with th' rest of us. What' you doin' around here?"

The prisoner set his teeth, though deathly pale, and did not reply.

"H'm-m...." said Coffee meditatively. "Let's take him in the pill-box an' let Loot'n't Madison tell us what to do with him."

They picked him up.

"No! No! For Gawd's sake, no!" cried the prisoner shrilly. "I just gassed it!"

The two halted. Coffee scratched his nose.

"Reckon he's lyin', Pete?" he asked.

Corporal Wallis shrugged gloomily.

"He ain't got any tobacco," he said morosely. "Let's chuck him in first an' see."

The prisoner wriggled until Coffee put his own automatic in the small of his back.

"How long does that gas last?" he asked, frowning.

"Loot'n't Madison wants us to report. There's some fellers in there, all gassed up, but we were in there a while back an' it didn't hurt us. How long does it last?"

"Fur-fifteen minutes, maybe twenty," chattered the prisoner. "Don't put me in there!"

Coffee scratched his nose again and looked at his wrist-watch.

"A'right," he conceded, "we give you twenty minutes. Then we chuck you down inside. That is, if you act real agreeable until then. Got anything to smoke?"

The prisoner agonizedly opened a zipper slip in his costume and brought out tobacco, even tailor-made cigarettes. Coffee pounced on them one second before Wallis. Then he divided them with absorbed and scrupulous fairness.

"Right," said Sergeant Coffee comfortably. He lighted up. "Say, you, if y' want to smoke, here's one o' your pills. Let's see the gas stuff. How' y' use it?"

Wallis had stripped off a heavy belt about the prisoner's waist and it was trailing over his arm. He inspected it now. There were twenty or thirty little sticks in it, each one barely larger than a lead pencil, of dirty gray color, and each one securely nested in a tube of flannel-lined papier-mache.

"These things?" asked Wallis contentedly. He was inhaling deeply with that luxurious enjoyment a tailor-made cigarette can give a man who had been remaking butts into smokes for days past.

"Don't touch 'em," warned the prisoner nervously. "You broke my goggles. You throw 'em, and they light and catch fire, and that scatters the gas."

Coffee touched the prisoner, indicating the ground, and sat down, comfortably smoking one of the prisoner's cigarettes. By his air, he began to approve of his captive.

"Say, you," he said curiously, "you talk English pretty good. How'd you learn it?"

"I was a waiter," the prisoner explained. "New York. Corner Forty-eighth and Sixth."

"My Gawd!" said Coffee. "Me, I used to be a movie operator along there. Forty-ninth. Projection room stuff, you know. Say, you know Heine's place?"

"Sure," said the prisoner. "I used to buy Scotch from that blond feller in the back room. With a benzine label for a prescription?"

Coffee lay back and slapped his knee.

"Ain't it a small world?" he demanded. "Pete, here, he ain't never been in any town bigger than Chicago. Ever in Chicago?"

"Hell," said Wallis, morose yet comfortable with a tailor-made cigarette. "If you guys want to start a extra war, go to knockin' Chicago. That's all."

Coffee looked at his wrist-watch again.

"Got ten minutes yet," he observed. "Say, you must

know Pete Hanfry—"

"Sure I know him," said the enemy prisoner, scornfully. "I waited on him. One day, just before us reserves were called back home...."

In the monster tank that was headquarters the general tapped his fingers on his knees. The pale white light flickered a little as it shone on the board where the bright sparks crawled. White sparks were American tanks. Blue flashes were for enemy tanks sighted and reported, usually in the three-second interval between their identification and the annihilation of the observation-post that had reported them. Red glows showed encounters between American and enemy tanks. There were a dozen red glows visible, with from one to a dozen white sparks hovering about them. It seemed as if the whole front line were about to burst into a glare of red, were about to become one long lane of conflicts in impenetrable obscurity, where metal monsters roared and rumbled and clanked one against the other, bellowing and belching flame and ramming each other savagely, while from them dripped the liquids

that made their breath mean death. There were nightmarish conflicts in progress under the blanket of fog, unparalleled save perhaps in the undersea battles between submarines in the previous European war.

The chief of staff looked up; his face drawn.

"General," he said harshly, "it looks like a frontal attack all along our line."

The general's cigar had gone out. He was pale, but calm with an iron composure.

"Yes," he conceded. "But you forget that blank spot in our line. We do not know what is happening there."

"I am not forgetting it. But the enemy outnumbered us two to one—"

"I am waiting," said the general, "to hear from those two infantrymen who reported some time ago from a listen-post in the dead area."

The chief of staff pointed to the outline formed by the

red glows where tanks were battling.

"Those fights are keeping up too long!" he said sharply. "General, don't you see, they're driving back our line, but they aren't driving it back as fast as if they were throwing their whole weight on it! If they were making a frontal attack there, they'd wipe out the tanks we have facing them; they'd roll right over them! That's a feint! They're concentrating in the dead space—"

"I am waiting," said the general softly, "to hear from those two infantrymen." He looked at the board again and said quietly, "Have the call-signal sent them. They may answer."

He struck a match to relight his dead cigar. His fingers barely quivered as they held the match. It might have been excitement—but it might have been foreboding, too.

"By the way," he said, holding the match clear, "have our machine-shops and supply-tanks ready to move. Every plane is, of course, ready to take the air on

signal. But get the aircraft ground personnel in their traveling tanks immediately."

Voices began to murmur orders as the general puffed. He watched the board steadily.

"Let me know if anything is heard from these infantrymen...."

There was a definite air of strain within the tank that was headquarters. It was a sort of tensility that seemed to emanate from the general himself.

Where Coffee and Wallis and the prisoner squatted on the ground, however, there was no sign of strain at all. There was a steady gabble of voices.

"What kinda rations they give you?" asked Coffee interestedly.

The enemy prisoner listed them, with profane side-comments.

"Hell," said Wallis gloomily. "Y'ought to see what we

get! Las' week they fed us worse'n dogs. An' th' canteen stuff—"

"Your tank men, they get treated fancy?" asked the prisoner.

Coffee made a reply consisting almost exclusively of high powered expletives.

"—and the infantry gets it in the neck every time," he finished savagely. "We do the work—"

Guns began to boom, far away. Wallis cocked his ears.

"Tanks gettin' together," he judged, gloomily. "If they'd all blow each other to hell an' let us infantry fight this battle—"

"Damn the tanks!" said the enemy prisoner viciously. "Look here, you fellers. Look at me. They sent a battalion of us out, in two waves. We hike along by compass through the fog, supposed to be five paces apart. We come on a pill-box or listenin' post, we gas it an' go on. We try not to make a noise. We try not to

get seen before we use our gas. We go on, deep in your lines as we can. We hear one of your tanks, we dodge it if we can, so we don't get seen at all.

O'course we give it a dose of gas in passing, just in case. But we don't get any orders about how far to go or how to come back. We ask for recognition signals for our own tanks, an' they grin an' say we won't see none of our tanks till the battle's over. They say 'Reform an' march back when the fog is out.' Ain't that pretty for you?"

"You second wave?" asked Coffee, with interest.

The prisoner nodded.

"Mopping up," he said bitterly, "what the first wave left. No fun in that! We go along gassin' dead men, an' all the time your tanks is ravin' around to find out what's happenin' to their listenin'-posts. They run into us—"

Coffee nodded sympathetically.

"The infantry always gets the dirty end of the stick,"

said Wallis morosely.

Somewhere, something blew up with a violent explosion. The noise of battle in the distance became heavier and heavier.

"Goin' it strong," said the prisoner, listening.

"Yeh," said Coffee. He looked at his wrist-watch. "Say, that twenty minutes is up. You go down in there first, big boy."

They stood beside the little pill-box. The prisoner's knees shook.

"Say, fellers," he said pleadingly, "they told us that stuff would scatter in twenty minutes, but you busted my mask. Yours ain't any good against this gas. I'll have to go down in there if you fellers make me, but —"

Coffee lighted another of the prisoner's tailor-made cigarettes.

"Give you five minutes more," he said graciously. "I don't suppose it'll ruin the war."

They sat down relievedly again, while the fog-gas made all the earth invisible behind a pall of grayness, a grayness from which the noises of battle came.

In the tank that was headquarters, the air of strain was pronounced. The maneuver-board showed the situation as close to desperation, now. The reserve-tank positions had been switched on the board, dim orange glows, massed in curiously precise blocks. And little squares of green showed there that the supply and machine-shop tanks were massed. They were moving slowly across the maneuver-board. But the principal change lay in the front-line indications.

The red glows that showed where tank battles were in progress formed an irregularly curved line, now. There were twenty or more such isolated battles in progress, varying from single combats between single tanks to greater conflicts where twenty to thirty tanks to a side were engaged. And the positions of those conflicts were changing constantly, and invariably the

American tanks were being pushed back.

The two staff officers behind the general were nearly silent. There were few sparks crawling within the American lines now. Nearly every one had been diverted into the front-line battles. The two men watched the board with feverish intensity, watching the red glows moving back, and back....

The chief of staff was shaking like a leaf, watching the American line stretched, and stretched....

The general looked at him with a twisted smile.

"I know my opponent," he said suddenly. "I had lunch with him once in Vienna. We were attending a disarmament conference." He seemed to be amused at the ironic statement. "We talked war and battles, of course. And he showed me, drawing on the tablecloth, the tactical scheme that should have been used at Cambrai, back in 1917. It was a singularly perfect plan. It was a beautiful one."

"General," burst out one of the two staff officers

behind him. "I need twenty tanks from the reserves."

"Take them," said the general. He went on, addressing his chief of staff. "It was an utterly flawless plan. I talked to other men. We were all pretty busy estimating each other there, we soldiers. We discussed each other with some freedom, I may say. And I formed the opinion that the man who is in command of the enemy is an artist: a soldier with the spirit of an amateur. He's a very skilful fencer, by the way. Doesn't that suggest anything?"

The chief of staff had his eyes glued to the board.

"That is a feint, sir. A strong feint, yes, but he has his force concentrated in the dead area."

"You are not listening, sir," said the general, reprovingly. "I am saying that my opponent is an artist, an amateur, the sort of person who delights in the delicate work of fencing. I, sir, would thank God for the chance to defeat my enemy. He has twice my force, but he will not be content merely to defeat me. He will want to defeat me by a plan of consummate

artistry, which will arouse admiration among soldiers for years to come."

"But General, every minute, every second—"

"We are losing men, of whom we have plenty, and tanks, of which we have not enough. True, very true," conceded the general. "But I am waiting to hear from two strayed infantrymen. When they report, I will speak to them myself."

"But, sir," cried the chief of staff, withheld only by the iron habit of discipline from violent action and the taking over of command himself, "they may be dead! You can't risk this battle waiting for them! You can't risk it, sir! You can't!"

"They are not dead," said the general coolly. "They cannot be dead. Sometimes, sir, we must obey the motto on our coins. Our country needs this battle to be won. We have got to win it, sir! And the only way to win it—"

The signal-light at his telephone glowed. The general

snatched it up, his hands quivering. But his voice, was steady and deliberate as he spoke.

"Hello, Sergeant—Sergeant Coffee, is it?... Very well, Sergeant. Tell me what you've found out.... Your prisoner objects to his rations, eh? Very well, go on.... How did he gas our listening-posts?... He did, eh? He got turned around and you caught him wandering about?... Oh, he was second wave! They weren't taking any chances on any of our listening-posts reporting their tanks, eh?... Say that again, Sergeant Coffee!" The general's tone had changed indescribably. "Your prisoner has no recognition signals for his own tanks? They told him he wouldn't see any of them until the battle was over?... Thank you, Sergeant. One of our tanks will stop for you. This is the commanding general speaking."

He rang off, his eyes blazing. Relaxation was gone. He was a dynamo, snapping orders.

"Supply tanks, machine-shop tanks, ground forces of the air service, concentrate here!" His finger rested on a spot in the middle of the dead area. "Reserve

tanks take position behind them. Draw off every tank we've got—take 'em out of action!—and mass them in front, on a line with our former first line of outposts. Every airplane and helicopter take the air and engage in general combat with the enemy, wherever the enemy may be found and in whatever force. And our tanks move straight through here!"

Orders were snapping into telephone transmitters. The commands had been relayed before their import was fully realized. Then there was a gasp.

"General!" cried the chief of staff. "If the enemy is massed there, he'll destroy our forces in detail as they take position!"

"He isn't massed there," said the general, his eyes blazing. "The infantrymen who were gassing our listening-posts were given no recognition signals for their tanks. Sergeant Coffee's prisoner has his gas-mask broken and is in deadly fear. The enemy commander is foolish in many ways, perhaps, but not foolish enough to break down morale by refusing recognition signals to his own men who will need

them. And look at the beautiful plan he's got."

He sketched half a dozen lines with his fingers, moving them in lightning gestures as his orders took effect.

"His main force is here, behind those skirmishes that look like a feint. As fast as we reinforce our skirmishing-line, he reinforces his—just enough to drive our tanks back slowly. It looks like a strong feint, but it's a trap! This dead space is empty. He thinks we are concentrating to face it. When he is sure of it—his helicopters will sweep across any minute, now, to see—he'll throw his whole force on our front line. It'll crumple up. His whole fighting force will smash through to take us, facing the dead space, in the rear! With twice our numbers, he'll drive us before him."

"But general! You're ordering a concentration there! You're falling in with his plans!"

The general laughed.

"I had lunch with the general in command over there, once upon a time. He is an artist. He won't be content with a defeat like that! He'll want to make his battle a masterpiece, a work of art! There's just one touch he can add. He has to have reserves to protect his supply-tanks and machine-shops. They're fixed. The ideal touch, the perfect tactical fillip, will be—Here! Look. He expects to smash in our rear, here. The heaviest blow will fall here. He will swing around our right wing, drive us out of the dead area into his own lines—and drive us on his reserves! Do you see it? He'll use every tank he's got in one beautiful final blow. We'll be outwitted, out-numbered, out-flanked and finally caught between his main body and his reserves and pounded to bits. It is a perfect, a masterly bit of work!"

He watched the board, hawklike.

"We'll concentrate, but our machine-shops and supplies will concentrate with us. Before he has time to take us in rear we'll drive ahead, in just the line he plans for us! We don't wait to be driven into his reserves. We roll into them and over them! We smash

his supplies! We destroy his shops! And then we can advance along his line of communication and destroy it, our own depots being blown up—give the orders when necessary—and leaving him stranded with motor-driven tanks, motorized artillery, and nothing to run his motors with! He'll be marooned beyond help in the middle of our country, and we will have him at our mercy when his tanks run out of fuel. As a matter of fact, I shall expect him to surrender in three days."

The little blocks of green and yellow that had showed the position of the reserve and supply-tanks, changed abruptly to white, and began to crawl across the maneuver-board. Other little white sparks turned about. Every white spark upon the maneuver-board suddenly took to itself a new direction.

"Disconnect cables," said the general, crisply. "We move with our tanks, in the lead!"

The monotonous humming of the electric generator was drowned out in a thunderous uproar that was muffled as an air-tight door was shut abruptly. Fifteen

seconds later there was a violent lurch, and the colossal tank was on the move in the midst of a crawling, thundering horde of metal monsters whose lumbering progress shook the earth.

Sergeant Coffee, still blinking his amazement, absent-mindedly lighted the last of his share of the cigarettes looted from the prisoner.

"The big guy himself!" he said, still stunned. "My Gawd! The big guy himself!"

A distant thunder began, a deep-toned rumbling that seemed to come from the rear. It came nearer and grew louder. A peculiar quivering seemed to set up in the earth. The noise was tanks moving through the fog, not one tank or two tanks, or twenty tanks, but all the tanks in creation rumbling and lurching at their topmost speed in serried array.

Corporal Wallis heard, and turned pale. The prisoner heard, and his knees caved in.

"Hell," said Corporal Wallis despairingly. "They can't

see us, an' they couldn't dodge us if they did!"

The prisoner wailed, and slumped to the floor.

Coffee picked him up by the collar and jerked him out of the pill-box.

"C'mon Pete," he ordered briefly. "They ain't givin' us a infantryman's chance, but maybe we can do some dodgin'!"

Then the roar of engines, of metal treads crushing upon earth and clinking upon their joints, drowned out all possible other sounds. Before the three men beside the pill-box could have moved a muscle, monster shapes loomed up, rushing, rolling, lurching, squeaking. They thundered past, and the hot fumes of their exhausts enveloped the trio.

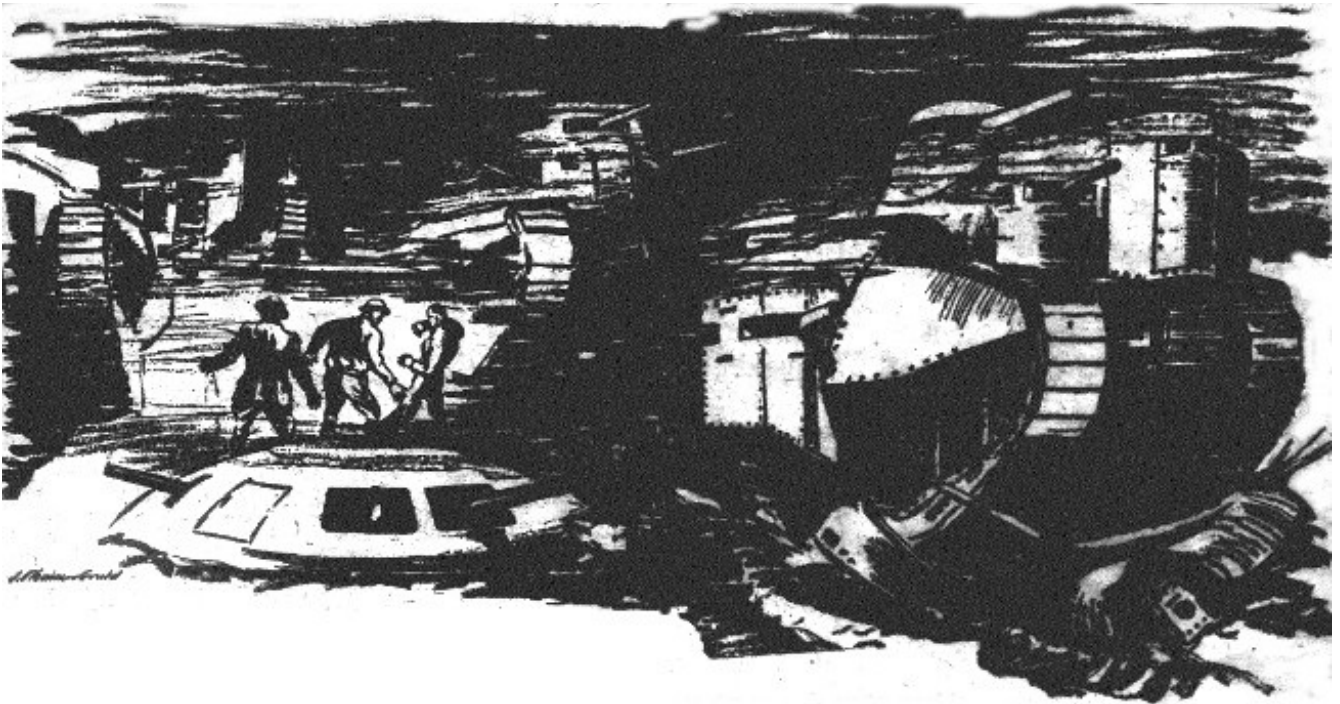
Coffee growled and put himself in a position of defiance, his feet braced against the concrete of the pill-box dome. His expression was snarling and angry but, surreptitiously, he crossed himself. He heard the fellows of the two tanks that had roared by him,

thundering along in alignment to right and left. A twenty-yard space, and a second row of the monsters came hurtling on, gun muzzles gaping, gas-tubes elevated, spitting smoke from their exhausts that was even thicker than the fog. A third row, a fourth, a fifth....

The universe was a monster uproar. One could not think in this volume of sound. It seemed that there was fighting overhead. Crackling noises came feebly through the reverberating uproar that was the army of the United States in full charge. Something came whirling down through the overhanging mist and exploded in a lurid flare that for a second or two cast the grotesque shadows of a row of tanks clearly before the trio of shaken infantrymen.

Still the tanks came on and roared past. Twenty tanks, twenty-one ... twenty-two.... Coffee lost count, dazed and almost stunned by the sheer noise. It rose from the earth and seemed to be echoed back from the topmost limit of the skies. It was a colossal din, an incredible uproar, a sustained thunder that beat at the eardrums like the reiterated concussions of a

thousand guns that fired without ceasing. There was no intermission, no cessation of the tumult. Row after row after row of the monsters roared by, beaked and armed, going greedily with hungry guns into battle.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration of large, futuristic metal tanks driving by through the darkness, with the one in the foreground crushing pieces of metal that were in its way. Image description end.]

And then, for a space of seconds, no tanks passed. Through the pandemonium of their going, however, the sound of firing somehow seemed to creep. It was gunfire of incredible intensity, and it came from the

direction in which the front-rank tanks were heading.

"Forty-eight, forty-nine, forty-ten, forty-'leven," muttered Coffee dazedly, his senses beaten down almost to unconsciousness by the ordeal of sound. "Gawd! The whole army went by!"

The roaring of the fighting-tanks was less, but it was still a monstrous din. Through it, however, came now a series of concussions that were so close together that they were inseparable, and so violent that they were like slaps upon the chest.

Then came other noises, louder only because nearer. These were different noises, too, from those the fighting-tanks had made. Lighter noises. The curious, misshapen service tanks began to rush by, of all sizes and all shapes. Fuel-carrier tanks. Machine-shop tanks, huge ones, these. Commissary tanks....

Something enormous and glistening stopped short. A door opened. A voice roared an order. The three men, beaten and whipped by noise, stared dumbly.

"Sergeant Coffee!" roared the voice. "Bring your men! Quick!"

Coffee dragged himself back to a semblance of life. Corporal Wallis moved forward, sagging. The two of them loaded their prisoner into the door and tumbled in. They were instantly sent into a heap as the tank took up its progress again with a sudden sharp leap.

"Good man," grinned a sooty-faced officer, clinging to a handhold. "The general sent special orders you were to be picked up. Said you'd won the battle. It isn't finished yet, but when the general says that—"

"Battle?" said Coffee dully. "This ain't my battle. It's a parade of a lot of damn tanks!"

There was a howl of joy from somewhere above. Discipline in the machine-shop tanks was strict enough, but vastly different in kind from the formality of the fighting-machines.

"Contact!" roared the voice again. "General wireless is going again! Our fellows have rolled over their

reserves and are smashing their machine-shops and supplies!"

Yells reverberated deafeningly inside the steel walls, already filled with tumult from the running motors and rumbling treads.

"Smashed 'em up!" shrieked the voice above, insane with joy. "Smashed 'em! Smashed 'em! Smashed 'em! We've wiped out their whole reserve and—" A series of detonations came through even the steel shell of the lurching tank. Detonations so violent, so monstrous, that even through the springs and treads of the tank the earth-concussion could be felt. "There goes their ammunition! We set off all their dumps!"

There was sheer pandemonium inside the service-tank, speeding behind the fighting force with only a thin skin of reserve-tanks between it and a panic-stricken, mechanically pursuing enemy.

"Yell, you birds!" screamed the voice. "The general says we've won the battle! Thanks to the fighting force! We're to go on and wipe out the enemy line of

communications, letting him chase us till his gas gives out! Then we come back and pound him to bits! Our tanks have wiped him out!"

Coffee managed to find something to hold on to. He struggled to his feet. Corporal Wallis, recovering from the certainty of death and the torture of sound, was being very sea-sick from the tank's motion. The prisoner moved away from him on the steel floor. He looked gloomily up at Coffee.

"Listen to 'em," said Coffee bitterly. "Tanks! Tanks! Tanks! Hell! If they'd given us infantry a chance—"

"You said it," said the prisoner savagely. "This is a hell of a way to fight a war."

Corporal Wallis turned a greenish face to them.

"The infantry always gets the dirty end of the stick," he gasped. "Now they—now they' makin' infantry ride in tanks! Hell!"

#07 Invisible Death by Anthony Pelcher:

On Lees' quick and clever action depended the life of "Old Perk" Ferguson, the millionaire manufacturer threatened by the uncanny, invisible killer.

Aproximate word count: 8,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The inquest into the mysterious death of Darius Darrow, savant, inventor, recluse and eccentric, resembled a scientific convention. Men and women of high scientific attainment, and, in some instances, world fame, attended to hear first hand the strange, uncanny, unbelievable circumstances as hinted by the newspapers.

Mrs. Susan Darrow, the widow, was the paramount witness. She appeared a quaint figure as she took the stand. Tearful, yet alert, this little woman betrayed the intelligence that had made her one of the world's

foremost chemists. She gave her age as fifty-eight, but if it had not been for her snowy hair she would have looked much younger. She was small but not frail, and had expressive blue eyes. She had a firm little nose and chin, and was garbed in black silk garments of a fashion evidently dating back a decade.

Although not modern in dress, her answers to questions regarding scientific and business affairs involved in the mysterious case, proved she was thoroughly abreast of the times in all other particulars.

"You believe your husband was murdered?" bluntly asked the examiner at one stage.

"That is my opinion," she said, then added: "It might have been some scientific accident, the nature of which I cannot fathom. We were confidential in all matters except my husband's work. He reserved the right to be secretive about the scientific problems on which he was working."

"Can you throw any light on a motive for such a

crime?"

"The motive seems self-evident. He was working on an invention that he said would do away with war and would make the owner of the device a practical world dictator, should he choose to exercise such power. The device was completed. The murderer killed him to secure his device. That all seems plain enough."

"Was anything else of value taken?"

"We had nothing else of value about the place. I was never given to jewelry. The furnishings and equipment were undisturbed. It is quite evident, I think, that the thief was no ordinary petty burglar."

The attorney interposed: "I believe we had better let Mrs. Darrow tell this story from the beginning in her own way. There are only two really important witnesses. Whatever she can remember to recite might be of value to the authorities. Now, Mrs. Darrow, how long had you lived at Brooknook? Begin there and just let your story unfold. Try to control your nerves and emotions."

"I am not emotional. I am not nervous," said the quaint little woman, bravely. "My heart hurts, that is all."

"The place was named by my father. We inherited it at his death, thirty years ago, and moved in. My two children were born and died there. At first we kept the servants and maintained all of the thirty-two rooms. But after the children were gone, we both gave ourselves over to study and we began to close one room after another, releasing the servants one by one."

"How many rooms do you occupy now?"

"We lived in three, a living-room, kitchen and bedroom. The two big parlors were turned into a laboratory. We both worked there. It was there my husband met his death at his work. Sometimes we worked together, sometimes independently. I did all my own housework, except the laundry, which I sent out. We had no visitors. We lived for each other and our work."

"Tell us about the rooms that were not occupied."

"We left them just as they always had been. I have not been in any of these rooms for twenty years. Once I looked into the little girl's room—my daughter's room. It was dusty and cobwebby, but undisturbed by human hand. My husband peered in over my shoulder. I closed the door. We turned away in each other's arms."

Here the little old woman fell to weeping softly into her lace handkerchief. Minutes lapsed as the court waited, respecting her grief.

"Were these rooms locked?" asked the attorney finally.

"No," said the widow, recovering, as she dabbed at her eyes. "We feared no one. All the rooms were closed, but not locked. The outside doors were seldom locked. We lived in our own world. For appearance sake we kept up the grounds. Peck, the gardener, kept the grounds, as you know. He called in outside help when necessary. This was his affair. We never bothered him. He lived probably a half mile up the

road. The first of each month he would come for his pay. He was practically our only visitor.

"When it was necessary to see our attorney or other connections, Peck would drive us. At first he used to drive our horses. Ten years ago we pastured the horses for life and bought the small car. We seldom went out. We have no close friends and no relatives nearer than the Pacific coast. They are distant cousins. You see, we were rather alone in the world since the children went away—we never spoke of them as being dead."

Again the court was hushed. The coroner and the attorney took occasion to blow their noses rather violently.

"On May 27th, the day your husband died, what happened, as you re-remember it?" asked the attorney.

"We arose and had breakfast as usual. I was puttering about the rooms. My husband kissed me and started for the laboratory. I was in the kitchen. It was about

ten o'clock when I finished in the kitchen and went into the living room which adjoins the laboratory. I had been rather fretted, something unusual for me. It seemed I dimly sensed the presence of someone near me, someone I did not know, an outsider. I thought it was foolish of me and buckled up.

"But when I went into the living room, it seemed as if some invisible presence were following me. I could hear the low hum of my husband's device. The door of the laboratory was open. He called to me and said:

"Sue dear, it seems strange, but I made two models of this set and now I can find only one. You could not have misplaced the other by any chance, could you?"

"I assured him I knew nothing of it and he said, 'Hum-m, that's funny.' Then he went back into the library and closed the door. The humming continued. I was more annoyed than ever, but I did not want to bother my husband. Then a queer thing happened. I saw the door of the laboratory open and close, but I did not see anyone. The next instant, I heard my husband's outcry. It was more a groan than a scream.

"I rushed into the laboratory. My husband was lying by his slate-topped table. The device, I noticed, was gone. It was no bigger than a coffee-mill, I thought, as I bent over my husband. Strange how such a thought could have crowded in at such a time.

"My husband's head was bleeding. It was cut, a long gash over the ear, just below the bald spot. It must have been a frightful blow. I looked in his eyes. My nurse's and pharmaceutical course gave me knowledge which sent a chill to my heart. He was dead. I must have fainted.

"When I recovered I ran for Peck. I found him near the house, coming my way and holding his right eye.

"'Something struck me,' he said. Then, seeing me so pale, he said, 'My God! Mrs. Darrow, what has happened?'

"'Run for the doctor,' I said. When the doctor came he called the police and coroner. They told me not to disturb the body. Later they took it away, and the gardener told me—"

"Never mind what Peck told you," interrupted the attorney. "We will let him tell it. Is that all you can tell us about the death itself?"

But the widow was weeping now, so violently that the court ordered her excused.

The gardener was called and took the stand displaying a big, black eye, which offered comedy relief to a pathetic situation.

"On the main road to the east," he began after preliminary questioning, "was a small car which had been parked there all morning. I noticed it because it had no license plates. It was visible from the inside of the grounds, but was hidden from the road by a hedge. It made me wonder because it was just inside our grounds.

"I had some very special red flags which I planted as a border back of pink geraniums. They were doing fine. I got them from the Fabrish seed house. There are no plants like Fabrish's—I wouldn't give a snap of my finger for all the other—"

"Just a minute," interrupted the attorney. He told the gardener to never mind the geraniums and flags, but to tell just what happened.

"Well, I was bending over the border bed when I heard sounds like someone running along the gravel path towards me. I heard a humming like a bumble bee and I jumped to my feet. Just then something hit me in the eye and knocked me down. Yes sir, knocked me plumb down, and—"

"Then what happened? Never mind the asides, the extras—tell us just the simple facts," instructed the attorney.

"Well, you won't believe it, but I heard the footsteps leave the road. The geraniums were badly trampled. I looked at the parked automobile and could hear the hum coming from there.

"The machine started and turned into the road—"

"Did you notice anyone at the wheel?"

"That's what you're not going to believe. There wasn't anybody in that auto at all. I didn't see anyone at any time. The auto started itself, and what is more, that auto only went about a hundred yards when it disappeared altogether—like that—like a flash."

"Did it turn off the road?"

"I didn't turn anywhere. It was in the middle of the road. It just disappeared right in the middle of the road. It started without a driver, it turned north without a driver, and went on by itself for about a hundred yards. Then it vanished in the middle of the road. Just dropped out of sight."

The court-room was hushed. The audience and court attaches were awe stricken and looked their incredulity.

"Do you mean to tell us that auto drove itself?" asked the court sternly.

The witness was completely confused. The attorney came to his rescue, looked at the court, and said:

"He has told that same story a hundred times, and he will stick to it. It seems impossible, but has not Mrs. Darrow told us she heard this humming and saw nothing? With the purely perfunctory recitals of the doctor and the constabulary this court and the jury have heard all there is to hear. We have no more witnesses. That is all there is.

"The jury will have to decide from the evidence whether this case is accident or murder. The doctor and two experts have reported that the wound appeared to have been made by some blunt instrument, swung powerfully. The skull under the wound and back of the ear was simply crushed. Death was instantaneous. It all happened in broad daylight."

After an hour's deliberation the jury decided the savant came to his death in his laboratory from a blow on the skull received in some manner unknown.

The crowd filed out, spiritedly discussing the unusual crime. In the crowd was Perkins Ferguson, known as "Old Perk," head of the Schefert Engineering Corporation, who paid royalty on some of the Darrow

patents. With him was Damon Farnsworth, his first vice-president.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Farnsworth, biting into a black cigar.

"Damned weird, isn't it?" replied "Old Perk." "I have my own theory, however," he added, "but I am going to know a whole lot more about this case before I venture it." The pair climbed into Ferguson's car discussing the Darrow death case with furrowed brows.

What might be termed an extraordinary meeting of the directors of the Schefert Engineering Corporation, was held a few days later in a big building in the financial district.

The rich furnishings of the directors' room indicated, better than Bradstreet's, the great wealth of the corporation. Uniformed pages stood at attention at each end of the long, mahogany table at which were seated the fourteen directors of the company. All were men of wealth, standing and engineering knowledge.

The departed Darrow often had been summoned to such meetings, and at this one there was a hush because of his recent demise.

After a batch of preliminary business had been transacted, Ferguson arose and cleared his throat. The directors leaned forward in their chairs expectantly. The page boys lost their mechanical attitude for the instant and fairly craned their necks around the bulks of the forms in front of them.

"The Darrow case has taken a sudden and sinister turn," said the president. "I have a letter. I will read it:

"Old Perk: Get wise to yourself. We are in a position to destroy you and all the pot-bellies in the Wall Street crowd. If you want to die of old age, remember what happened to Darrow and begin declaring us in on Wall Street dividends. If you do not you will follow Darrow in the same way.

"Our first demand is for \$100,000. Leave this

amount in hundreds and fifties in the rubbish can at the corner of 50th Street and Broadway at 10 A. M. next Thursday. If you fail we will break your damned neck. Bring the police with you if you like.

Invisible Death.

Ferguson passed the letter around for inspection. It was painstakingly printed, evidently from the type in a rubber stamp set such as is sold in toy stores.

"I have decided," said Perkins at length, "to give this case to Walter Lees. He has never failed us in mechanical, chemical, or any form of scientific problem. I hope he will not fail in this. He will work independently of the police, who have requested that we keep the appointment at 50th Street and Broadway at the hour named. We will deposit a roll of newspapers, around which has been wrapped a fifty dollar bill and then we will stand by while the awaiting detectives do their duty."

"You do not think anyone is going to call for any

supposed package of money at one of the most congested corners in the world in broad daylight?" asked a director at the end of the table.

"Why not?" asked Ferguson. "A seedy individual could pick a package from a rubbish bin at that corner without attracting the least attention."

"I guess you're right," agreed the doubting one.

"I know I'm right," said the president. And he usually was.

"I have already arranged to have Lees instructed in his work," Ferguson volunteered as a pause came in the buzz of conversation about the table. "Lees is young, but he is capable." There was general discussion of the strange case of Darius Darrow; the room filled with the blue haze of many cigars.

Suddenly a low, humming sound was heard in the room.

Papers on the directors' table were bunched as if by

unseen hands, and thrown to the ceiling, from which they descended like flakes of snow and scattered about the room.

A book of minutes was torn from the hands of a secretary. It was raised and brought down on vice-president Farnsworth's head. A chair was pulled out from under another director and he was deposited in an undignified heap on the floor.

Another director acted as though he had been tripped, and he fell on top of Farnsworth. Two big vases crashed to the floor in bits. Other decorative objects were scattered about.

The directors who had been hurtled to the floor stood up with expressions of comical surprise on their features. Their chairs catapulted into a far corner of the room, one after the other.

Startled expressions resounded from the group.

A small bookcase fell on its front with a crash of glass. Ferguson's cane jumped in the air and crashed a

window pane.

The humming ceased suddenly.

The room was a wreck. The assembled men stood aghast. They were simply nonplussed. Finally they phoned for the police.

After hearing the strange recital from so many highly reputable witnesses, a detective sergeant, who had responded to the call with others, reported to headquarters.

A uniformed police guard was sent to the place with instructions to remain on duty until relieved.

Ferguson sent for Walter Lees, the young engineer of whom he had spoken to the directorate. Assigned to the task of unraveling the Darrow death mystery, Lees ran true to form by getting busy at once. This was at midnight of the day of the surprising directors' meeting. Lees owned a big car; he piled into it and started for the scene of the crime.

Daybreak found him examining every inch of the road around the Darrow estate. Then he searched the hedge along the east road, where the phantom auto had disappeared after the crime. The brush along the opposite side of the thoroughfare was also gone over.

Passing autos had stopped to ask the meaning of his flashlight. Lees explained he had lost a pocketbook. It was as good an excuse as any and served to keep him from drawing a crowd. He found nothing to reward his long and painstaking efforts.

At seven A. M. he decided to interview the Darrow widow, and found her already up and about her kitchen, weeping softly as she worked.

She bade him be seated in the living room.

"No, I am not afraid to stay here alone," she said in reply to Lees' first question. "Whoever killed my husband did so to get possession of his second model. They had already stolen the first. I have thought since that they were afraid that the finding of the second model after his death would aid in their detection. For

some reason they had to have both models."

She agreed to tell all she knew of the case. Lees listened to the long recital as already recorded at the coroner's inquest. By adroit questioning Lees gained just one new fact. Mrs. Darrow remembered that she had called her husband, just before he retired to his laboratory, to fix a towel hanger in the kitchen. "He found the pivot needed oiling," explained the widow. "That was all. He oiled it and went into the laboratory."

The idea of one of the world's greatest mechanical engineers stopping his work to oil a towel hanger caused Lees to smile, but Mrs. Darrow did not smile.

"My husband was a genius at repairing about the house," she said, in all seriousness.

"I can imagine so," agreed Lees.

The conversation ceased. Lees sat for a few minutes with his head in his hands, thinking deeply. Finally he said:

"I am convinced that someone who was well aware of your husband's habits committed this crime. Do you believe, positively, that the gardener is above suspicion?"

"Oh, it couldn't have been Peck," insisted Mrs. Darrow. "I had seen him down near the gate from the window. He was too far from the house, and besides, he was devoted to us both."

"Then it was somebody from the neighborhood," said Lees.

"Maybe so," replied Mrs. Darrow, noncommittally.

"Who lives in the next house south?"

"That is towards the city," mused the widow. "There are no houses south on either side of the road for a little further than a mile, when you reach the town limits of Farsdale. The town line is about half-way between, and marks the southern end of this estate."

"Who lives in the first house to the north?"

"That is the cottage of Peck, the gardener."

"How near is the next house?"

"That was the parcel my father sold. It is about three acres, and in the center, or about the center, is the house built by Adolph Jouret, who bought the land. He lives there with his daughter. They built a magnificent place. The brook that traverses our grounds rises at a spring back of his house. Save for two West Indian servants, they are alone. The servants live in Farsdale and motor back and forth."

"What do you know of this—what's his name?"
queried Lees, who had assumed the role of examiner.

"Jouret? Very little. He is some sort of a circus man or showman, or was before he retired. He once had wealth, but my husband, some weeks ago, said that because of ill-advised investments he was not so well rated as formerly. I had the feeling that he might be forced to give up the place. I just felt that. I never heard it. I am so sorry because of the daughter. She is a beautiful girl, and seemed kindly, the one time I saw

her. She was about twelve then. I do not like to say it, but she seemed a little dazed or slow witted, but really beautiful." Mrs. Darrow fell to smoothing out the folds in her house apron as Lees asked:

"When was the only time you saw her?"

"Ten years ago, about. Just after my father's death. They called on us. We did not care to continue the friendship, as Jouret seemed a little flamboyant—his circus nature, I suppose. Anyway, we were quiet folks, and there was no need of close association with neighbors.

"I remember," continued the widow, after a pause, "that Jouret, when he heard my husband was a scientist, simulated an interest in science. He did have a smattering knowledge of science, but he was plainly affected, so we decided to just let him drop. No ill-feeling. We just—well, we were not interested."

"You do not approve of circus people?"

"It is not that. Any honest work is honorable. It seems

commendable to furnish amusement for the public. I know little about people of his profession but I am sure they are perfectly all right. It was Jouret, personally. He seemed noisy and insincere. The girl was nice. I loved her."

"That is all you know of the Jourets?"

"That is all."

"Mrs. Darrow, I wish to go through this house from attic to basement. Have you any objections?"

"None whatever. Make yourself free, but do not attach any significance to what appears to be a secret passageway and cave. My father was a biological chemist. He used to experiment much with small animals. He had a cave where he stored chemicals, and I believe you will find old chemicals stored down there now. I disturbed nothing."

The widow forced a smile to her lips. "Will you excuse me?" she concluded. "I am trying to carry on."

Lees, carrying a flashlight, began a systematic search of the premises. He made his way up a winding staircase, through dust and cobwebs to the attic. He found the top story filled with trunks and bits of furniture of a previous generation. All was in order, but dust-covered and cobwebby.

"Someone has been here before me," he said to himself, brushing a mist of cobwebs from his coat sleeves. "There is a path brushed through the spiderwebs." Turning his flashlight on the floor, he exclaimed:

"And here are footprints in the dust. Well I'll be—!"

Then, after some study, he mused:

"Of course there has been someone here. The killer of Darrow probably has been here to see what he could see. It was no great task. The doors were never locked. The footprints are of no value except to give me the size of his shoes."

He measured the footprints carefully. Then he went

downstairs and phoned the measurements to a local shoe dealer, asking him to give him the trade size of shoes which would make such prints.

"They are number nines," decided the shoe dealer.

Lees then returned to resume his search in the rooms and corridors.

"Wonder if Jouret wears nines," he questioned himself. "But what if he does? I couldn't convict him on that score. However, it might help."

Then he fell to searching through the old trunks. He found old photographs, articles of apparel, knickknacks—grandmother's and grandfather's belongings all of them, and some children's clothes of the days when little boys wore ruffles about their necks and little girls' pantalettes reached to their ankles.

Carefully each article was replaced. He made his way down to the third and then the second floor. Through cobwebby corridors and bedchambers he searched, but found nothing further to aid his case.

In the unused rooms on the first floor he found an old spinning-wheel, candle moulds and utensils used in cooking in the days when housewives cooked over an open fire.

He did not find the "secret" passageway until Mrs. Darrow came to his aid. Leading from the basement was a coal chute. This shoot was formed in a triangle with the point under a trap. It was man-high at the cellar opening and its floor was a slide for fuel. It had been in use, evidently, quite recently.

At the cellar wall of this chute, Mrs. Darrow pressed what appeared to be a knot in the old timber and pushed open a door.

A dank odor issued forth as the door was opened. Lees entered the passage and Mrs. Darrow returned upstairs.

Following the underground passageway, Lees came onto a cave about 14 by 14 feet in size with a ceiling and walls of arched brick. It had evidently been built before the days of cement construction.

A long bench and shelves with carboys and jars of chemicals were the only furnishings. Lees sounded all the walls, but found nothing further to interest him.

Lees returned to town at the urgent call of "Old Perk," who had arranged with great care to keep the appointment at 50th street and Broadway, where the decoy package was to be left. He had snipers in nearby windows. He had detectives, dressed in the gay garb of the habitues of the neighborhood, patrolling the corner, and he and his own guard parked an automobile, against all traffic rule, at the curb near the rubbish can.

An office boy sauntered up to the rubbish can, threw in the decoy package, and sauntered away.

A second later there was a low humming sound. The decoy package fairly jumped out of the rubbish can and disappeared in thin air.

The humming sound seemed to round the corner into 50th Street. Detectives followed on the jump. The humming approached an auto at the curb and the

auto's self starter began to function. As the police stood near by, enough to have jumped into the auto, the whole machine, a big touring car, actually disappeared before their eyes.

Consternation is a mild word when used to describe the result.

All forces set to trap the extortionists gathered in a group, and in their surprise and disappointment began discussing the queer case in loud tones. A crowd was gathering which was blocking traffic.

"Old Perk" was the first to recover from his surprise.

"Get the hell out of this neighborhood," he yelled to his working forces. "All of you get down to my office!"

The working force dissolved and "Old Perk" drove away.

At "Old Perk's" office shortly afterward a conference of the defeated forces of the law and of science was held.

"Old Perk" stormed and raged and the detective captain in charge fumed and fussed, but nothing came of it all. One was as powerless as another. Finally the conference adjourned.

The next morning in the mail, Perkins Ferguson, president of Schefert Engineering Corporation, received a letter carefully printed in rubber type. It read:

Thanks for the \$50 bill. You cheated us by \$99,950. This will never do. Don't be like that. You poor fools, you make us increase our demand. We double it. Leave \$200,000 for us on your desk and leave the desk unlocked. We will get it. Every time you ignore one of our demands, one of your number will die. Better take this matter seriously. Last warning.

Invisible Death.

"Not another dime will they get out of me," mused Ferguson.

He started opening the rest of his mail.

A clerk entered and handed him a telegram. It read:

"Damon Farnsworth struck down at breakfast table. Family heard humming sound as he fell from his chair. Removed to Medical Center. Skull reported fractured. May die.

"William Devins, Chief of Police, Larchmont."

Ferguson wildly seized the telephone. "Get me Farnsworth's house at Larchmont!" he shouted to his operator.

The phone was answered by Jones, the butler.

"This is Ferguson."

An agitated voice replied:

"Ow sir, yes sir. It's true, sir. 'E was bleeding at the 'ead, sir. Something 'it 'im."

"Let me talk to Mrs. Farnsworth."

"They are at the 'ospital, sir."

"One of the boys."

"Both are at the 'ospital, sir."

"Do you think he will live?"

"An' 'ow could I say, sir?"

Ferguson called the Medical Center. They permitted him to talk to a doctor and a nurse. The nurse referred him to the doctor, who said:

"He is unconscious. There is a wicked fracture at the base of the brain. He was struck from the back—a club, I believe. He may die without regaining consciousness. I am hoping he will rally and that he will be all right."

Ferguson ordered his car and, with Lees at his heels, jumped in the tonneau. He heard a humming sound back of him. He looked back and saw nothing. Both he and Lees were too impressed for words.

"Step on it," Ferguson ordered the chauffeur. "Drive us to the Medical Center."

At the world's largest group of hospitals, Ferguson's worst fears were confirmed. The patient was reported sinking.

Ferguson, giant of Wall Street, was a low spirited man as he drove back down town to his office. With Lees he passed through the outer offices, buzzing with business and the click of typewriters. Not a head was raised from a desk or machine. It was a well-drilled force.

Into his private sanctum he walked or rather dragged himself, and wearily he sat down. He pushed a pile of papers from him and ran his hand over his hot brow.

Blood pounded at his temples.

For the first time in his life he faced a situation which was too deep for his understanding.

Over and over again he reviewed the uncanny events

as Lees sat awaiting orders.

"I cannot have them killing off my friends like that," he mused finally.

He called a clerk.

"Go to the bank and get \$200,000 in fifties and one hundreds," he commanded.

When the clerk returned with the money he laid the package on his desk and left the desk open. "This might appear cowardly, but it will give us time," he said. Lees did not offer an opinion.

Ferguson drew a personal note for \$200,000 and sent it to the Schefert Corporation's attorneys. This amount represented a large part of Ferguson's personal assets, not involved with any company with which he was connected. He told Lees to go about his further investigations. Then he left the office and started for his home. "I'll bank my life Lees will have those crooks lined up within a week," he assured himself as he lolled in his auto, bound homeward. But

his voice sounded hollow, and the blood still pounded at his temples.

Reaching home, he found a call from the western plant, at Chicago. He phoned the superintendent with a foreboding that all was not well.

"This you, Perk?" sounded the voice on the wire.

"Yes, what's up?"

"I had not intended bothering you with this, but in the light of all that has happened I guess you had better know that one of our engineers went stark mad out here about three weeks ago. He was a very brainy man but his reason snapped. He first appeared queer when he began talking of anarchy and cursing capitalists. Then one afternoon he struck a shop foreman down with a heavy wrench and rushed out of the plant. We have not seen him since. The police have been looking for him, but he is still at large."

"That explains a lot of things," said "Old Perk." "Tell the police to keep after him. We'll look for him here."

File me a complete detailed report of the incident by telegraph," he instructed. Then he asked:

"How is the foreman? Badly hurt?"

"He dodged; it was a glancing blow. The foreman was back to work in a week. But he is nervous and has armed himself. We have put on extra guards."

"Good," commended Ferguson. "Don't hesitate to spend tolls to keep me advised of any developments."

An hour and a half later, Ferguson phoned the chief clerk in his offices:

"Go into my private office," he ordered, "and see if there is a package on my desk. It is a bank package."

The clerk returned in a few moments.

"There is no package on your desk, Mr. Ferguson."

"That is all I wanted to know," said Ferguson, and hung up the receiver.

Then Ferguson called up the Darrow home and tried to get in touch with Lees, but was unable to do so, as Mrs. Darrow said she had not seen him since he had been called back to the office.

The reason Ferguson could not reach Lees was because Lees had decided to learn once and for all if Jouret wore number nine shoes. He had started for Jouret's in his own car. It was a beautiful country he was traversing, but he had no time to note that the tree branches almost met over his head and that his way was bordered with a profusion of wild flowers, displaying a rainbow of colors.

The house of Jouret, the retired circus performer, sat back far from the road, against the side of a beautiful hill, and was surrounded by poplars. The landscape was wilder and more natural than that of the Darrow place adjoining.

The door was opened by a Porto Rican boy. Lees lost no time. He said bluntly:

"Tell your master that a gentleman is here to see him

on very particular business."

Jouret, himself, came back with the boy.

"What is it?" he asked, smiling a welcome.

"I am working on the case of the death of Mr. Darrow, your neighbor. I believed you might have seen something. I thought you might aid me."

Jouret betrayed no surprise.

"Come in," he said. He led the way to a large reception room and asked his visitor to be seated. He was the soul of affability. Short, husky and florid. His eyes large, black and staring. His hair black, quite long and curling upward at the ears. He was dressed in black, and he had the appearance of a big, fat crow.

"I am glad you came," he greeted his guest, "for I have far too few callers." He switched on a big electric bunch-light in the center of the room, for it was dusk.

"We have been told that you are a retired circus man," said Lees, in his usual frank manner.

"Not exactly," said Jouret. "I traveled on the continent, finally journeying to Australia and then to the States. I crossed the country from San Francisco and settled down here. I was known as 'Elias, the Great.' I had my own company and property. It was a magic show. It was not a circus, although we did carry two elephants, three camels, some ponies, snakes, and birds and smaller animals. That's where the circus report came from.

"When I retired I sold my stock to a circus. The newspapers regarded it as funny, and one of them printed a half page story with pictures about the public sale. It was very much exaggerated. They mentioned giraffes, hyenas, and a lot of other animals I never possessed. Odd, wasn't it, getting so much publicity after I was through needing it? However I never, in those days, dodged the limelight." Jouret ended his speech with a loud and hearty guffaw.

"I will call my daughter," Jouret appended. "She will

be glad to meet you." He left the room.

Lees had taken occasion to note the size of Jouret's feet. They were small, almost effeminate. More likely fives or sixes than nines.

Soon Jouret returned with a girl in her early twenties. She was blond and radiantly beautiful.

Doris Jouret bowed and smiled in a perfectly friendly manner. Lees noted that there was something about her eyes that made her appear dazed.

Jouret monopolized the conversation, giving no one a chance to edge in a word.

"This gentleman desires information in connection with the death of our neighbor Mr., or is it Dr., Darrow? I want you to assure him, as I will, that we have seen or noted nothing that could possibly throw light on the strange case."

The girl nodded, it seemed a little wearily, and Jouret was off on another conversational flight:

"I too am a man of scientific attainments," he chattered. "I am a biologist, toxicologist, doctor of medicine, a geologist, metallurgist, mineralogist, and somewhat of a mechanic and electrician. I have given long hours to the study of strange sciences in metaphysics, to which you men give too little attention. There are sciences which transcend any of this sphere. There is a higher astronomy. I neglected to say that I am an astronomer."

"Yes?" drawled Lees.

"Yes!" said Jouret emphatically.

The girl had adopted rather a theatrical pose, which disclosed considerable of her nether charms, and said nothing at all.

"When you find your man," volunteered Jouret, "you will find a madman." He said this ponderously and with a gesture meant evidently to be impressive.

"You believe a madman did it?" asked Lees, as Jouret paused, expecting a question.

"Undoubtedly. It was a paranoic with delusions of money, grandeur and a strongly developed homicidal mania. To me, that is the only sensible solution. I am quite sure that I am correct."

Lees arose to go and Jouret did not urge him to stay. He bowed Lees out and Doris bowed with him.

"She is a beautiful girl," mused Lees once he was outside.

Lees ran over in his mind the circumstances of his visit to Jouret. There was no doubt in his mind that Jouret's shoes were too small to be number nines, and he reasoned that that fact might tend to eliminate Jouret. But he was not satisfied.

"I am going to get some gas," he told himself, "and then I am going to get two private detectives to assist me, for I'm going right back there. For the first time in my life I am going to be a Peeping Tom."

"There is no moon. The poplars will give us a view of all three floors of that house, if they leave their blinds

up enough, and three of us can watch all three floors at once."

He phoned Ferguson that he might be busy for days, joined his pair of operatives from the detective agency and for some time the three operated on a well conceived plan.

It was probably a week later that Lees rendered a report to Perkins Ferguson, which for a time proved one of the strangest documents in the weird case. It read:

"You will probably think I am crazy, and for this reason I am having this report subscribed and sworn to, jointly and severally. With my two detectives I have seen Miss Jouret, the girl I told you about over the phone, in three places at one and the same time. Not once but twice this has happened.

"Looking through the windows of the Jouret place at night, we saw the girl on the first, second and third floor of the house. We believed this due to a clever arrangement of mirrors. But figure this out:

"The next day she drove a car to town. We followed. She got out at one theater and entered. She did not come back, that we could see, but the car drove off. There was no chauffeur, and we thought we had discovered the driverless auto, until we looked and saw Miss Jouret still at the wheel.

"She got out and entered another theater. She did not come back, but the car drove off with her still at the wheel. She entered a third theater after parking the car and this time the driver's seat and the tonneau was empty.

"Reverse the reel and you will see her coming out of three theaters and driving home. That is what happened. There must be three of her, all identical, but only one shows at a time. If it's some of Jouret's far-famed magic, I'll say he's some conjurer. The explanation is not yet forthcoming. We want to shadow Jouret, but he never goes anywhere. The girl has only been out the one time when she attended three matinees as described. Believe it or not.

"The next night we each—the two detectives and I—

tried to steal a march on one another and called her up and asked her to go out. To our individual surprise, she agreed in each case. To our collective surprise, she kept all three dates on the same night. She walked through the trees in this vicinity with me. She also drove down the road in the auto with one of my detectives, and she went dancing with the other. She was in three places miles apart at one and the same time.

"We each brought her home within a half hour of the other and we are swearing to that. Either we are all hypnotized or else there are three identical Misses Jouret.

"Jouret himself treats us all wonderfully, gives us the run of the house, and tries to talk us to death."

The strange document was subscribed by Lees and the two detectives and was held by Ferguson pending developments.

The next report from Lees read:

"I had a chance to prowl around the Jouret house a little while waiting for Miss Jouret to dress. I met her twice in my ramblings and a few minutes later she met me again, this time in a different costume.

"I got a chance to search the woods back of Jouret's house in the evening. I found a spot where the earth had been disturbed, and dug up a pair of shoes. They were number nines."

A fourth report from him read:

"We found the body of the crazed engineer. He had drowned himself in a lake. This eliminates him as a murder suspect."

Two weeks passed with no new developments in the "Invisible Death" case except for the arrival of a letter demanding \$1,000,000 and threatening the life of Perkins Ferguson if the demand was ignored. It was ignored, and only served to spur Lees and his detectives on to decisive action.

They decided to rush the Jouret house and kidnap

Jouret with the idea of holding him until he agreed to explain the presence of the number nine shoes buried back of his house.

A low moon hung over the poplars when Lees rang the Jouret front door bell. One detective was guarding a side door and the other a back door.

Suddenly Jouret was seen to jump from a second-story window. As he did, a car driven by one of his Porto Ricans came along the drive and he leaped into it. Lees, first to see Jouret, called his detectives. They came running. Their car was waiting in the road.

The Porto Rican was seen to jump from the Jouret car just as it started south towards New York.

Lees took up the race. Both cars had plenty of power, but the Jouret car suddenly disappeared as a low humming noise began to break the stillness of the night.

One of the detectives was at the wheel. Lees, as usual, was giving orders:

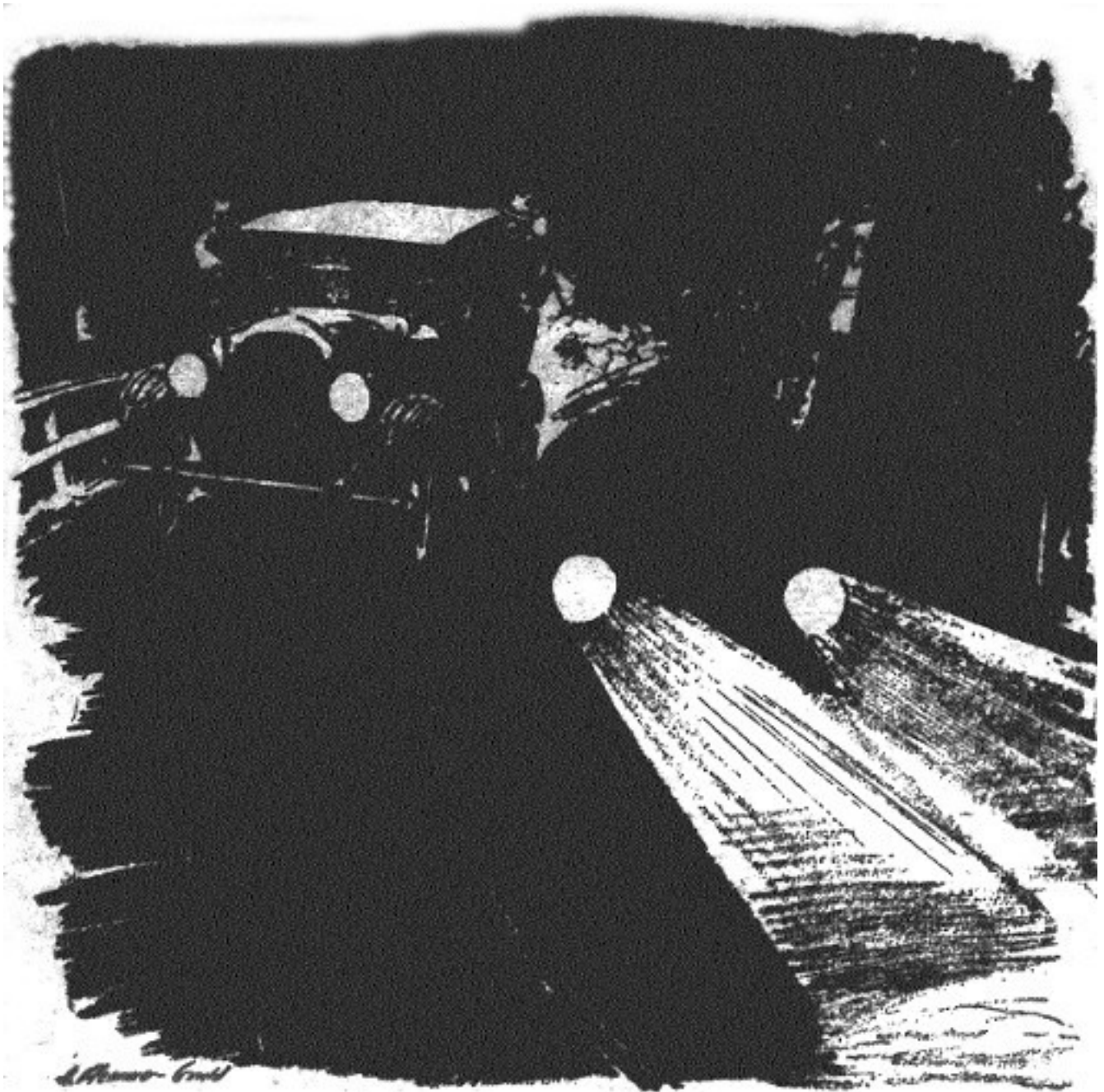
"Keep close to that hum. Never mind that you cannot *see* the car. It is there all right. If you can gain on it enough, drive right into it."

"Righto!" shouted the detective. "We're wise to him now."

The humming noise was taking on speed with every second. So was Lees' car. Soon Lees' car was making sixty miles an hour with the hum just ahead and barely audible.

Past traffic lights, over bridges and grade crossings the mad chase of the phantom continued.

Wildly racing through the night, missing other cars by a breath, the big, visible auto continued its pursuit of —what?



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing the headlights of an invisible car cutting through the darkness, pursued by another car with light reflecting off the roof and corners. Image description end.]

Careening, Lees' car rounded a curve, and, above the hum just ahead, they heard the shouted curses of their quarry. But he could not be seen. Lees could only see the road marked by his lights.

Mile after mile the wild, uncanny chase of the phantom continued.

Soon the lights of New York could be seen in the distance. The cars were forced to slow down somewhat. Suddenly there was a thundering crash ahead. A car was twisted in a mass of tangled wreckage.

Feminine and masculine shrieks blended as Lees' car piled up on the wrecked heap. A third car, becoming suddenly visible, rolled over and brought up at the edge of the road. From this car emerged the limping, cursing form of Jouret.

From the wreckage three painfully injured young men dragged and tore themselves. Then they leaped—ignoring their hurts—at the limping figure.

The fight was on. Jouret was heavy and powerful and proved an obstinate fighter, for he knew he was fighting for his life. He bit and clawed. He kicked with one uninjured leg and butted with his massive head.

Lees and his detectives were fighting with no respect for the rules. Lees managed to get his two hands on the bull-neck of Jouret just as one detective connected a duet of blows to the man's wind.

Lees' hands closed in a steely grip, and soon Jouret was limp and helpless.

They held him there. An ambulance arrived. A few minutes later a police auto with reserves came on the scene. The police shackled Jouret.

The car that had been hit by the phantom was a light sedan. It was occupied by two women. Their bodies were drawn from the wreckage. Both were dead—innocents sacrificed to the blood madness of a maniac.

Jouret was right about himself. He was a paranoid

with a strongly developed homicidal mania.

In the wreckage was found a package containing \$200,000 and also two twisted and broken mechanisms. One of these was about the size of an ordinary kitchen coffee-mill, and the other slightly larger.

Regarding these machines, Lees wrote in a report:

"While making a fourth search of Darrow's laboratory, I found the equations, specifications and what I believe to be the full plans for the last invention of the ingenious Darius Darrow.

"Many of the most astounding inventions and discoveries have resulted from theories which were laughed to scorn at the time they were advanced. Roebling's plans for the Brooklyn Bridge resulted in a meeting of the foremost engineers of the day. All agreed that the plans were built on a false premise. They argued that the bridge would fall of its own weight. Then they all had a good laugh. The bridge still stands.

"Watching smoke float over a hill from army camp fires caused an early French scientist to dream of filling a bag full of smoke and riding with it over the hill. The first balloon was the answer to this dream.

"James Watt is said to have gotten his idea for a steam engine from watching a lid on a tea-kettle dance under steam pressure.

"When Langley was flying his man-carrying kites the Wright brothers dreamed of hitching an engine and a propeller to a giant kite. The airplane was the result of these experiments.

"Darrow got his idea from watching a rapidly revolving wheel. He noticed that the spokes and rim blended into a blurred disc when a certain speed was reached. The entire wheel was practically invisible, under certain lighting conditions, when a higher speed was attained.

"Darrow went further and reached the conclusion that there was a rate of vibration that would produce invisibility. This was accepted in practically all

engineering research plants, long before it was perfected by Darrow.

"The facts are that any rapidly vibrating object becomes more and more difficult to outline as its rate of vibration increases. All that was left for Darrow was to arrive at the exact mathematical time, tone, or rate of vibration producing invisibility and to construct a vibrator tuned to produce this condition.

"His first machine produced the vibrations of invisibility in a field with a three-foot radius in all directions. That is, it caused every solid object, within this atmospheric field, to vibrate at the rate, tone, or speed of invisibility. This machine was in no sense rotary. It departed from the original example of a revolving wheel and entered instead into general vibration in a given or measured field.

"The pulsations or vibrations of an ordinary automobile engine will cause every ounce of metal, or solid, in the automobile—including the driver—to vibrate at the same rate or momentum. This is a known fact, and it provided the basis for Darrow's

experiments.

"Darrow built two machines. The first had a field with a radius of three feet on all sides. This was used by the killer in his murders. Jouret stole this machine first, thus paving his way for the second robbery.

"With the first machine in his possession, Jouret was able to commit the Darrow murder without being seen. He had to have the second and larger machine, however, to make his auto disappear. He stole the larger machine at the time of the Darrow murder, and with it he had his auto vanish, as the gardener testified.

"Both machines were hopelessly smashed in the wreck, but with Darrow's documents at hand, we might be able to construct another and a larger model. A machine built on the proper scale will make a plane or a battleship invisible and should, as Darrow said, make war against this country impossible.

"Digging into Jouret's history we found that the

'Misses Jouret' were one-cell triplets. Their mother, Mrs. Doris Nettleton, an English woman, was a member of Jouret's troupe, as was the father.

"The mother died at the birth of the triplets. The father died a few years later. The company was touring Australia at the time. Jouret and the father had the birth of only one baby recorded. She was named Doris, after the mother. The other girls also used this one name. They now have only one name among them until the court gives them individual names.

"Jouret never let but one girl be seen at a time. The reason was that he and the father had planned to use the girls, when grown, to create a surprising stage illusion. In this illusion, one girl was to act as the earthly body and the other girls as the astral bodies of the same purported individual.

"The father died, and Jouret retired before he ever got around to staging the illusion. Jouret continued the deception, however, because it appealed to his showman's nature.

"The girls, at all times, were under the hypnotic control of Jouret, and, of course, knew nothing of his crazed intellect or crimes. Upon his arrest Jouret released the girls from the spell of years.

"The Misses Nettleton say that Jouret was always kind to them and was an ethical showman until his mind gave way.

"I told the triplets that I might find them employment with our concern, but they prefer to follow in the footsteps of their mother and father, and return to the stage."

Ferguson, quite his normal self once more, since Farnsworth was recovering slowly, twitted Lees about being in love with one of the triplets. Lees admitted they were most gorgeous blondes, but insisted he preferred one brunette.

"Then another thing," added Lees. "Any man who falls in love with one of the Nettleton triplets will never be sure just which one he fell in love with."

February 1930

#08 Old Crompton's Secret, by Harold Vincent Schoepflin:

Tom's extraordinary machine glowed—and the years were banished from old crompton's body. But there still remained, deep-seated in his century-old mind, the memory of his crime.

Aproximate word count: 7,800

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Two miles west of the village of Laketon there lived an aged recluse who was known only as Old Crompton. As far back as the villagers could remember he had visited the town regularly twice a month, each time tottering his lonely way homeward with a load of provisions. He appeared to be well

supplied with funds, but purchased sparingly as became a miserly hermit. And so vicious was his tongue that few cared to converse with him, even the young hoodlums of the town hesitating to harass him with the banter usually accorded the other bizarre characters of the streets.

The oldest inhabitants knew nothing of his past history, and they had long since lost their curiosity in the matter. He was a fixture, as was the old town hall with its surrounding park. His lonely cabin was shunned by all who chanced to pass along the old dirt road that led through the woods to nowhere and was rarely used.

His only extravagance was in the matter of books, and the village book store profited considerably by his purchases. But, at the instigation of Cass Harmon, the bookseller, it was whispered about that Old Crompton was a believer in the black art—that he had made a pact with the devil himself and was leagued with him and his imps. For the books he bought were strange ones; ancient volumes that Cass must needs order from New York or Chicago and that cost as much as

ten and even fifteen dollars a copy; translations of the writings of the alchemists and astrologers and philosophers of the dark ages.

It was no wonder Old Crompton was looked at askance by the simple-living and deeply religious natives of the small Pennsylvania town.

But there came a day when the hermit was to have a neighbor, and the town buzzed with excited speculation as to what would happen.

he property across the road from Old Crompton's hut belonged to Alton Forsythe, Laketon's wealthiest resident—hundreds of acres of scrubby woodland that he considered well nigh worthless. But Tom Forsythe, the only son, had returned from college and his ambitions were of a nature strange to his townspeople and utterly incomprehensible to his father. Something vague about biology and chemical experiments and the like is what he spoke of, and, when his parents objected on the grounds of possible explosions and other weird accidents, he prevailed upon his father to have a secluded laboratory built for

him in the woods.

When the workmen started the small frame structure not a quarter of a mile from his own hut, Old Crompton was furious. He raged and stormed, but to no avail. Tom Forsythe had his heart set on the project and he was somewhat of a successful debater himself. The fire that flashed from his cold gray eyes matched that from the pale blue ones of the elderly anchorite. And the law was on his side.

So the building was completed and Tom Forsythe moved in, bag and baggage.

For more than a year the hermit studiously avoided his neighbor, though, truth to tell, this required very little effort. For Tom Forsythe became almost as much of a recluse as his predecessor, remaining indoors for days at a time and visiting the home of his people scarcely oftener than Old Crompton visited the village. He too became the target of village gossip and his name was ere long linked with that of the old man in similar animadversion. But he cared naught for the opinions of his townspeople nor for the dark

looks of suspicion that greeted him on his rare appearances in the public places. His chosen work engrossed him so deeply that all else counted for nothing. His parents remonstrated with him in vain. Tom laughed away their recriminations and fears, continuing with his labors more strenuously than ever. He never troubled his mind over the nearness of Old Crompton's hut, the existence of which he hardly noticed or considered.

It so happened one day that the old man's curiosity got the better of him and Tom caught him prowling about on his property, peering wonderingly at the many rabbit hutches, chicken coops, dove cotes and the like which cluttered the space to the rear of the laboratory.

Seeing that he was discovered, the old man wrinkled his face into a toothless grin of conciliation.

"Just looking over your place, Forsythe," he said.

"Sorry about the fuss I made when you built the house. But I'm an old man, you know, and changes are unwelcome. Now I have forgotten my objections and

would like to be friends. Can we?"

Tom peered searchingly into the flinty eyes that were set so deeply in the wrinkled, leathery countenance. He suspected an ulterior motive, but could not find it within him to turn the old fellow down.

"Why—I guess so, Crompton," he hesitated: "I have nothing against you, but I came here for seclusion and I'll not have anyone bothering me in my work."

"I'll not bother you, young man. But I'm fond of pets and I see you have many of them here; guinea pigs, chickens, pigeons, and rabbits. Would you mind if I make friends with some of them?"

"They're not pets," answered Tom dryly, "they are material for use in my experiments. But you may amuse yourself with them if you wish."

"You mean that you cut them up—kill them, perhaps?"

"Not that. But I sometimes change them in physical form, sometimes cause them to become of huge size,

sometimes produce pigmy offspring of normal animals."

"Don't they suffer?"

"Very seldom, though occasionally a subject dies. But the benefit that will accrue to mankind is well worth the slight inconvenience to the dumb creatures and the infrequent loss of their lives."

Old Crompton regarded him dubiously. "You are trying to find?" he interrogated.

"The secret of life!" Tom Forsythe's eyes took on the stare of fanaticism. "Before I have finished I shall know the nature of the vital force—how to produce it. I shall prolong human life indefinitely; create artificial life. And the solution is more closely approached with each passing day."

The hermit blinked in pretended mystification. But he understood perfectly, and he bitterly envied the younger man's knowledge and ability that enabled him to delve into the mysteries of nature which had

always been so attractive to his own mind. And somehow, he acquired a sudden deep hatred of the coolly confident young man who spoke so positively of accomplishing the impossible.

During the winter months that followed, the strange acquaintance progressed but little. Tom did not invite his neighbor to visit him, nor did Old Crompton go out of his way to impose his presence on the younger man, though each spoke pleasantly enough to the other on the few occasions when they happened to meet.

With the coming of spring they encountered one another more frequently, and Tom found considerable of interest in the quaint, borrowed philosophy of the gloomy old man. Old Crompton, of course, was desperately interested in the things that were hidden in Tom's laboratory, but he never requested permission to see them. He hid his real feelings extremely well and was apparently content to spend as much time as possible with the feathered and furred subjects for experiment, being very careful not to incur Tom's displeasure by displaying too great

interest in the laboratory itself.

Then there came a day in early summer when an accident served to draw the two men closer together, and Old Crompton's long-sought opportunity followed.

He was starting for the village when, from down the road, there came a series of tremendous squawkings, then a bellow of dismay in the voice of his young neighbor. He turned quickly and was astonished at the sight of a monstrous rooster which had escaped and was headed straight for him with head down and wings fluttering wildly. Tom followed close behind, but was unable to catch the darting monster. And monster it was, for this rooster stood no less than three feet in height and appeared more ferocious than a large turkey. Old Crompton had his shopping bag, a large one of burlap which he always carried to town, and he summoned enough courage to throw it over the head of the screeching, over-sized fowl. So tangled did the panic-stricken bird become that it was a comparatively simple matter to effect his capture, and the old man rose to his feet triumphant with the bag securely closed over the struggling captive.

"Thanks," panted Tom, when he drew alongside. "I should never have caught him, and his appearance at large might have caused me a great deal of trouble—now of all times."

"It's all right, Forsythe," smirked the old man. "Glad I was able to do it."

Secretly he gloated, for he knew this occurrence would be an open sesame to that laboratory of Tom's. And it proved to be just that.

A few nights later he was awakened by a vigorous thumping at his door, something that had never before occurred during his nearly sixty years occupancy of the tumbledown hut. The moon was high and he cautiously peeped from the window and saw that his late visitor was none other than young Forsythe.

"With you in a minute!" he shouted, hastily thrusting his rheumatic old limbs into his shabby trousers.

"Now to see the inside of that laboratory," he chuckled to himself.

It required but a moment to attire himself in the scanty raiment he wore during the warm months, but he could hear Tom muttering and impatiently pacing the flagstones before his door.

"What is it?" he asked, as he drew the bolt and emerged into the brilliant light of the moon.

"Success!" breathed Tom excitedly. "I have produced growing, living matter synthetically. More than this, I have learned the secret of the vital force—the spark of life. Immortality is within easy reach. Come and see for yourself."

They quickly traversed the short distance to the two-story building which comprised Tom's workshop and living quarters. The entire ground floor was taken up by the laboratory, and Old Crompton stared aghast at the wealth of equipment it contained. Furnaces there were, and retorts that reminded him of those pictured in the wood cuts in some of his musty books. Then there were complicated machines with many levers and dials mounted on their faces, and with huge glass bulbs of peculiar shape with coils of wire connecting

to knoblike protuberances of their transparent walls. In the exact center of the great single room there was what appeared to be a dissecting table, with a brilliant light overhead and with two of the odd glass bulbs at either end. It was to this table that Tom led the excited old man.

"This is my perfected apparatus," said Tom proudly, "and by its use I intend to create a new race of supermen, men and women who will always retain the vigor and strength of their youth and who can not die excepting by actual destruction of their bodies. Under the influence of the rays all bodily ailments vanish as if by magic, and organic defects are quickly corrected. Watch this now."

He stepped to one of the many cages at the side of the room and returned with a wriggling cottontail in his hands. Old Compton watched anxiously as he picked a nicked instrument from a tray of surgical appliances and requested his visitor to hold the protesting animal while he covered its head with a handkerchief.

"Ethyl chloride," explained Tom, noting with amusement the look of distaste on the old man's face. "We'll just put him to sleep for a minute while I amputate a leg."

The struggles of the rabbit quickly ceased when the spray soaked the handkerchief and the anaesthetic took effect. With a shining scalpel and a surgical saw, Tom speedily removed one of the forelegs of the animal and then he placed the limp body in the center of the table, removing the handkerchief from its head as he did so. At the end of the table there was a panel with its glittering array of switches and electrical instruments, and Old Crompton observed very closely the manipulations of the controls as Tom started the mechanism. With the ensuing hum of a motor-generator from a corner of the room, the four bulbs adjacent to the table sprang into life, each glowing with a different color and each emitting a different vibratory note as it responded to the energy within.

"Keep an eye on Mr. Rabbit now," admonished Tom.

From the body of the small animal there emanated an

intangible though hazily visible aura as the combined effects of the rays grew in intensity. Old Crompton bent over the table and peered amazedly at the stump of the foreleg, from which blood no longer dripped. The stump was healing over! Yes—it seemed to elongate as one watched. A new limb was growing on to replace the old! Then the animal struggled once more, this time to regain consciousness. In a moment it was fully awake and, with a frightened hop, was off the table and hobbling about in search of a hiding place.

Tom Forsythe laughed. "Never knew what happened," he exulted, "and excepting for the temporary limp is not inconvenienced at all. Even that will be gone in a couple of hours, for the new limb will be completely grown by that time."

"But—but, Tom," stammered the old man, "this is wonderful. How do you accomplish it?"

"Ha! Don't think I'll reveal my secret. But this much I will tell you: the life force generated by my apparatus stimulates a certain gland that's normally inactive in

warm blooded animals. This gland, when active, possesses the function of growing new members to the body to replace lost ones in much the same manner as this is done in case of the lobster and certain other crustaceans. Of course, the process is extremely rapid when the gland is stimulated by the vital rays from my tubes. But this is only one of the many wonders of the process. Here is something far more remarkable."

He took from a large glass jar the body of a guinea pig, a body that was rigid in death.

"This guinea pig," he explained, "was suffocated twenty-four hours ago and is stone dead."

"Suffocated?"

"Yes. But quite painlessly, I assure you. I merely removed the air from the jar with a vacuum pump and the little creature passed out of the picture very quickly. Now we'll revive it."

Old Crompton stretched forth a skinny hand to touch

the dead animal, but withdrew it hastily when he felt the clammy rigidity of the body. There was no doubt as to the lifelessness of this specimen.

Tom placed the dead guinea pig on the spot where the rabbit had been subjected to the action of the rays. Again his visitor watched carefully as he manipulated the controls of the apparatus.

With the glow of the tubes and the ensuing haze of eery light that surrounded the little body, a marked change was apparent. The inanimate form relaxed suddenly and it seemed that the muscles pulsed with an accession of energy. Then one leg was stretched forth spasmodically. There was a convulsive heave as the lungs drew in a first long breath, and, with that, an astonished and very much alive rodent scrambled to its feet, blinking wondering eyes in the dazzling light.

"See? See?" shouted Tom, grasping Old Crompton by the arm in a viselike grip. "It is the secret of life and death! Aristocrats, plutocrats and beggars will beat a path to my door. But, never fear, I shall choose my

subjects well. The name of Thomas Forsythe will yet be emblazoned in the Hall of Fame. I shall be master of the world!"

Old Crompton began to fear the glitter in the eyes of the gaunt young man who seemed suddenly to have become demented. And his envy and hatred of his talented host blazed anew as Forsythe gloried in the success of his efforts. Then he was struck with an idea and he affected his most ingratiating manner.

"It is a marvelous thing, Tom," he said, "and is entirely beyond my poor comprehension. But I can see that it is all you say and more. Tell me—can you restore the youth of an aged person by these means?"

"Positively!" Tom did not catch the eager note in the old man's voice. Rather he took the question as an inquiry into the further marvels of his process.

"Here," he continued, enthusiastically, "I'll prove that to you also. My dog Spot is around the place somewhere. And he is a decrepit old hound, blind, lame and toothless. You've probably seen him with me."

He rushed to the stairs and whistled. There was an answering yelp from above and the pad of uncertain paws on the bare wooden steps. A dejected old beagle blundered into the room, dragging a crippled hind leg as he fawned upon his master, who stretched forth a hand to pat the unsteady head.

"Guess Spot is old enough for the test," laughed Tom, "and I have been meaning to restore him to his youthful vigor, anyway. No time like the present."

He led his trembling pet to the table of the remarkable tubes and lifted him to its surface. The poor old beast lay trustingly where he was placed, quiet, save for his husky asthmatic breathing.

"Hold him, Crompton," directed Tom as he pulled the starting lever of his apparatus.

And Old Crompton watched in fascinated anticipation as the ethereal luminosity bathed the dog's body in response to the action of the four rays. Somewhat vaguely it came to him that the baggy flesh of his own wrinkled hands took on a new firmness and color

where they reposed on the animal's back. Young Forsythe grinned triumphantly as Spot's breathing became more regular and the rasp gradually left it. Then the dog whined in pleasure and wagged his tail with increasing vigor. Suddenly he raised his head, perked his ears in astonishment and looked his master straight in the face with eyes that saw once more. The low throat cry rose to a full and joyous bark. He sprang to his feet from under the restraining hands and jumped to the floor in a lithe-muscled leap that carried him half way across the room. He capered about with the abandon of a puppy, making extremely active use of four sound limbs.

"Why—why, Forsythe," stammered the hermit, "it's absolutely incredible. Tell me—tell me—what is this remarkable force?"

His host laughed gleefully. "You probably wouldn't understand it anyway, but I'll tell you. It is as simple as the nose on your face. The spark of life, the vital force, is merely an extremely complicated electrical manifestation which I have been able to duplicate artificially. This spark or force is all that distinguishes

living from inanimate matter, and in living beings the force gradually decreases in power as the years pass, causing loss of health and strength. The chemical composition of bones and tissue alters, joints become stiff, muscles atrophied, and bones brittle. By recharging, as it were, with the vital force, the gland action is intensified, youth and strength is renewed. By repeating the process every ten or fifteen years the same degree of vigor can be maintained indefinitely. Mankind will become immortal. That is why I say I am to be master of the world."

For the moment Old Crompton forgot his jealous hatred in the enthusiasm with which he was imbued. "Tom—Tom," he pleaded in his excitement, "use me as a subject. Renew my youth. My life has been a sad one and a lonely one, but I would that I might live it over. I should make of it a far different one—something worth while. See, I am ready."

He sat on the edge of the gleaming table and made as if to lie down on its gleaming surface. But his young host only stared at him in open amusement.

"What? You?" he sneered, unfeelingly. "Why, you old fossil! I told you I would choose my subjects carefully. They are to be people of standing and wealth, who can contribute to the fame and fortune of one Thomas Forsythe."

"But Tom, I have money," Old Crompton begged. But when he saw the hard mirth in the younger man's eyes, his old animosity flamed anew and he sprang from his position and shook a skinny forefinger in Tom's face.

"Don't do that to me, you old fool!" shouted Tom, "and get out of here. Think I'd waste current on an old cadger like you? I guess not! Now get out. Get out, I say!"

Then the old anchorite saw red. Something seemed to snap in his soured old brain. He found himself kicking and biting and punching at his host, who backed away from the furious onslaught in surprise. Then Tom tripped over a wire and fell to the floor with a force that rattled the windows, his ferocious little adversary on top. The younger man lay still where he had fallen,

a trickle of blood showing at his temple.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing Old Crompton with his hands around Tom's neck and Tom falls over backwards, as they stand in a dark, crowded lab. End image description.]

"My God! I've killed him!" gasped the old man.

With trembling fingers he opened Tom's shirt and listened for his heartbeats. Panic-stricken, he rubbed the young man's wrists, slapped his cheeks, and ran

for water to dash in his face. But all efforts to revive him proved futile, and then, in awful fear, Old Crompton dashed into the night, the dog Spot snapping at his heels as he ran.

Hours later the stooped figure of a shabby old man might have been seen stealthily re-entering the lonely workshop where the lights still burned brightly. Tom Forsythe lay rigid in the position in which Old Crompton had left him, and the dog growled menacingly.

Averting his gaze and circling wide of the body, Old Crompton made for the table of the marvelous rays. In minute detail he recalled every move made by Tom in starting and adjusting the apparatus to produce the incredible results he had witnessed. Not a moment was to be wasted now. Already he had hesitated too long, for soon would come the dawn and possible discovery of his crime. But the invention of his victim would save him from the long arm of the law, for, with youth restored, Old Crompton would cease to exist and a new life would open its doors to the starved soul of the hermit. Hermit, indeed! He would begin

life anew, an active man with youthful vigor and ambition. Under an assumed name he would travel abroad, would enjoy life, and would later become a successful man of affairs. He had enough money, he told himself. And the police would never find Old Crompton, the murderer of Tom Forsythe! He deposited his small traveling bag on the floor and fingered the controls of Tom's apparatus.

He threw the starting switch confidently and grinned in satisfaction as the answering whine of the motor-generator came to his ears. One by one he carefully made the adjustments in exactly the manner followed by the now silenced discoverer of the process.

Everything operated precisely as it had during the preceding experiments. Odd that he should have anticipated some such necessity! But something had told him to observe Tom's movements carefully, and now he rejoiced in the fact that his intuition had led him aright. Painfully he climbed to the table top and stretched his aching body in the warm light of the four huge tubes. His exertions during the struggle with Tom were beginning to tell on him. But the

soreness and stiffness of feeble muscles and stubborn joints would soon be but a memory. His pulses quickened at the thought and he breathed deep in a sudden feeling of unaccustomed well-being.

The dog growled continuously from his position at the head of his master, but did not move to interfere with the intruder. And Old Crompton, in the excitement of the momentous experience, paid him not the slightest attention.

His body tingled from head to foot with a not unpleasant sensation that conveyed the assurance of radical changes taking place under the influence of the vital rays. The tingling sensation increased in intensity until it seemed that every corpuscle in his veins danced to the tune of the vibration from those glowing tubes that bathed him in an ever-spreading radiance. Aches and pains vanished from his body, but he soon experienced a sharp stab of new pain in his lower jaw. With an experimental forefinger he rubbed the gum. He laughed aloud as the realization came to him that in those gums where there had been no teeth for more than twenty years there was now growing a

complete new set. And the rapidity of the process amazed him beyond measure. The aching area spread quickly and was becoming really uncomfortable. But then—and he consoled himself with the thought—nothing is brought into being without a certain amount of pain. Besides, he was confident that his discomfort would soon be over.

He examined his hand, and found that the joints of two fingers long crippled with rheumatism now moved freely and painlessly. The misty brilliance surrounding his body was paling and he saw that the flesh was taking on a faint green fluorescence instead. The rays had completed their work and soon the transformation would be fully effected. He turned on his side and slipped to the floor with the agility of a youngster. The dog snarled anew, but kept steadfastly to his position.

There was a small mirror over the wash stand at the far end of the room and Old Crompton made haste to obtain the first view of his reflected image. His step was firm and springy, his bearing confident, and he found that his long-stooped shoulders straightened

naturally and easily. He felt that he had taken on at least two inches in stature, which was indeed the case. When he reached the mirror he peered anxiously into its dingy surface and what he saw there so startled him that he stepped backward in amazement. This was not Larry Crompton, but an entirely new man. The straggly white hair had given way to soft, healthy waves of chestnut hue. Gone were the seams from the leathery countenance and the eyes looked out clearly and steadily from under brows as thick and dark as they had been in his youth. The reflected features were those of an entire stranger. They were not even reminiscent of the Larry Crompton of fifty years ago, but were the features of a far more vigorous and prepossessing individual than he had ever seemed, even in the best years of his life. The jaw was firm, the once sunken cheeks so well filled out that his high cheek bones were no longer in evidence. It was the face of a man of not more than thirty-eight years of age, reflecting exceptional intelligence and strength of character.

"What a disguise!" he exclaimed in delight. And his

voice, echoing in the stillness that followed the switching off of the apparatus, was deep-throated and mellow—the voice of a new man.

Now, serenely confident that discovery was impossible, he picked up his small but heavy bag and started for the door. Dawn was breaking and he wished to put as many miles between himself and Tom's laboratory as could be covered in the next few hours. But at the door he hesitated. Then, despite the furious yapping of Spot, he returned to the table of the rays and, with deliberate thoroughness smashed the costly tubes which had brought about his rehabilitation. With a pinch bar from a nearby tool rack, he wrecked the controls and generating mechanisms beyond recognition. Now he was absolutely secure! No meddling experts could possibly discover the secret of Tom's invention. All evidence would show that the young experimenter had met his death at the hands of Old Crompton, the despised hermit of West Laketon. But none would dream that the handsome man of means who was henceforth to be known as George Voight was that

same despised hermit.

He recovered his satchel and left the scene. With long, rapid strides he proceeded down the old dirt road toward the main highway where, instead of turning east into the village, he would turn west and walk to Kernsburg, the neighboring town. There, in not more than two hours time, his new life would really begin!

Had you, a visitor, departed from Laketon when Old Crompton did and returned twelve years later, you would have noticed very little difference in the appearance of the village. The old town hall and the little park were the same, the dingy brick building among the trees being just a little dingier and its wooden steps more worn and sagged. The main street showed evidence of recent repaving, and, in consequence of the resulting increase in through automobile traffic; there were two new gasoline filling stations in the heart of the town. Down the road about a half mile there was a new building, which, upon inquiring from one of the natives, would be proudly designated as the new high school building.

Otherwise there were no changes to be observed.

In his dilapidated chair in the untidy office he had occupied for nearly thirty years, sat Asa Culkin, popularly known as "Judge" Culkin. Justice of the peace, sheriff, attorney-at-law, and three times Mayor of Laketon, he was still a controlling factor in local politics and government. And many a knotty legal problem was settled in that gloomy little office. Many a dispute in the town council was dependent for arbitration upon the keen mind and understanding wit of the old judge.

The four o'clock train had just puffed its labored way from the station when a stranger entered his office, a stranger of uncommonly prosperous air. The keen blue eyes of the old attorney appraised him instantly and classified him as a successful man of business, not yet forty years of age, and with a weighty problem on his mind.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked, removing his feet from the battered desk top.

"You may be able to help me a great deal, Judge," was the unexpected reply. "I came to Laketon to give myself up."

"Give yourself up?" Culkin rose to his feet in surprise and unconsciously straightened his shoulders in the effort to seem less dwarfed before the tall stranger. "Why, what do you mean?" he inquired.

"I wish to give myself up for murder," answered the amazing visitor, slowly and with decision, "for a murder committed twelve years ago. I should like you to listen to my story first, though. It has been kept too long."

"But I still do not understand." There was puzzlement in the honest old face of the attorney. He shook his gray locks in uncertainty. "Why should you come here? Why come to me? What possible interest can I have in the matter?"

"Just this, Judge. You do not recognize me now, and you will probably consider my story incredible when you hear it. But, when I have given you all the

evidence, you will know who I am and will be compelled to believe. The murder was committed in Laketon. That is why I came to you."

"A murder in Laketon? Twelve years ago?" Again the aged attorney shook his head. "But—proceed."

"Yes. I killed Thomas Forsythe."

The stranger looked for an expression of horror in the features of his listener, but there was none. Instead the benign countenance took on a look of deepening amazement, but the smile wrinkles had somehow vanished and the old face was grave in its surprised interest.

"You seem astonished," continued the stranger.

"Undoubtedly you were convinced that the murderer was Larry Crompton—Old Crompton, the hermit. He disappeared the night of the crime and has never been heard from since. Am I correct?"

"Yes. He disappeared all right. But continue."

Not by a lift of his eyebrow did Culkin betray his disbelief, but the stranger sensed that his story was somehow not as startling as it should have been.

"You will think me crazy, I presume. But I am Old Crompton. It was my hand that felled the unfortunate young man in his laboratory out there in West Laketon twelve years ago to-night. It was his marvelous invention that transformed the old hermit into the apparently young man you see before you. But I swear that I am none other than Larry Crompton and that I killed young Forsythe. I am ready to pay the penalty. I can bear the flagellation of my own conscience no longer."

The visitor's voice had risen to the point of hysteria. But his listener remained calm and unmoved.

"Now just let me get this straight," he said quietly.

"Do I understand that you claim to be Old Crompton, rejuvenated in some mysterious manner, and that you killed Tom Forsythe on that night twelve years ago? Do I understand that you wish now to go to trial for that crime and to pay the penalty?"

"Yes! Yes! And the sooner the better. I can stand it no longer. I am the most miserable man in the world!"

"Hm-m—hm-m," muttered the judge, "this is strange." He spoke soothingly to his visitor. "Do not upset yourself, I beg of you. I will take care of this thing for you, never fear. Just take a seat, Mister—er—"

"You may call me Voight for the present," said the stranger, in a more composed tone of voice, "George Voight. That is the name I have been using since the mur—since that fatal night."

"Very well, Mr. Voight," replied the counsellor with an air of the greatest solicitude, "please have a seat now, while I make a telephone call."

And George Voight slipped into a stiff-backed chair with a sigh of relief. For he knew the judge from the old days and he was now certain that his case would be disposed of very quickly.

With the telephone receiver pressed to his ear, Culkin repeated a number. The stranger listened intently

during the ensuing silence. Then there came a muffled "hello" sounding in impatient response to the call.

"Hello, Alton," spoke the attorney, "this is Asa speaking. A stranger has just stepped into my office and he claims to be Old Crompton. Remember the hermit across the road from your son's old laboratory? Well, this man, who bears no resemblance whatever to the old man he claims to be and who seems to be less than half the age of Tom's old neighbor, says that he killed Tom on that night we remember so well."

There were some surprised remarks from the other end of the wire, but Voight was unable to catch them. He was in a cold perspiration at the thought of meeting his victim's father.

"Why, yes, Alton," continued Culkin, "I think there is something in this story, although I cannot believe it all. But I wish you would accompany us and visit the laboratory. Will you?"

"Lord, man, not that!" interrupted the judge's visitor. "I can hardly bear to visit the scene of my crime—and in the company of Alton Forsythe. Please, not that!"

"Now you just let me take care of this, young man," replied the judge, testily. Then, once more speaking into the mouthpiece of the telephone, "All right, Alton. We'll pick you up at your office in five minutes."

He replaced the receiver on its hook and turned again to his visitor. "Please be so kind as to do exactly as I request," he said. "I want to help you, but there is more to this thing than you know and I want you to follow unquestioningly where I lead and ask no questions at all for the present. Things may turn out differently than you expect."

"All right, Judge." The visitor resigned himself to whatever might transpire under the guidance of the man he had called upon to turn him over to the officers of the law.

Seated in the judge's ancient motor car, they stopped at the office of Alton Forsythe a few minutes later and

were joined by that red-faced and pompous old man. Few words were spoken during the short run to the well-remembered location of Tom's laboratory, and the man who was known as George Voight caught at his own throat with nervous fingers when they passed the tumbledown remains of the hut in which Old Crompton had spent so many years. With a screeching of well-worn brakes the car stopped before the laboratory, which was now almost hidden behind a mass of shrubs and flowers.

"Easy now, young man," cautioned the judge, noting the look of fear which had clouded his new client's features. The three men advanced to the door through which Old Crompton had fled on that night of horror, twelve years before. The elder Forsythe spoke not a word as he turned the knob and stepped within. Voight shrank from entering, but soon mastered his feelings and followed the other two. The sight that met his eyes caused him to cry aloud in awe.

At the dissecting table, which seemed to be exactly as he had seen it last but with replicas of the tubes he had destroyed once more in place, stood Tom

Forsythe! Considerably older and with hair prematurely gray, he was still the young man Old Crompton thought he had killed. Tom Forsythe was not dead after all! And all of his years of misery had gone for nothing. He advanced slowly to the side of the wondering young man, Alton Forsythe and Asa Culkin watching silently from just inside the door.

"Tom—Tom," spoke the stranger, "you are alive? You were not dead when I left you on that terrible night when I smashed your precious tubes? Oh—it is too good to be true! I can scarcely believe my eyes!"

He stretched forth trembling fingers to touch the body of the young man to assure himself that it was not all a dream.

"Why," said Tom Forsythe, in astonishment. "I do not know you, sir. Never saw you in my life. What do you mean by your talk of smashing my tubes, of leaving me for dead?"

"Mean?" The stranger's voice rose now; he was growing excited. "Why, Tom, I am Old Crompton.

Remember the struggle, here in this very room? You refused to rejuvenate an unhappy old man with your marvelous apparatus, a temporarily insane old man—Crompton. I was that old man and I fought with you. You fell, striking your head. There was blood. You were unconscious. Yes, for many hours I was sure you were dead and that I had murdered you. But I had watched your manipulations of the apparatus and I subjected myself to the action of the rays. My youth was miraculously restored. I became as you see me now. Detection was impossible, for I looked no more like Old Crompton than you do. I smashed your machinery to avoid suspicion. Then I escaped. And, for twelve years, I have thought myself a murderer. I have suffered the tortures of the damned!"

Tom Forsythe advanced on this remarkable visitor with clenched fists. Staring him in the eyes with cold appraisal, his wrath was all too apparent. The dog Spot, young as ever, entered the room and, upon observing the stranger, set up an ominous growling and snarling. At least the dog recognized him!

"What are you trying to do, catechise me? Are you

another of these alienists my father has been bringing around?" The young inventor was furious. "If you are," he continued, "you can get out of here—now! I'll have no more of this meddling with my affairs. I'm as sane as any of you and I refuse to submit to this continual persecution."

The elder Forsythe grunted, and Culkin laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Just a minute now, Tom," he said soothingly. "This stranger is no alienist. He has a story to tell. Please permit him to finish."

Somewhat mollified, Tom Forsythe shrugged his assent.

"Tom," continued the stranger, more calmly now, "what I have said is the truth. I shall prove it to you. I'll tell you things no mortals on earth could know but we two. Remember the day I captured the big rooster for you—the monster you had created? Remember the night you awakened me and brought me here in the moonlight? Remember the rabbit whose leg you amputated and re-grew? The poor guinea pig you had suffocated and whose life you restored? Spot here?

Don't you remember rejuvenating him? I was here. And you refused to use your process on me, old man that I was. Then is when I went mad and attacked you. Do you believe me, Tom?"

Then a strange thing happened. While Tom Forsythe gazed in growing belief, the stranger's shoulders sagged and he trembled as with the ague. The two older men who had kept in the background gasped their astonishment as his hair faded to a sickly gray, then became as white as the driven snow. Old Crompton was reverting to his previous state! Within five minutes, instead of the handsome young stranger, there stood before them a bent, withered old man—Old Crompton beyond a doubt. The effects of Tom's process were spent.

"Well I'm damned!" ejaculated Alton Forsythe. "You have been right all along, Asa. And I am mighty glad I did not commit Tom as I intended. He has told us the truth all these years and we were not wise enough to see it."

"We!" exclaimed the judge. "You, Alton Forsythe! I

have always upheld him. You have done your son a grave injustice and you owe him your apologies if ever a father owed his son anything."

"You are right, Asa." And, his aristocratic pride forgotten, Alton Forsythe rushed to the side of his son and embraced him.

The judge turned to Old Crompton pityingly. "Rather a bad ending for you, Crompton," he said. "Still, it is better by far than being branded as a murderer."

"Better? Better?" croaked Old Crompton. "It is wonderful, Judge. I have never been so happy in my life!"

The face of the old man beamed, though scalding tears coursed down the withered and seamed cheeks. The two Forsythes looked up from their demonstrations of peacemaking to listen to the amazing words of the old hermit.

"Yes, happy for the first time in my life," he continued. "I am one hundred years of age, gentlemen, and I now

look it and feel it. That is as it should be. And my experience has taught me a final lasting lesson. None of you know it, but, when I was but a very young man I was bitterly disappointed in love. Ha! ha! Never think it to look at me now, would you? But I was, and it ruined my entire life. I had a little money—inherited—and I traveled about in the world for a few years, then settled in that old hut across the road where I buried myself for sixty years, becoming crabbed and sour and despicable. Young Tom here was the first bright spot and, though I admired him, I hated him for his opportunities, hated him for that which he had that I had not. With the promise of his invention I thought I saw happiness, a new life for myself. I got what I wanted, though not in the way I had expected. And I want to tell you gentlemen that there is nothing in it. With developments of modern science you may be able to restore a man's youthful vigor of body, but you can't cure his mind with electricity. Though I had a youthful body, my brain was the brain of an old man—memories were there which could not be suppressed. Even had I not had the fancied death of young Tom on my conscience I should still have been

miserable. I worked. God, how I worked—to forget! But I could not forget. I was successful in business and made a lot of money. I am more independent—probably wealthier than you, Alton Forsythe, but that did not bring happiness. I longed to be myself once more, to have the aches and pains which had been taken from me. It is natural to age and to die. Immortality would make of us a people of restless misery. We would quarrel and bicker and long for death, which would not come to relieve us. Now it is over for me and I am glad—glad—glad!"

He paused for breath, looking beseechingly at Tom Forsythe. "Tom," he said, "I suppose you have nothing for me in your heart but hatred. And I don't blame you. But I wish—I wish you would try and forgive me. Can you?"

The years had brought increased understanding and tolerance to young Tom. He stared at Old Crompton and the long-nursed anger over the destruction of his equipment melted into a strange mixture of pity and admiration for the courageous old fellow.

"Why, I guess I can, Crompton," he replied. "There was many a day when I struggled hopelessly to reconstruct my apparatus, cursing you with every bit of energy in my make-up. I could cheerfully have throttled you, had you been within reach. For twelve years I have labored incessantly to reproduce the results we obtained on the night of which you speak. People called me insane—even my father wished to have me committed to an asylum. And, until now, I have been unsuccessful. Only to-day has it seemed for the first time that the experiments will again succeed. But my ideas have changed with regard to the uses of the process. I was a cocksure young pup in the old days, with foolish dreams of fame and influence. But I have seen the error of my ways. Your experience, too, convinces me that immortality may not be as desirable as I thought. But there are great possibilities in the way of relieving the sufferings of mankind and in making this a better world in which to live. With your advice and help I believe I can do great things. I now forgive you freely and I ask you to remain here with me to assist in the work that is to come. What do you say to the idea?"

At the reverent thankfulness in the pale eyes of the broken old man who had so recently been a perfect specimen of vigorous youth, Alton Forsythe blew his nose noisily. The little judge smiled benevolently and shook his head as if to say, "I told you so." Tom and Old Crompton gripped hands—mightily.

#09 Spawn of the Stars, by Charles Willard

Diffin:

The earth lay powerless beneath those loathsome, yellowish monsters that, sheathed in cometlike globes, sprang from the skies to annihilate man and reduce his cities to ashes.

Aproximate word count: 11,800

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

When Cyrus R. Thurston bought himself a single-motored Stoughton job he was looking for new thrills. Flying around the east coast had lost its zest: he wanted to join that jaunty group who spoke so easily of hopping off for Los Angeles.

And what Cyrus Thurston wanted he usually obtained. But if that young millionaire-sportsman had been told that on his first flight this blocky, bulletlike ship was

to pitch him headlong into the exact center of the wildest, strangest war this earth had ever seen—well, it is still probable that the Stoughton company would not have lost the sale.

They were roaring through the starlit, calm night, three thousand feet above a sage sprinkled desert, when the trip ended. Slim Riley had the stick when the first blast of hot oil ripped slashingly across the pilot's window. "There goes your old trip!" he yelled. "Why don't they try putting engines in these ships?"

He jammed over the throttle and, with motor idling, swept down toward the endless miles of moonlit waste. Wind? They had been boring into it. Through the opened window he spotted a likely stretch of ground. Setting down the ship on a nice piece of Arizona desert was a mere detail for Slim.

"Let off a flare," he ordered, "when I give the word."

The white glare of it faded the stars as he sideslipped, then straightened out on his hand-picked field. The plane rolled down a clear space and stopped. The

bright glare persisted while he stared curiously from the quiet cabin. Cutting the motor he opened both windows, then grabbed Thurston by the shoulder.

"'Tis a curious thing, that," he said unsteadily. His hand pointed straight ahead. The flare died, but the bright stars of the desert country still shone on a glistening, shining bulb.

It was some two hundred feet away. The lower part was lost in shadow, but its upper surfaces shone rounded and silvery like a giant bubble. It towered in the air, scores of feet above the chaparral beside it. There was a round spot of black on its side, which looked absurdly like a door....

"I saw something moving," said Thurston slowly. "On the ground I saw.... Oh, good Lord, Slim, it isn't real!"

Slim Riley made no reply. His eyes were riveted to an undulating, ghastly something that oozed and crawled in the pale light not far from the bulb. His hand was reaching, reaching.... It found what he sought; he leaned toward the window. In his hand was the Very

pistol for discharging the flares. He aimed forward and up.

The second flare hung close before it settled on the sandy floor. Its blinding whiteness made the more loathsome the sickening yellow of the flabby flowing thing that writhed frantically in the glare. It was formless, shapeless, a heaving mound of nauseous matter. Yet even in its agonized writhing distortions they sensed the beating pulsations that marked it a living thing.

There were unending ripples crossing and recrossing through the convolutions. To Thurston there was suddenly a sickening likeness: the thing was a brain from a gigantic skull—it was naked—was suffering....

The thing poured itself across the sand. Before the staring gaze of the speechless men an excrescence appeared—a thick bulb on the mass—that protruded itself into a tentacle. At the end there grew instantly a hooked hand. It reached for the black opening in the great shell, found it, and the whole loathsome

shapelessness poured itself up and through the hole.

Only at the last was it still. In the dark opening the last slippery mass held quiet for endless seconds. It formed, as they watched, to a head—frightful—menacing. Eyes appeared in the head; eyes flat and round and black save for a cross slit in each; eyes that stared horribly and unchangingly into theirs. Below them a gaping mouth opened and closed.... The head melted—was gone....

And with its going came a rushing roar of sound.

From under the metallic mass shrieked a vaporous cloud. It drove at them, a swirling blast of snow and sand. Some buried memory of gas attacks woke Riley from his stupor. He slammed shut the windows an instant before the cloud struck, but not before they had seen, in the moonlight, a gleaming, gigantic, elongated bulb rise swiftly—screamingly—into the upper air.

The blast tore at their plane. And the cold in their tight compartment was like the cold of outer space.

The men stared, speechless, panting. Their breath froze in that frigid room into steam clouds.

"It—it...." Thurston gasped—and slumped helpless upon the floor.

It was an hour before they dared open the door of their cabin. An hour of biting, numbing cold. Zero—on a warm summer night on the desert! Snow in the hurricane that had struck them!

"'Twas the blast from the thing," guessed the pilot; "though never did I see an engine with an exhaust like that." He was pounding himself with his arms to force up the chilled circulation.

"But the beast—the—the *thing*!" exclaimed Thurston. "It's monstrous; indecent! It thought—no question of that—but no body! Horrible! Just a raw, naked, thinking protoplasm!"

It was here that he flung open the door. They sniffed cautiously of the air. It was warm again—clean—save for a hint of some nauseous odor. They walked

forward; Riley carried a flash.

The odor grew to a stench as they came where the great mass had lain. On the ground was a fleshy mound. There were bones showing, and horns on a skull. Riley held the light close to show the body of a steer. A body of raw bleeding meat. Half of it had been absorbed....

"The damned thing," said Riley, and paused vainly for adequate words. "The damned thing was eating.... Like a jelly-fish, it was!"

"Exactly," Thurston agreed. He pointed about. There were other heaps scattered among the low sage.

"Smothered," guessed Thurston, "with that frozen exhaust. Then the filthy thing landed and came out to eat."

"Hold the light for me," the pilot commanded. "I'm goin' to fix that busted oil line. And I'm goin' to do it right now. Maybe the creature's still hungry."

They sat in their room. About them was the luxury of a modern hotel. Cyrus Thurston stared vacantly at the breakfast he was forgetting to eat. He wiped his hands mechanically on a snowy napkin. He looked from the window. There were palm trees in the park, and autos in a ceaseless stream. And people! Sane, sober people, living in a sane world. Newsboys were shouting; the life of the city was flowing.

"Riley!" Thurston turned to the man across the table. His voice was curiously toneless, and his face haggard. "Riley, I haven't slept for three nights. Neither have you. We've got to get this thing straight. We didn't both become absolute maniacs at the same instant, but—it was *not* there, it was *never* there—not *that*...." He was lost in unpleasant recollections. "There are other records of hallucinations."

"Hallucinations—hell!" said Slim Riley. He was looking at a Los Angeles newspaper. He passed one hand wearily across his eyes, but his face was happier than it had been in days.

"We didn't imagine it, we aren't crazy—it's real!"

Would you read that now!" He passed the paper across to Thurston. The headlines were startling.

"Pilot Killed by Mysterious Airship. Silvery Bubble Hangs Over New York. Downs Army Plane in Burst of Flame. Vanishes at Terrific Speed."

"It's our little friend," said Thurston. And on his face, too, the lines were vanishing; to find this horror a reality was positive relief. "Here's the same cloud of vapor—drifted slowly across the city, the accounts says, blowing this stuff like steam from underneath. Airplanes investigated—an army plane drove into the vapor—terrific explosion—plane down in flames—others wrecked. The machine ascended with meteor speed, trailing blue flame. Come on, boy, where's that old bus? Thought I never wanted to fly a plane again. Now I don't want to do anything but."

"Where to?" Slim inquired.

"Headquarters," Thurston told him. "Washington—let's go!"

From Los Angeles to Washington is not far, as the plane flies. There was a stop or two for gasoline, but it was only a day later that they were seated in the War Office. Thurston's card had gained immediate admittance. "Got the low-down," he had written on the back of his card, "on the mystery airship."

"What you have told me is incredible," the Secretary was saying, "or would be if General Lozier here had not reported personally on the occurrence at New York. But the monster, the thing you have described.... Cy, if I didn't know you as I do I would have you locked up."

"It's true," said Thurston, simply. "It's damnable, but it's true. Now what does it mean?"

"Heaven knows," was the response. "That's where it came from—out of the heavens."

"Not what we saw," Slim Riley broke in. "That thing came straight out of Hell." And in his voice was no suggestion of levity.

"You left Los Angeles early yesterday; have you seen the papers?"

Thurston shook his head.

"They are back," said the Secretary. "Reported over London—Paris—the West Coast. Even China has seen them. Shanghai cabled an hour ago."

"Them? How many are there?"

"Nobody knows. There were five seen at one time. There are more—unless the same ones go around the world in a matter of minutes."

Thurston remembered that whirlwind of vapor and a vanishing speck in the Arizona sky. "They could," he asserted. "They're faster than anything on earth. Though what drives them ... that gas—steam—whatever it is...."

"Hydrogen," stated General Lozier. "I saw the New York show when poor Davis got his. He flew into the exhaust; it went off like a million bombs."

Characteristic hydrogen flame trailed the damn thing up out of sight—a tail of blue fire."

"And cold," stated Thurston.

"Hot as a Bunsen burner," the General contradicted.

"Davis' plane almost melted."

"Before it ignited," said the other. He told of the cold in their plane.

"Ha!" The General spoke explosively. "That's expansion. That's a tip on their motive power. Expansion of gas. That accounts for the cold and the vapor. Suddenly expanded it would be intensely cold. The moisture of the air would condense, freeze. But how could they carry it? Or"—he frowned for a moment, brows drawn over deep-set gray eyes—"or generate it? But that's crazy—that's impossible!"

"So is the whole matter," the Secretary reminded him. "With the information Mr. Thurston and Mr. Riley have given us, the whole affair is beyond any gage our past experience might supply. We start from the

impossible, and we go—where? What is to be done?"

"With your permission, sir, a number of things shall be done. It would be interesting to see what a squadron of planes might accomplish, diving on them from above. Or anti-aircraft fire."

"No," said the Secretary of War, "not yet. They have looked us over, but they have not attacked. For the present we do not know what they are. All of us have our suspicions—thoughts of interplanetary travel—thoughts too wild for serious utterance—but we know nothing.

"Say nothing to the papers of what you have told me," he directed Thurston. "Lord knows their surmises are wild enough now. And for you, General, in the event of any hostile move, you will resist."

"Your order was anticipated, sir." The General permitted himself a slight smile. "The air force is ready."

"Of course," the Secretary of War nodded. "Meet me

here to-night—nine o'clock." He included Thurston and Riley in the command. "We need to think ... to think ... and perhaps their mission is friendly."

"Friendly!" The two flyers exchanged glances as they went to the door. And each knew what the other was seeing—a viscous ocherous mass that formed into a head where eyes devilish in their hate stared coldly into theirs....

"Think, we need to think," repeated Thurston later. "A creature that is just one big hideous brain, that can think an arm into existence—think a head where it wishes! What does a thing like that think of? What beastly thoughts could that—that *thing* conceive?"

"If I got the sights of a Lewis gun on it," said Riley vindictively, "I'd make it think."

"And my guess is that is all you would accomplish," Thurston told him. "I am forming a few theories about our visitors. One is that it would be quite impossible to find a vital spot in that big homogeneous mass."

The pilot dispensed with theories: his was a more literal mind. "Where on earth did they come from, do you suppose, Mr. Thurston?"

They were walking to their hotel. Thurston raised his eyes to the summer heavens. Faint stars were beginning to twinkle; there was one that glowed steadily.

"Nowhere on earth," Thurston stated softly, "nowhere on earth."

"Maybe so," said the pilot, "maybe so. We've thought about it and talked about it ... and they've gone ahead and done it." He called to a newsboy; they took the latest editions to their room.

The papers were ablaze with speculation. There were dispatches from all corners of the earth, interviews with scientists and near scientists. The machines were a Soviet invention—they were beyond anything human—they were harmless—they would wipe out civilization—poison gas—blasts of fire like that which had enveloped the army flyer....

And through it all Thurston read an ill-concealed fear, a reflection of panic that was gripping the nation—the whole world. These great machines were sinister. Wherever they appeared came the sense of being watched, of a menace being calmly withheld. And at thought of the obscene monsters inside those spheres, Thurston's lips were compressed and his eyes hardened. He threw the papers aside.

"They are here," he said, "and that's all that we know. I hope the Secretary of War gets some good men together. And I hope someone is inspired with an answer."

"An answer is it?" said Riley. "I'm thinkin' that the answer will come, but not from these swivel-chair fighters. 'Tis the boys in the cockpits with one hand on the stick and one on the guns that will have the answer."

But Thurston shook his head. "Their speed," he said, "and the gas! Remember that cold. How much of it can they lay over a city?"

The question was unanswered, unless the quick ringing of the phone was a reply.

"War Department," said a voice. "Hold the wire." The voice of the Secretary of War came on immediately.

"Thurston?" he asked. "Come over at once on the jump, old man. Hell's popping."

The windows of the War Department Building were all alight as they approached. Cars were coming and going; men in uniform, as the Secretary had said, "on the jump." Soldiers with bayonets stopped them, then passed Thurston and his companion on. Bells were ringing from all sides. But in the Secretary's office was perfect quiet.

General Lozier was there, Thurston saw, and an imposing array of gold-braided men with a sprinkling of those in civilian clothes. One he recognized: MacGregor from the Bureau of Standards. The Secretary handed Thurston some papers.

"Radio," he explained. "They are over the Pacific

coast. Hit near Vancouver; Associated Press says city destroyed. They are working down the coast. Same story—blast of hydrogen from their funnel shaped base. Colder than Greenland below them; snow fell in Seattle. No real attack since Vancouver and little damage done—" A message was laid before him.

"Portland," he said. "Five mystery ships over city. Dart repeatedly toward earth, deliver blast of gas and then retreat. Doing no damage. Apparently inviting attack. All commercial planes ordered grounded. Awaiting instructions.

"Gentlemen," said the Secretary, "I believe I speak for all present when I say that, in the absence of first hand information, we are utterly unable to arrive at any definite conclusion or make a definite plan. There is a menace in this, undeniably. Mr. Thurston and Mr. Riley have been good enough to report to me. They have seen one machine at close range. It was occupied by a monster so incredible that the report would receive no attention from me did I not know Mr. Thurston personally.

"Where have they come from? What does it mean—what is their mission? Only God knows.

"Gentlemen, I feel that I must see them. I want General Lozier to accompany me, also Doctor MacGregor, to advise me from the scientific angle. I am going to the Pacific Coast. They may not wait—that is true—but they appear to be going slowly south. I will leave to-night for San Diego. I hope to intercept them. We have strong air-forces there; the Navy Department is cooperating."

He waited for no comment. "General," he ordered, "will you kindly arrange for a plane? Take an escort or not as you think best.

"Mr. Thurston and Mr. Riley will also accompany us. We want all the authoritative data we can get. This on my return will be placed before you, gentlemen, for your consideration." He rose from his chair. "I hope they wait for us," he said.

Time was when a commander called loudly for a horse, but in this day a Secretary of War is not kept

waiting for transportation. Sirening motorcycles preceded them from the city. Within an hour, motors roaring wide open, propellers ripping into the summer night, lights slipping eastward three thousand feet below, the Secretary of War for the United States was on his way. And on either side from their plane stretched the arms of a V. Like a flight of gigantic wild geese, fast fighting planes of the Army air service bored steadily into the night, guarantors of safe convoy.

"The Air Service is ready," General Lozier had said. And Thurston and his pilot knew that from East coast to West, swift scout planes, whose idling engines could roar into action at a moment's notice, stood waiting; battle planes hidden in hangars would roll forth at the word—the Navy was cooperating—and at San Diego there were strong naval units, Army units, and Marine Corps.

"They don't know what we can do, what we have up our sleeve: they are feeling us out," said the Secretary. They had stopped more than once for gas and for wireless reports. He held a sheaf of

typewritten briefs.

"Going slowly south. They have taken their time. Hours over San Francisco and the bay district. Repeating same tactics; fall with terrific speed to cushion against their blast of gas. Trying to draw us out, provoke an attack, make us show our strength. Well, we shall beat them to San Diego at this rate. We'll be there in a few hours."

The afternoon sun was dropping ahead of them when they sighted the water. "Eckener Pass," the pilot told them, "where the Graf Zeppelin came through. Wonder what these birds would think of a Zepp!"

"There's the ocean," he added after a time. San Diego glistened against the bare hills. "There's North Island—the Army field." He stared intently ahead, then shouted: "And there they are! Look there!"

Over the city a cluster of meteors was falling. Dark underneath, their tops shone like pure silver in the sun's slanting glare. They fell toward the city, then buried themselves in a dense cloud of steam,

rebounding at once to the upper air, vapor trailing behind them.

The cloud billowed slowly. It struck the hills of the city, then lifted and vanished.

"Land at once," requested the Secretary. A flash of silver countermanded the order.

It hung there before them, a great gleaming globe, keeping always its distance ahead. It was elongated at the base, Thurston observed. From that base shot the familiar blast that turned steamy a hundred feet below as it chilled the warm air. There were round orifices, like ports, ranged around the top, where an occasional jet of vapor showed this to be a method of control. Other spots shone dark and glassy. Were they windows? He hardly realized their peril, so interested was he in the strange machine ahead.

Then: "Dodge that vapor," ordered General Lozier. The plane wavered in signal to the others and swung sharply to the left. Each man knew the flaming death that was theirs if the fire of their exhaust touched that

explosive mixture of hydrogen and air. The great bubble turned with them and paralleled their course.

"He's watching us," said Riley, "giving us the once over, the slimy devil. Ain't there a gun on this ship?"

The General addressed his superior. Even above the roar of the motors his voice seemed quiet, assured.

"We must not land now," he said. "We can't land at North Island. It would focus their attention upon our defenses. That thing—whatever it is—is looking for a vulnerable spot. We must.... Hold on—there he goes!"

The big bulb shot upward. It slanted above them, and hovered there.

"I think he is about to attack," said the General quietly. And, to the commander of their squadron: "It's in your hands now, Captain. It's your fight."

The Captain nodded and squinted above. "He's got to throw heavier stuff than that," he remarked. A small object was falling from the cloud. It passed close to their ship.

"Half-pint size," said Cyrus Thurston, and laughed in derision. There was something ludicrous in the futility of the attack. He stuck his head from a window into the gale they created. He sheltered his eyes to try to follow the missile in its fall.

They were over the city. The criss-cross of streets made a grill-work of lines; tall buildings were dwarfed from this three thousand foot altitude. The sun slanted across a projecting promontory to make golden ripples on a blue sea and the city sparkled back in the clear air. Tiny white faces were massed in the streets, huddled in clusters where the futile black missile had vanished.

And then—then the city was gone....

A white cloud-bank billowed and mushroomed. Slowly, it seemed to the watcher—so slowly.

It was done in the fraction of a second. Yet in that brief time his eyes registered the chaotic sweep in advance of the cloud. There came a crashing of buildings in some monster whirlwind, a white cloud

engulfing it all.... It was rising—was on them.

"God," thought Thurston, "why can't I move!" The plane lifted and lurched. A thunder of sound crashed against them, an intolerable force. They were crushed to the floor as the plane was hurled over and upward.

Out of the mad whirling tangle of flying bodies, Thurston glimpsed one clear picture. The face of the pilot hung battered and blood-covered before him, and over the limp body the hand of Slim Riley clutched at the switch.

"Bully boy," he said dazedly, "he's cutting the motors...." The thought ended in blackness.

There was no sound of engines or beating propellers when he came to his senses. Something lay heavy upon him. He pushed it to one side. It was the body of General Lozier.

He drew himself to his knees to look slowly about, rubbed stupidly at his eyes to quiet the whirl, then stared at the blood on his hand. It was so quiet—the

motors—what was it that happened? Slim had reached for the switch....

The whirling subsided. Before him he saw Slim Riley at the controls. He got to his feet and went unsteadily forward. It was a battered face that was lifted to his.

"She was spinning," the puffed lips were muttering slowly. "I brought her out ... there's the field...." His voice was thick; he formed the words slowly, painfully. "Got to land ... can you take it? I'm—I'm—" He slumped limply in his seat.

Thurston's arms were uninjured. He dragged the pilot to the floor and got back of the wheel. The field was below them. There were planes taxiing out; he heard the roar of their motors. He tried the controls. The plane answered stiffly, but he managed to level off as the brown field approached.

Thurston never remembered that landing. He was trying to drag Riley from the battered plane when the first man got to him.

"Secretary of War?" he gasped. "In there.... Take Riley; I can walk."

"We'll get them," an officer assured him. "Knew you were coming. They sure gave you hell! But look at the city!"

Arms carried him stumbling from the field. Above the low hangars he saw smoke clouds over the bay. These and red rolling flames marked what had been an American city. Far in the heavens moved five glinting specks.

His head reeled with the thunder of engines. There were planes standing in lines and more erupting from hangars, where khaki-clad men, faces tense under leather helmets, rushed swiftly about.

"General Lozier is dead," said a voice. Thurston turned to the man. They were bringing the others. "The rest are smashed up some," the officer told him, "but I think they'll pull through."

The Secretary of War for the United States lay beside

him. Men with red on their sleeves were slitting his coat. Through one good eye he squinted at Thurston. He even managed a smile.

"Well, I wanted to see them up close," he said. "They say you saved us, old man."

Thurston waved that aside. "Thank Riley—" he began, but the words ended in the roar of an exhaust. A plane darted swiftly away to shoot vertically a hundred feet in the air. Another followed and another. In a cloud of brown dust they streamed endlessly out, zooming up like angry hornets, eager to get into the fight.

"Fast little devils!" the ambulance man observed. "Here come the big boys."

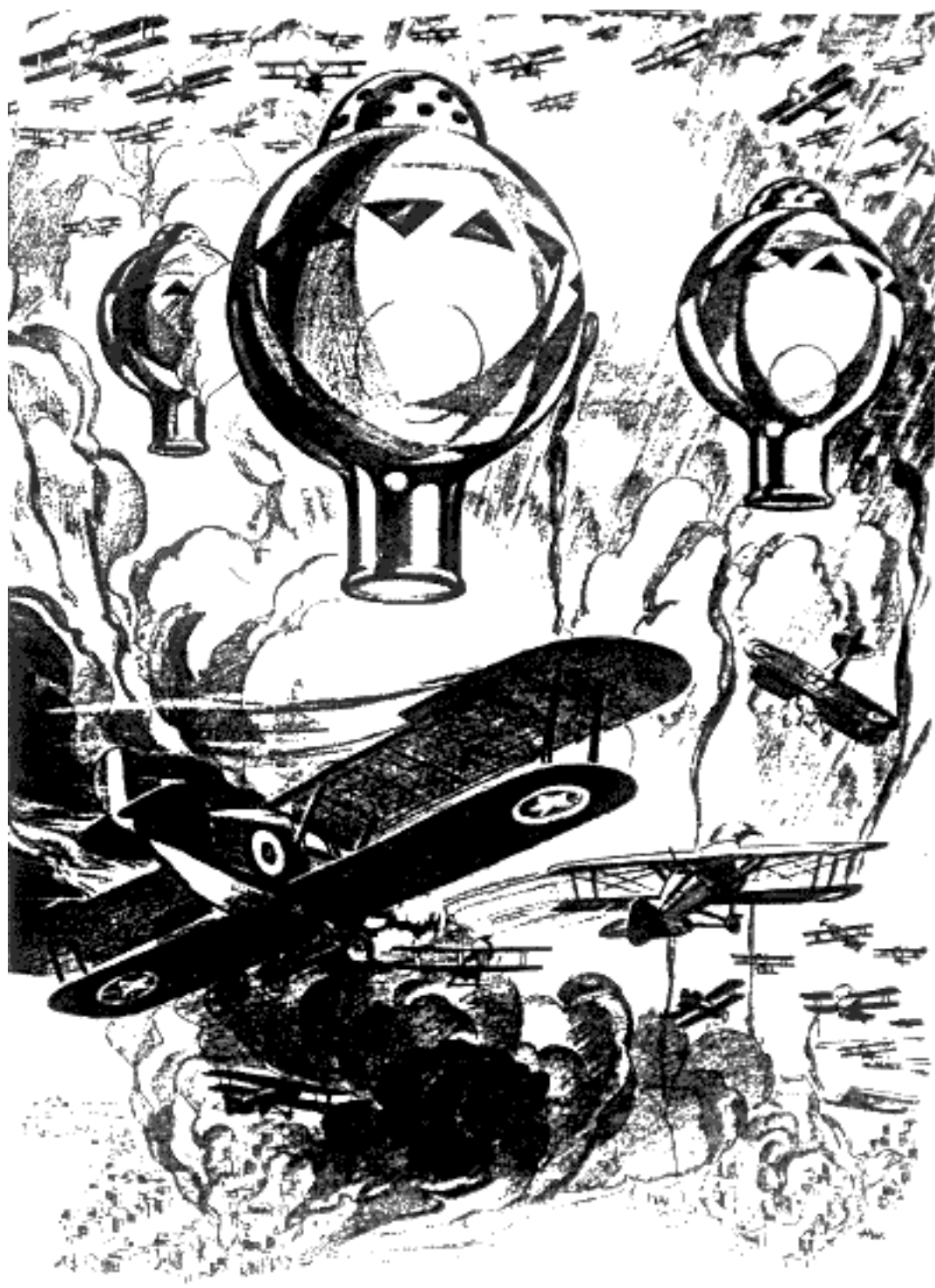
A leviathan went deafeningly past. And again others came on in quick succession. Farther up the field, silvery gray planes with rudders flaunting their red, white and blue rose circling to the heights.

"That's the Navy," was the explanation. The surgeon

straightened the Secretary's arm. "See them come off the big airplane carriers!"

If his remarks were part of his professional training in removing a patient's thoughts from his pain, they were effective. The Secretary stared out to sea, where two great flat-decked craft were shooting planes with the regularity of a rapid fire gun. They stood out sharply against a bank of gray fog. Cyrus Thurston forgot his bruised body, forgot his own peril—even the inferno that raged back across the bay: he was lost in the sheer thrill of the spectacle.

Above them the sky was alive with winged shapes.



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And from all the disorder there was order appearing. Squadron after squadron swept to battle formation. Like flights of wild ducks the true sharp-pointed Vs soared off into the sky. Far above and beyond, rows of dots marked the race of swift scouts for the upper levels. And high in the clear air shone the glittering menace trailing their five plumes of gas.

A deeper detonation was merging into the uproar. It came from the ships, Thurston knew, where anti-aircraft guns poured a rain of shells into the sky. About the invaders they bloomed into clusters of smoke balls. The globes shot a thousand feet into the air. Again the shells found them, and again they retreated.

"Look!" said Thurston. "They got one!"

He groaned as a long curving arc of speed showed that the big bulb was under control. Over the ships it paused, to balance and swing, then shot to the zenith as one of the great boats exploded in a cloud of vapor.

The following blast swept the airdrome. Planes yet on the ground went like dry autumn leaves. The hangars were flattened.

Thurston cowered in awe. They were sheltered, he saw, by a slope of the ground. No ridicule now for the bombs!

A second blast marked when the gas-cloud ignited. The billowing flames were blue. They writhed in tortured convulsions through the air. Endless explosions merged into one rumbling roar.

MacGregor had roused from his stupor; he raised to a sitting position.

"Hydrogen," he stated positively, and pointed where great volumes of flame were sent whirling aloft. "It burns as it mixes with air." The scientist was studying intently the mammoth reaction. "But the volume," he marveled, "the volume! From that small container! Impossible!"

"Impossible," the Secretary agreed, "but...." He

pointed with his one good arm toward the Pacific. Two great ships of steel, blackened and battered in that fiery breath, tossed helplessly upon the pitching, heaving sea. They furnished to the scientist's exclamation the only adequate reply.

Each man stared aghast into the pallid faces of his companions. "I think we have underestimated the opposition," said the Secretary of War quietly. "Look—the fog is coming in, but it's too late to save them."

The big ships were vanishing in the oncoming fog. Whirls of vapor were eddying toward them in the flame-blaster air. Above them the watchers saw dimly the five gleaming bulbs. There were airplanes attacking: the tapping of machine-gun fire came to them faintly.

Fast planes circled and swooped toward the enemy. An armada of big planes drove in from beyond. Formations were blocking space above.... Every branch of the service was there, Thurston exulted, the army, Marine Corps, the Navy. He gripped hard at the dry ground in a paralysis of taut nerves. The battle

was on, and in the balance hung the fate of the world.

The fog drove in fast. Through straining eyes he tried in vain to glimpse the drama spread above. The world grew dark and gray. He buried his face in his hands.

And again came the thunder. The men on the ground forced their gaze to the clouds, though they knew some fresh horror awaited.

The fog-clouds reflected the blue terror above. They were riven and torn. And through them black objects were falling. Some blazed as they fell. They slipped into unthought maneuvers—they darted to earth trailing yellow and black of gasoline fires. The air was filled with the dread rain of death that was spewed from the gray clouds. Gone was the roaring of motors. The air-force of the San Diego area swept in silence to the earth, whose impact alone could give kindly concealment to their flame-stricken burden.

Thurston's last control snapped. He flung himself flat to bury his face in the sheltering earth.

Only the driving necessity of work to be done saved the sanity of the survivors. The commercial broadcasting stations were demolished, a part of the fuel for the terrible furnace across the bay. But the Naval radio station was beyond on an outlying hill. The Secretary of War was in charge. An hour's work and this was again in commission to flash to the world the story of disaster. It told the world also of what lay ahead. The writing was plain. No prophet was needed to forecast the doom and destruction that awaited the earth.

Civilization was helpless. What of armies and cannon, of navies, of aircraft, when from some unreachable height these monsters within their bulbous machines could drop coldly—methodically—their diminutive bombs. And when each bomb meant shattering destruction; each explosion blasting all within a radius of miles; each followed by the blue blast of fire that melted the twisted framework of buildings and powdered the stones to make of a proud city a desolation of wreckage, black and silent beneath the cold stars. There was no crumb of comfort for the

world in the terror the radio told.

Slim Riley was lying on an improvised cot when Thurston and the representative of the Bureau of Standards joined him. Four walls of a room still gave shelter in a half-wrecked building. There were candles burning: the dark was unbearable.

"Sit down," said MacGregor quietly; "we must think...."

"Think!" Thurston's voice had an hysterical note. "I can't think! I mustn't think! I'll go raving crazy...."

"Yes, think," said the scientist. "Had it occurred to you that that is our only weapon left?"

"We must think, we must analyze. Have these devils a vulnerable spot? Is there any known means of attack? We do not know. We must learn. Here in this room we have all the direct information the world possesses of this menace. I have seen their machines in operation. You have seen more—you have looked at the monsters themselves. At one of them, anyway."

The man's voice was quiet, methodical. Mr. MacGregor was attacking a problem. Problems called for concentration; not hysterics. He could have poured the contents from a beaker without spilling a drop. His poise was needed: they were soon to make a laboratory experiment.

The door burst open to admit a wild-eyed figure that snatched up their candles and dashed them to the floor.

"Lights out!" he screamed at them. "There's one of 'em coming back." He was gone from the room.

The men sprang for the door, then turned to where Riley was clumsily crawling from his couch. An arm under each of his, and the three men stumbled from the room.

They looked about them in the night. The fog-banks were high, drifting in from the ocean. Beneath them the air was clear; from somewhere above a hidden moon forced a pale light through the clouds. And over the ocean, close to the water, drifted a familiar shape.

Familiar in its huge sleek roundness, in its funnel-shaped base where a soft roar made vaporous clouds upon the water. Familiar, too, in the wild dread it inspired.

The watchers were spellbound. To Thurston there came a fury of impotent frenzy. It was so near! His hands trembled to tear at that door, to rip at that foul mass he knew was within.... The great bulb drifted past. It was nearing the shore. But its action! Its motion!

Gone was the swift certainty of control. The thing settled and sank, to rise weakly with a fresh blast of gas from its exhaust. It settled again, and passed waveringly on in the night.

Thurston was throbbingly alive with hope that was certainty. "It's been hit," he exulted; "it's been hit. Quick! After it, follow it!" He dashed for a car. There were some that had been salvaged from the less ruined buildings. He swung it quickly around where the others were waiting.

"Get a gun," he commanded. "Hey, you,"—to an officer who appeared—"your pistol, man, quick! We're going after it!" He caught the tossed gun and hurried the others into the car.

"Wait," MacGregor commanded. "Would you hunt elephants with a pop-gun? Or these things?"

"Yes," the other told him, "or my bare hands! Are you coming, or aren't you?"

The physicist was unmoved. "The creature you saw—you said that it writhed in a bright light—you said it seemed almost in agony. There's an idea there! Yes, I'm going with you, but keep your shirt on, and think."

He turned again to the officer. "We need lights," he explained, "bright lights. What is there? Magnesium? Lights of any kind?"

"Wait." The man rushed off into the dark.

He was back in a moment to thrust a pistol into the car. "Flares," he explained. "Here's a flashlight, if you

need it." The car tore at the ground as Thurston opened it wide. He drove recklessly toward the highway that followed the shore.

The high fog had thinned to a mist. A full moon was breaking through to touch with silver the white breakers hissing on the sand. It spread its full glory on dunes and sea: one more of the countless soft nights where peace and calm beauty told of an ageless existence that made naught of the red havoc of men or of monsters. It shone on the ceaseless surf that had beaten these shores before there were men, that would thunder there still when men were no more. But to the tense crouching men in the car it shone only ahead on a distant, glittering speck. A wavering reflection marked the uncertain flight of the stricken enemy.

Thurston drove like a maniac; the road carried them straight toward their quarry. What could he do when he overtook it? He neither knew nor cared. There was only the blind fury forcing him on within reach of the thing. He cursed as the lights of the car showed a bend in the road. It was leaving the shore.

He slackened their speed to drive cautiously into the sand. It dragged at the car, but he fought through to the beach, where he hoped for firm footing. The tide was out. They tore madly along the smooth sand, breakers clutching at the flying wheels.

The strange aircraft was nearer; it was plainly over the shore, they saw. Thurston groaned as it shot high in the air in an effort to clear the cliffs ahead. But the heights were no longer a refuge. Again it settled. It struck on the cliff to rebound in a last futile leap. The great pear shape tilted, then shot end over end to crash hard on the firm sand. The lights of the car struck the wreck, and they saw the shell roll over once. A ragged break was opening—the spherical top fell slowly to one side. It was still rocking as they brought the car to a stop. Filling the lower shell, they saw dimly, was a mucouslike mass that seethed and struggled in the brilliance of their lights.

MacGregor was persisting in his theory. "Keep the lights on it!" he shouted. "It can't stand the light."

While they watched, the hideous, bubbling beast

oozed over the side of the broken shell to shelter itself in the shadow beneath. And again Thurston sensed the pulse and throb of life in the monstrous mass.

He saw again in his rage the streaming rain of black airplanes; saw, too, the bodies, blackened and charred as they saw them when first they tried rescue from the crashed ships; the smoke clouds and flames from the blasted city, where people—his people, men and women and little children—had met terrible death. He sprang from the car. Yet he faltered with a revulsion that was almost a nausea. His gun was gripped in his hand as he ran toward the monster.

"Come back!" shouted MacGregor. "Come back! Have you gone mad?" He was jerking at the door of the car.

Beyond the white funnel of their lights a yellow thing was moving. It twisted and flowed with incredible speed a hundred feet back to the base of the cliff. It drew itself together in a quivering heap.

An out-thrusting rock threw a sheltering shadow; the

moon was low in the west. In the blackness a phosphorescence was apparent. It rippled and rose in the dark with the pulsing beat of the jellylike mass. And through it were showing two discs. Gray at first, they formed to black, staring eyes.

Thurston had followed. His gun was raised as he neared it. Then out of the mass shot a serpentine arm. It whipped about him, soft, sticky, viscid—utterly loathsome. He screamed once when it clung to his face, then tore savagely and in silence at the encircling folds.

The gun! He ripped a blinding mass from his face and emptied the automatic in a stream of shots straight toward the eyes. And he knew as he fired that the effort was useless; to have shot at the milky surf would have been as vain.

The thing was pulling him irresistibly; he sank to his knees; it dragged him over the sand. He clutched at a rock. A vision was before him: the carcass of a steer, half absorbed and still bleeding on the sand of an Arizona desert....

To be drawn to the smothering embrace of that glutinous mass ... for that monstrous appetite.... He tore afresh at the unyielding folds, then knew MacGregor was beside him.

In the man's hand was a flashlight. The scientist risked his life on a guess. He thrust the powerful light into the clinging serpent. It was like the touch of hot iron to human flesh. The arm struggled and flailed in a paroxysm of pain.

Thurston was free. He lay gasping on the sand. But MacGregor!... He looked up to see him vanish in the clinging ooze. Another thick tentacle had been projected from the main mass to sweep like a whip about the man. It hissed as it whirled about him in the still air.

The flashlight was gone; Thurston's hand touched it in the sand. He sprang to his feet and pressed the switch. No light responded; the flashlight was out—broken.

A thick arm slashed and wrapped about him.... It beat

him to the ground. The sand was moving beneath him; he was being dragged swiftly, helplessly, toward what waited in the shadow. He was smothering.... A blinding glare filled his eyes....

The flares were still burning when he dared look about. MacGregor was pulling frantically at his arm. "Quick—quick!" he was shouting. Thurston scrambled to his feet.

One glimpse he caught of a heaving yellow mass in the white light; it twisted in horrible convulsions. They ran stumblingly—drunkenly—toward the car.

Riley was half out of the machine. He had tried to drag himself to their assistance. "I couldn't make it," he said: "then I thought of the flares."

"Thank Heaven," said MacGregor with emphasis, "it was your legs that were paralyzed, Riley, not your brain."

Thurston found his voice. "Let me have that Very pistol. If light hurts that damn thing, I am going to

put a blaze of magnesium into the middle of it if I die for it."

"They're all gone," said Riley.

"Then let's get out of here. I've had enough. We can come back later on."

He got back of the wheel and slammed the door of the sedan. The moonlight was gone. The darkness was velvet just tinged with the gray that precedes the dawn. Back in the deeper blackness at the cliff-base a phosphorescent something wavered and glowed. The light rippled and flowed in all directions over the mass. Thurston felt, vaguely, its mystery—the bulk was a vast, naked brain; its quiverings were like visible thought waves....

The phosphorescence grew brighter. The thing was approaching. Thurston let in his clutch, but the scientist checked him.

"Wait," he implored, "wait! I wouldn't miss this for the world." He waved toward the east, where far distant

ranges were etched in palest rose.

"We know less than nothing of these creatures, in what part of the universe they are spawned, how they live, where they live—Saturn!—Mars!—the Moon! But—we shall soon know how one dies!"

The thing was coming from the cliff. In the dim grayness it seemed less yellow, less fluid. A membrane enclosed it. It was close to the car. Was it hunger that drove it, or cold rage for these puny opponents? The hollow eyes were glaring; a thick arm formed quickly to dart out toward the car. A cloud, high above, caught the color of approaching day....

Before their eyes the vile mass pulsed visibly; it quivered and beat. Then, sensing its danger, it darted like some headless serpent for its machine.

It massed itself about the shattered top to heave convulsively. The top was lifted, carried toward the rest of the great metal egg. The sun's first rays made golden arrows through the distant peaks.

The struggling mass released its burden to stretch its vile length toward the dark caves under the cliffs. The last sheltering fog-veil parted. The thing was halfway to the high bank when the first bright shaft of direct sunlight shot through.

Incredible in the concealment of night, the vast protoplasmic pod was doubly so in the glare of day. But it was there before them, not a hundred feet distant. And it boiled in vast tortured convulsions. The clean sunshine struck it, and the mass heaved itself into the air in a nauseous eruption, then fell limply to the earth.

The yellow membrane turned paler. Once more the staring black eyes formed to turn hopelessly toward the sheltering globe. Then the bulk flattened out on the sand. It was a jellylike mound, through which trembled endless quivering palpitations.

The sun struck hot, and before the eyes of the watching, speechless men was a sickening, horrible sight—a festering mass of corruption.

The sickening yellow was liquid. It seethed and bubbled with liberated gases; it decomposed to purplish fluid streams. A breath of wind blew in their direction. The stench from the hideous pool was overpowering, unbearable. Their heads swam in the evil breath.... Thurston ripped the gears into reverse, nor stopped until they were far away on the clean sand.

The tide was coming in when they returned. Gone was the vile putrescence. The waves were lapping at the base of the gleaming machine.

"We'll have to work fast," said MacGregor. "I must know, I must learn." He drew himself up and into the shattered shell.

It was of metal, some forty feet across, its framework a maze of latticed struts. The central part was clear. Here in a wide, shallow pan the monster had rested. Below this was tubing, intricate coils, massive, heavy and strong. MacGregor lowered himself upon it, Thurston was beside him. They went down into the dim bowels of the deadly instrument.

"Hydrogen," the physicist was stating. "Hydrogen—there's our starting point. A generator, obviously, forming the gas—from what? They couldn't compress it! They couldn't carry it or make it, not the volume that they evolved. But they did it, they did it!"

Close to the coils a dim light was glowing. It was a pin-point of radiance in the half-darkness about them. The two men bent closer.

"See," directed MacGregor, "it strikes on this mirror—bright metal and parabolic. It disperses the light, doesn't concentrate it! Ah! Here is another, and another. This one is bent—broken. They are adjustable. Hm! Micrometer accuracy for reducing the light. The last one could reflect through this slot. It's light that does it, Thurston, it's light that does it!"

"Does what?" Thurston had followed the other's analysis of the diffusion process. "The light that would finally reach that slot would be hardly perceptible."

"It's the agent," said MacGregor, "the activator—the catalyst! What does it strike upon? I must know—I

must!"

The waves were splashing outside the shell. Thurston turned in a feverish search of the unexplored depths. There was a surprising simplicity, an absence of complicated mechanism. The generator, with its tremendous braces to carry its thrust to the framework itself, filled most of the space. Some of the ribs were thicker, he noticed. Solid metal, as if they might carry great weights. Resting upon them were ranged numbers of objects. They were like eggs, slender, and inches in length. On some were propellers. They worked through the shells on long slender rods. Each was threaded finely—an adjustable arm engaged the thread. Thurston called excitedly to the other.

"Here they are," he said. "Look! Here are the shells. Here's what blew us up!"

He pointed to the slim shafts with their little propellerlike fans. "Adjustable, see? Unwind in their fall ... set 'em for any length of travel ... fires the charge in the air. That's how they wiped out our air

fleet."

There were others without the propellers; they had fins to hold them nose downward. On each nose was a small rounded cap.

"Detonators of some sort," said MacGregor. "We've got to have one. We must get it out quick; the tide's coming in." He laid his hands upon one of the slim, egg-shaped things. He lifted, then strained mightily. But the object did not rise; it only rolled sluggishly.

The scientist stared at it amazed. "Specific gravity," he exclaimed, "beyond anything known! There's nothing on earth ... there is no such substance ... no form of matter..." His eyes were incredulous.

"Lots to learn," Thurston answered grimly. "We've yet to learn how to fight off the other four."

The other nodded. "Here's the secret," he said. "These shells liberate the same gas that drives the machine. Solve one and we solve both—then we learn how to combat it. But how to remove it—that is the problem.

You and I can never lift this out of here."

His glance darted about. There was a small door in the metal beam. The groove in which the shells were placed led to it; it was a port for launching the projectiles. He moved it, opened it. A dash of spray struck him in the face. He glanced inquiringly at his companion.

"Dare we do it?" he asked. "Slide one of them out?"

Each man looked long into the eyes of the other. Was this, then, the end of their terrible night? One shell to be dropped—then a bursting volcano to blast them to eternity....

"The boys in the planes risked it," said Thurston quietly. "They got theirs." He stopped for a broken fragment of steel. "Try one with a fan on; it hasn't a detonator."

The men pried at the slim thing. It slid slowly toward the open port. One heave and it balanced on the edge, then vanished abruptly. The spray was cold on their

faces. They breathed heavily with the realization that they still lived.

There were days of horror that followed, horror tempered by a numbing paralysis of all emotions. There were bodies by thousands to be heaped in the pit where San Diego had stood, to be buried beneath countless tons of debris and dirt. Trains brought an army of helpers; airplanes came with doctors and nurses and the beginning of a mountain of supplies. The need was there; it must be met. Yet the whole world was waiting while it helped, waiting for the next blow to fall.

Telegraph service was improvised, and radio receivers rushed in. The news of the world was theirs once more. And it told of a terrified, waiting world. There would be no temporizing now on the part of the invaders. They had seen the airplanes swarming from the ground—they would know an airdrome next time from the air. Thurston had noted the windows in the great shell, windows of dull-colored glass which would protect the darkness of the interior, essential to life for the horrible occupant, but through which it

could see. It could watch all directions at once.

The great shell had vanished from the shore. Pounding waves and the shifting sands of high tide had obliterated all trace. More than once had Thurston uttered devout thanks for the chance shell from an anti-aircraft gun that had entered the funnel beneath the machine, had bent and twisted the arrangement of mirrors that he and MacGregor had seen, and, exploding, had cracked and broken the domed roof of the bulb. They had learned little, but MacGregor was up north within reach of Los Angeles laboratories. And he had with him the slim cylinder of death. He was studying, thinking.

Telephone service had been established for official business. The whole nation-wide system, for that matter, was under military control. The Secretary of War had flown back to Washington. The whole world was on a war basis. War! And none knew where they should defend themselves, nor how.

An orderly rushed Thurston to the telephone. "You are wanted at once; Los Angeles calling."

The voice of MacGregor was cool and unhurried as Thurston listened. "Grab a plane, old man," he was saying, "and come up here on the jump."

The phrase brought a grim smile to Thurston's tired lips. "Hell's popping!" the Secretary of War had added on that evening those long ages before. Did MacGregor have something? Was a different kind of hell preparing to pop? The thoughts flashed through the listener's mind.

"I need a good deputy," MacGregor said. "You may be the whole works—may have to carry on—but I'll tell you it all later. Meet me at the Biltmore."

"In less than two hours," Thurston assured him.

A plane was at his disposal. Riley's legs were functioning again, after a fashion. They kept the appointment with minutes to spare.

"Come on," said MacGregor, "I'll talk to you in the car." The automobile whirled them out of the city to race off upon a winding highway that climbed into far

hills. There was twenty miles of this; MacGregor had time for his talk.

"They've struck," he told the two men. "They were over Germany yesterday. The news was kept quiet: I got the last report a half-hour ago. They pretty well wiped out Berlin. No air-force there. France and England sent a swarm of planes, from the reports. Poor devils! No need to tell you what they got. We've seen it first hand. They headed west over the Atlantic, the four machines. Gave England a burst or two from high up, paused over New York, then went on. But they're here somewhere, we think. Now listen:

"How long was it from the time when you saw the first monster until we heard from them again?"

Thurston forced his mind back to those days that seemed so far in the past. He tried to remember.

"Four days," broke in Riley. "It was the fourth day after we found the devil feeding."

"Feeding!" interrupted the scientist. "That's the point

I am making. Four days. Remember that!

"And we knew they were down in the Argentine five days ago—that's another item kept from an hysterical public. They slaughtered some thousands of cattle; there were scores of them found where the devils—I'll borrow Riley's word—where the devils had fed. Nothing left but hide and bones.

"And—mark this—that was four days before they appeared over Berlin.

"Why? Don't ask me. Do they have to lie quiet for that period miles up there in space? God knows. Perhaps! These things seem outside the knowledge of a deity. But enough of that! Remember: four days! Let us assume that there is this four days waiting period. It will help us to time them. I'll come back to that later.

"Here is what I have been doing. We know that light is a means of attack. I believe that the detonators we saw on those bombs merely opened a seal in the shell and forced in a flash of some sort. I believe that radiant energy is what fires the blast.

"What is it that explodes? Nobody knows. We have opened the shell, working in the absolute blackness of a room a hundred feet underground. We found in it a powder—two powders, to be exact.

"They are mixed. One is finely divided, the other rather granular. Their specific gravity is enormous, beyond anything known to physical science unless it would be the hypothetical neutron masses we think are in certain stars. But this is not matter as we know matter; it is something new.

"Our theory is this: the hydrogen atom has been split, resolved into components, not of electrons and the proton centers, but held at some halfway point of decomposition. Matter composed only of neutrons would be heavy beyond belief. This fits the theory in that respect. But the point is this: When these solids are formed—they are dense—they represent in a cubic centimeter possibly a cubic mile of hydrogen gas under normal pressure. That's a guess, but it will give you the idea.

"Not compressed, you understand, but all the

elements present in other than elemental form for the reconstruction of the atom ... for a million billions of atoms.

"Then the light strikes it. These dense solids become instantly a gas—miles of it held in that small space.

"There you have it: the gas, the explosion, the entire absence of heat—which is to say, its terrific cold—when it expands."

Slim Riley was looking bewildered but game. "Sure, I saw it snow," he affirmed, "so I guess the rest must be O.K. But what are we going to do about it? You say light kills 'em, and fires their bombs. But how can we let light into those big steel shells, or the little ones either?"

"Not through those thick walls," said MacGregor. "Not light. One of our anti-aircraft shells made a direct hit. That might not happen again in a million shots. But there are other forms of radiant energy that do penetrate steel...."

The car had stopped beside a grove of eucalyptus. A barren, sun-baked hillside stretched beyond. MacGregor motioned them to alight.

Riley was afire with optimism. "And do you believe it?" he asked eagerly. "Do you believe that we've got 'em licked?"

Thurston, too, looked into MacGregor's face: Riley was not the only one who needed encouragement. But the gray eyes were suddenly tired and hopeless.

"You ask what I believe," said the scientist slowly. "I believe we are witnessing the end of the world, our world of humans, their struggles, their grave hopes and happiness and aspirations...."

He was not looking at them. His gaze was far off in space.

"Men will struggle and fight with their puny weapons, but these monsters will win, and they will have their way with us. Then more of them will come. The world, I believe, is doomed...."

He straightened his shoulders. "But we can die fighting," he added, and pointed over the hill.

"Over there," he said, "in the valley beyond, is a charge of their explosive and a little apparatus of mine. I intend to fire the charge from a distance of three hundred yards. I expect to be safe, perfectly safe. But accidents happen.

"In Washington a plane is being prepared. I have given instructions through hours of phoning. They are working night and day. It will contain a huge generator for producing my ray. Nothing new! Just the product of our knowledge of radiant energy up to date. But the man who flies that plane will die—horribly. No time to experiment with protection. The rays will destroy him, though he may live a month.

"I am asking you," he told Cyrus Thurston, "to handle that plane. You may be of service to the world—you may find you are utterly powerless. You surely will die. But you know the machines and the monsters; your knowledge may be of value in an attack." He waited. The silence lasted for only a moment.

"Why, sure," said Cyrus Thurston.

He looked at the eucalyptus grove with earnest appraisal. The sun made lovely shadows among their stripped trunks: the world was a beautiful place. A lingering death, MacGregor had intimated—and horrible.... "Why, sure," he repeated steadily.

Slim Riley shoved him firmly aside to stand facing MacGregor.

"Sure, hell!" he said. "I'm your man, Mr. MacGregor.

"What do you know about flying?" he asked Cyrus Thurston. "You're good—for a beginner. But men like you two have got brains, and I'm thinkin' the world will be needin' them. Now me, all I'm good for is holdin' a shtick"—his brogue had returned to his speech, and was evidence of his earnestness.

"And, besides"—the smile faded from his lips, and his voice was suddenly soft—"them boys we saw take their last flip was just pilots to you, just a bunch of good fighters. Well, they're buddies of mine. I fought

beside some of them in France.... I belong!"

He grinned happily at Thurston. "Besides," he said, "what do you know about dog-fights?"

MacGregor gripped him by the hand. "You win," he said. "Report to Washington. The Secretary of War has all the dope."

He turned to Thurston. "Now for you! Get this! The enemy machines almost attacked New York. One of them came low, then went back, and the four flashed out of sight toward the west. It is my belief that New York is next, but the devils are hungry. The beast that attacked us was ravenous, remember. They need food and lots of it. You will hear of their feeding, and you can count on four days. Keep Riley informed—that's your job.

"Now I'm going over the hill. If this experiment works, there's a chance we can repeat it on a larger scale. No certainty, but a chance! I'll be back. Full instructions at the hotel in case...." He vanished into the scrub growth.

"Not exactly encouraging," Thurston pondered, "but he's a good man, Mac, a good egg! Not as big a brain as the one we saw, but perhaps it's a better one—cleaner—and it's working!"

They were sheltered under the brow of the hill, but the blast from the valley beyond rocked them like an earthquake. They rushed to the top of the knoll. MacGregor was standing in the valley; he waved them a greeting and shouted something unintelligible.

The gas had mushroomed into a cloud of steamy vapor. From above came snowflakes to whirl in the churning mass, then fall to the ground. A wind came howling about them to beat upon the cloud. It swirled slowly back and down the valley. The figure of MacGregor vanished in its smothering embrace.

"Exit, MacGregor!" said Cyrus Thurston softly. He held tight to the struggling figure of Slim Riley.

"He couldn't live a minute in that atmosphere of hydrogen," he explained. "They can—the devils!—but not a good egg like Mac. It's our job now—yours and

mine."

Slowly the gas retreated, lifted to permit their passage down the slope.

MacGregor was a good prophet. Thurston admitted that when, four days later, he stood on the roof of the Equitable Building in lower New York.

The monsters had fed as predicted. Out in Wyoming a desolate area marked the place of their meal, where a great herd of cattle lay smothered and frozen. There were ranch houses, too, in the circle of destruction, their occupants frozen stiff as the carcasses that dotted the plains. The country had stood tense for the following blow. Only Thurston had lived in certainty of a few days reprieve. And now had come the fourth day.

In Washington was Riley. Thurston had been in touch with him frequently.

"Sure, it's a crazy machine," the pilot had told him, "and 'tis not much I think of it at all. Neither bullets

nor guns, just this big glass contraption and speed. She's fast, man, she's fast ... but it's little hope I have." And Thurston, remembering the scientist's words, was heartless and sick with dreadful certainty.

There were aircraft ready near New York; it was generally felt that here was the next objective. The enemy had looked it over carefully. And Washington, too, was guarded. The nation's capital must receive what little help the aircraft could afford.

There were other cities waiting for destruction. If not this time—later! The horror hung over them all.

The fourth day! And Thurston was suddenly certain of the fate of New York. He hurried to a telephone. Of the Secretary of War he implored assistance.

"Send your planes," he begged. "Here's where we will get it next. Send Riley. Let's make a last stand—win or lose."

"I'll give you a squadron," was the concession. "What difference whether they die there or here...?" The

voice was that of a weary man, weary and sleepless and hopeless.

"Good-by Cy, old man!" The click of the receiver sounded in Thurston's ear. He returned to the roof for his vigil.

To wait, to stride nervously back and forth in impotent expectancy. He could leave, go out into open country, but what were a few days or months—or a year—with this horror upon them? It was the end. MacGregor was right. "Good old Mac!"

There were airplanes roaring overhead. It meant.... Thurston abruptly was cold; a chill gripped at his heart.

The paroxysm passed. He was doubled with laughter—or was it he who was laughing? He was suddenly buoyantly carefree. Who was he that it mattered? Cyrus Thurston—an ant! And their ant-hill was about to be snuffed out....

He walked over to a waiting group and clapped one

man on the shoulder. "Well, how does it feel to be an ant?" he inquired and laughed loudly at the jest. "You and your millions of dollars, your acres of factories, your steamships, railroads!"

The man looked at him strangely and edged cautiously away. His eyes, like those of the others, had a dazed, stricken look. A woman was sobbing softly as she clung to her husband. From the streets far below came a quavering shrillness of sound.

The planes gathered in climbing circles. Far on the horizon were four tiny glinting specks....

Thurston stared until his eyes were stinging. He was walking in a waking sleep as he made his way to the stone coping beyond which was the street far below. He was dead—dead!—right this minute. What were a few minutes more or less? He could climb over the coping; none of the huddled, fear-gripped group would stop him. He could step out into space and fool them, the devils. They could never kill him....

What was it MacGregor had said? Good egg,

MacGregor! "But we can die fighting...." Yes, that was it—die fighting. But he couldn't fight; he could only wait. Well, what were the others doing, down there in the streets—in their homes? He could wait with them, die with them....

He straightened slowly and drew one long breath. He looked steadily and unafraid at the advancing specks. They were larger now. He could see their round forms. The planes were less noisy: they were far up in the heights—climbing—climbing.

The bulbs came slantingly down. They were separating. Thurston wondered vaguely.

What had they done in Berlin? Yes, he remembered. Placed themselves at the four corners of a great square and wiped out the whole city in one explosion. Four bombs dropped at the same instant while they shot up to safety in the thin air. How did they communicate? Thought transference, most likely. Telepathy between those great brains, one to another. A plane was falling. It curved and swooped in a trail of flame, then fell straight toward the earth. They

were fighting....

Thurston stared above. There were clusters of planes diving down from on high. Machine-guns stuttered faintly. "Machine-guns—toys! Brave, that was it! 'We can die fighting.'" His thoughts were far off; it was like listening to another's mind.

The air was filled with swelling clouds. He saw them before the blast struck where he stood. The great building shuddered at the impact. There were things falling from the clouds, wrecks of planes, blazing and shattered. Still came others; he saw them faintly through the clouds. They came in from the West; they had gone far to gain altitude. They drove down from the heights—the enemy had drifted—they were over the bay.

More clouds, and another blast thundering at the city. There were specks, Thurston saw, falling into the water.

Again the invaders came down from the heights where they had escaped their own shattering attack.

There was the faint roar of motors behind, from the south. The squadron from Washington passed overhead.

They surely had seen the fate that awaited. And they drove on to the attack, to strike at an enemy that shot instantly into the sky leaving crashing destruction about the torn dead.

"Now!" said Cyrus Thurston aloud.

The big bulbs were back. They floated easily in the air, a plume of vapor billowing beneath. They were ranging to the four corners of a great square.

One plane only was left, coming in from the south, a lone straggler, late for the fray. One plane! Thurston's shoulders sagged heavily. All they had left! It went swiftly overhead.... It was fast—fast. Thurston suddenly knew. It was Riley in that plane.

"Go back, you fool!"—he was screaming at the top of his voice—"Back—back—you poor, damned, decent Irishman!"

Tears were streaming down his face. "His buddies," Riley had said. And this was Riley, driving swiftly in, alone, to avenge them....

He saw dimly as the swift plane sped over the first bulb, on and over the second. The soft roar of gas from the machines drowned the sound of his engine. The plane passed them in silence to bank sharply toward the third corner of the forming square.

He was looking them over, Thurston thought. And the damn beasts disregarded so contemptible an opponent. He could still leave. "For God's sake, Riley, beat it—escape!"

Thurston's mind was solely on the fate of the lone voyager—until the impossible was borne in upon him.

The square was disrupted. Three great bulbs were now drifting. The wind was carrying them out toward the bay. They were coming down in a long, smooth descent. The plane shot like a winged rocket at the fourth great, shining ball. To the watcher, aghast with sudden hope, it seemed barely to crawl.

"The ray! The ray...." Thurston saw as if straining eyes had pierced through the distance to see the invisible. He saw from below the swift plane, the streaming, intangible ray. That was why Riley had flown closely past and above them—the ray poured from below. His throat was choking him, strangling....

The last enemy took alarm. Had it seen the slow sinking of its companions, failed to hear them in reply to his mental call? The shining pear shape shot violently upward; the attacking plane rolled to a vertical bank as it missed the threatening clouds of exhaust. "What do you know about dog-fights?" And Riley had grinned ... Riley belonged!

The bulb swelled before Thurston's eyes in its swift descent. It canted to one side to head off the struggling plane that could never escape, did not try to escape. The steady wings held true upon their straight course. From above came the silver meteor; it seemed striking at the very plane itself. It was almost upon it before it belched forth the cushioning blast of gas.

Through the forming clouds a plane bored in swiftly. It rolled slowly, was flying upside down. It was under the enemy! Its ray.... Thurston was thrown a score of feet away to crash helpless into the stone coping by the thunderous crash of the explosion.

There were fragments falling from a dense cloud—fragments of curved and silvery metal ... the wing of a plane danced and fluttered in the air....

"He fired its bombs," whispered Thurston in a shaking voice. "He killed the other devils where they lay—he destroyed this with its own explosive. He flew upside down to shoot up with the ray, to set off its shells...."

His mind was fumbling with the miracle of it. "Clever pilot, Riley, in a dog-fight...." And then he realized.

Cyrus Thurston, millionaire sportsman, sank slowly, numbly to the roof of the Equitable Building that still stood. And New York was still there ... and the whole world....

He sobbed weakly, brokenly. Through his dazed brain

flashed a sudden, mind-saving thought. He laughed foolishly through his sobs.

"And you said he'd die horribly, Mac, a horrible death." His head dropped upon his arms, unconscious—and safe—with the rest of humanity.

#10 The Corpse on the Grating, by Hugh Barnett Cave:

In the gloomy depths of the old warehouse dale saw a thing that drew a scream of horror to his dry lips. It was a corpse—the mold of decay on its long-dead features—and yet it was alive!

Aproximate word count: 5,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was ten o'clock on the morning of December 5 when M. S. and I left the study of Professor Daimler. You are perhaps acquainted with M. S. His name appears constantly in the pages of the Illustrated News, in conjunction with some very technical article on psycho-analysis or with some extensive study of the human brain and its functions. He is a psycho-fanatic, more or less, and has spent an entire lifetime

of some seventy-odd years in pulling apart human skulls for the purpose of investigation. Lovely pursuit!

For some twenty years I have mocked him, in a friendly, half-hearted fashion. I am a medical man, and my own profession is one that does not sympathize with radicals.

As for Professor Daimler, the third member of our triangle—perhaps, if I take a moment to outline the events of that evening, the Professor's part in what follows will be less obscure. We had called on him, M. S. and I, at his urgent request. His rooms were in a narrow, unlighted street just off the square, and Daimler himself opened the door to us. A tall, loosely built chap he was, standing in the doorway like a motionless ape, arms half extended.

"I've summoned you, gentlemen," he said quietly, "because you two, of all London, are the only persons who know the nature of my recent experiments. I should like to acquaint you with the results!"

He led the way to his study, then kicked the door shut

with his foot, seizing my arm as he did so. Quietly he dragged me to the table that stood against the farther wall. In the same even, unemotional tone of a man completely sure of himself, he commanded me to inspect it.

For a moment, in the semi-gloom of the room, I saw nothing. At length, however, the contents of the table revealed themselves, and I distinguished a motley collection of test tubes, each filled with some fluid. The tubes were attached to each other by some ingenious arrangement of thistles, and at the end of the table, where a chance blow could not brush it aside, lay a tiny phial of the resulting serum. From the appearance of the table, Daimler had evidently drawn a certain amount of gas from each of the smaller tubes, distilling them through acid into the minute phial at the end. Yet even now, as I stared down at the fantastic paraphernalia before me, I could sense no conclusive reason for its existence.

I turned to the Professor with a quiet stare of bewilderment. He smiled.

"The experiment is over," he said. "As to its conclusion, you, Dale, as a medical man, will be sceptical. And you"—turning to M. S.—"as a scientist you will be amazed. I, being neither physician nor scientist, am merely filled with wonder!"

He stepped to a long, square table-like structure in the center of the room. Standing over it, he glanced quizzically at M. S., then at me.

"For a period of two weeks," he went on, "I have kept, on the table here, the body of a man who has been dead more than a month. I have tried, gentlemen, with acid combinations of my own origination, to bring that body back to life. And ... I have—failed!

"But," he added quickly, noting the smile that crept across my face, "that failure was in itself worth more than the average scientist's greatest achievement! You know, Dale, that heat, if a man is not truly dead, will sometimes resurrect him. In a case of epilepsy, for instance, victims have been pronounced dead only to return to life—sometimes in the grave.

"I say 'if a man be not truly dead.' But what if that man *is* truly dead? Does the cure alter itself in any manner? The motor of your car dies—do you bury it? You do not; you locate the faulty part, correct it, and infuse new life. And so, gentlemen, after remedying the ruptured heart of this dead man, by operation, I proceeded to bring him back to life.

"I used heat. Terrific heat will sometimes originate a spark of new life in something long dead. Gentlemen, on the fourth day of my tests, following a continued application of electric and acid heat, the patient—"

Daimler leaned over the table and took up a cigarette. Lighting it, he dropped the match and resumed his monologue.

"The patient turned suddenly over and drew his arm weakly across his eyes. I rushed to his side. When I reached him, the body was once again stiff and lifeless. And—it has remained so."

The Professor stared at us quietly, waiting for comment. I answered him, as carelessly as I could,

with a shrug of my shoulders.

"Professor, have you ever played with the dead body of a frog?" I said softly.

He shook his head silently.

"You would find it interesting sport," I told him. "Take a common dry cell battery with enough voltage to render a sharp shock. Then apply your wires to various parts of the frog's anatomy. If you are lucky, and strike the right set of muscles, you will have the pleasure of seeing a dead frog leap suddenly forward. Understand, he will not regain life. You have merely released his dead muscles by shock, and sent him bolting."

The Professor did not reply. I could feel his eyes on me, and had I turned, I should probably have found M. S. glaring at me in honest hate. These men were students of mesmerism, of spiritualism, and my commonplace contradiction was not over welcome.

"You are cynical, Dale," said M. S. coldly, "because

you do not understand!"

"Understand? I am a doctor—not a ghost!"

But M. S. had turned eagerly to the Professor.

"Where is this body—this experiment?" he demanded.

Daimler shook his head. Evidently he had acknowledged failure and did not intend to drag his dead man before our eyes, unless he could bring that man forth alive, upright, and ready to join our conversation!

"I've put it away," he said distantly. "There is nothing more to be done, now that our reverend doctor has insisted in making a matter of fact thing out of our experiment. You understand, I had not intended to go in for wholesale resurrection, even if I had met with success. It was my belief that a dead body, like a dead piece of mechanism, can be brought to life again, provided we are intelligent enough to discover the secret. And by God, it is *still* my belief!"

That was the situation, then, when M. S. and I paced slowly back along the narrow street that contained the Professor's dwelling-place. My companion was strangely silent. More than once I felt his eyes upon me in an uncomfortable stare, yet he said nothing. Nothing, that is, until I had opened the conversation with some casual remark about the lunacy of the man we had just left.

"You are wrong in mocking him, Dale," M. S. replied bitterly. "Daimler is a man of science. He is no child, experimenting with a toy; he is a grown man who has the courage to believe in his powers. One of these days...."

He had intended to say that some day I should respect the Professor's efforts. One of these days! The interval of time was far shorter than anything so indefinite. The first event, with its succeeding series of horrors, came within the next three minutes.

We had reached a more deserted section of the square, a black, uninhabited street extending like a shadowed band of darkness between gaunt, high

walls. I had noticed for some time that the stone structure beside us seemed to be unbroken by door or window—that it appeared to be a single gigantic building, black and forbidding. I mentioned the fact to M. S.

"The warehouse," he said simply. "A lonely, God-forsaken place. We shall probably see the flicker of the watchman's light in one of the upper chinks."

At his words, I glanced up. True enough, the higher part of the grim structure was punctured by narrow, barred openings. Safety vaults, probably. But the light, unless its tiny gleam was somewhere in the inner recesses of the warehouse, was dead. The great building was like an immense burial vault, a tomb—silent and lifeless.

We had reached the most forbidding section of the narrow street, where a single arch-lamp overhead cast a halo of ghastly yellow light over the pavement. At the very rim of the circle of illumination, where the shadows were deeper and more silent, I could make out the black mouldings of a heavy iron grating. The

bars of metal were designed, I believe, to seal the side entrance of the great warehouse from night marauders. It was bolted in place and secured with a set of immense chains, immovable.

This much I saw as my intent gaze swept the wall before me. This huge tomb of silence held for me a peculiar fascination, and as I paced along beside my gloomy companion, I stared directly ahead of me into the darkness of the street. I wish to God my eyes had been closed or blinded!

He was hanging on the grating. Hanging there, with white, twisted hands clutching the rigid bars of iron, straining to force them apart. His whole distorted body was forced against the barrier, like the form of a madman struggling to escape from his cage. His face—the image of it still haunts me whenever I see iron bars in the darkness of a passage—was the face of a man who has died from utter, stark horror. It was frozen in a silent shriek of agony, staring out at me with fiendish maliciousness. Lips twisted apart. White teeth gleaming in the light. Bloody eyes, with a horrible glare of colorless pigment. And—*dead*.

I believe M. S. saw him at the very instant I recoiled. I felt a sudden grip on my arm; and then, as an exclamation came harshly from my companion's lips, I was pulled forward roughly. I found myself staring straight into the dead eyes of that fearful thing before me, found myself standing rigid, motionless, before the corpse that hung within reach of my arm.

And then, through that overwhelming sense of the horrible, came the quiet voice of my comrade—the voice of a man who looks upon death as nothing more than an opportunity for research.

"The fellow has been frightened to death, Dale. Frightened most horribly. Note the expression of his mouth, the evident struggle to force these bars apart and escape. Something has driven fear to his soul, killed him."

I remember the words vaguely. When M. S. had finished speaking, I did not reply. Not until he had stepped forward and bent over the distorted face of the thing before me, did I attempt to speak. When I did, my thoughts were a jargon.

"What, in God's name," I cried, "could have brought such horror to a strong man? What—"

"Loneliness, perhaps," suggested M. S. with a smile. "The fellow is evidently the watchman. He is alone, in a huge, deserted pit of darkness, for hours at a time. His light is merely a ghostly ray of illumination, hardly enough to do more than increase the darkness. I have heard of such cases before."

He shrugged his shoulders. Even as he spoke, I sensed the evasion in his words. When I replied, he hardly heard my answer, for he had suddenly stepped forward, where he could look directly into those fear twisted eyes.

"Dale," he said at length, turning slowly to face me, "you ask for an explanation of this horror? There *is* an explanation. It is written with an almost fearful clearness on this fellow's mind. Yet if I tell you, you will return to your old skepticism—your damnable habit of disbelief!"

I looked at him quietly. I had heard M. S. claim, at

other times, that he could read the thoughts of a dead man by the mental image that lay on that man's brain. I had laughed at him. Evidently, in the present moment, he recalled those laughs. Nevertheless, he faced me seriously.

"I can see two things, Dale," he said deliberately. "One of them is a dark, narrow room—a room piled with indistinct boxes and crates, and with an open door bearing the black number 4167. And in that open doorway, coming forward with slow steps—alive, with arms extended and a frightful face of passion—is a decayed human form. A corpse, Dale. A man who has been dead for many days, and is now—*alive!*"

M. S. turned slowly and pointed with upraised hand to the corpse on the grating.

"That is why," he said simply, "this fellow died from horror."

His words died into emptiness. For a moment I stared at him. Then, in spite of our surroundings, in spite of the late hour, the loneliness of the street, the awful

thing beside us, I laughed.

He turned upon me with a snarl. For the first time in my life I saw M. S. convulsed with rage. His old, lined face had suddenly become savage with intensity.

"You laugh at me, Dale," he thundered. "By God, you make a mockery out of a science that I have spent more than my life in studying! You call yourself a medical man—and you are not fit to carry the name! I will wager you, man, that your laughter is not backed by courage!"

I fell away from him. Had I stood within reach, I am sure he would have struck me. Struck me! And I have been nearer to M. S. for the past ten years than any man in London. And as I retreated from his temper, he reached forward to seize my arm. I could not help but feel impressed at his grim intentness.

"Look here, Dale," he said bitterly, "I will wager you a hundred pounds that you will not spend the remainder of this night in the warehouse above you! I will wager a hundred pounds against your own

courage that you will not back your laughter by going through what this fellow has gone through. That you will not prowl through the corridors of this great structure until you have found room 4167—*and remain in that room until dawn!*"

There was no choice. I glanced at the dead man, at the face of fear and the clutching, twisted hands, and a cold dread filled me. But to refuse my friend's wager would have been to brand myself an empty coward. I had mocked him. Now, whatever the cost, I must stand ready to pay for that mockery.

"Room 4167?" I replied quietly, in a voice which I made every effort to control, lest he should discover the tremor in it. "Very well, I will do it!"

It was nearly midnight when I found myself alone, climbing a musty, winding ramp between the first and second floors of the deserted building. Not a sound, except the sharp intake of my breath and the dismal creak of the wooden stairs, echoed through that tomb of death. There was no light, not even the usual dim glow that is left to illuminate an unused corridor.

Moreover, I had brought no means of light with me—nothing but a half empty box of safety matches which, by some unholy premonition, I had forced myself to save for some future moment. The stairs were black and difficult, and I mounted them slowly, groping with both hands along the rough wall.

I had left M. S. some few moments before. In his usual decisive manner he had helped me to climb the iron grating and lower myself to the sealed alley-way on the farther side. Then, leaving him without a word, for I was bitter against the triumphant tone of his parting words, I proceeded into the darkness, fumbling forward until I had discovered the open door in the lower part of the warehouse.

And then the ramp, winding crazily upward—upward—upward, seemingly without end. I was seeking blindly for that particular room which was to be my destination. Room 4167, with its high number, could hardly be on the lower floors, and so I had stumbled upward....

It was at the entrance of the second floor corridor

that I struck the first of my desultory supply of matches, and by its light discovered a placard nailed to the wall. The thing was yellow with age and hardly legible. In the drab light of the match I had difficulty in reading it—but, as far as I can remember, the notice went something like this:

WAREHOUSE RULES

- 1.No light shall be permitted in any room or corridor, as a prevention against fire.
- 2.No person shall be admitted to rooms or corridors unless accompanied by an employee.
- 3.A watchman shall be on the premises from 7 P.M. until 6 A.M. He shall make the round of the corridors every hour during that interval, at a quarter past the hour.
- 4.Rooms are located by their numbers: the first figure in the room number indicating its floor location.

I could read no further. The match in my fingers burned to a black thread and dropped. Then, with the burnt stump still in my hand, I groped through the darkness to the bottom of the second ramp.

Room 4167, then, was on the fourth floor—the topmost floor of the structure. I must confess that the knowledge did not bring any renewed burst of courage! The top floor! Three black stair-pits would lie between me and the safety of escape. There would be no escape! No human being in the throes of fear could hope to discover that tortured outlet, could hope to grope his way through Stygian gloom down a triple ramp of black stairs. And even though he succeeded in reaching the lower corridors, there was still a blind alley-way, sealed at the outer end by a high grating of iron bars....

Escape! The mockery of it caused me to stop suddenly in my ascent and stand rigid, my whole body trembling violently.

But outside, in the gloom of the street, M. S. was waiting, waiting with that fiendish glare of triumph

that would brand me a man without courage. I could not return to face him, not though all the horrors of hell inhabited this gruesome place of mystery. And horrors must surely inhabit it, else how could one account for that fearful thing on the grating below? But I had been through horror before. I had seen a man, supposedly dead on the operating table, jerk suddenly to his feet and scream. I had seen a young girl, not long before, awake in the midst of an operation, with the knife already in her frail body. Surely, after those definite horrors, no *unknown* danger would send me cringing back to the man who was waiting so bitterly for me to return.

Those were the thoughts pregnant in my mind as I groped slowly, cautiously along the corridor of the upper floor, searching each closed door for the indistinct number 4167. The place was like the center of a huge labyrinth, a spider-web of black, repelling passages, leading into some central chamber of utter silence and blackness. I went forward with dragging steps, fighting back the dread that gripped me as I went farther and farther from the outlet of escape.

And then, after losing myself completely in the gloom, I threw aside all thoughts of return and pushed on with a careless, surface bravado, and laughed aloud.

So, at length, I reached that room of horror, secreted high in the deeper recesses of the deserted warehouse. The number—God grant I never see it again!—was scrawled in black chalk on the door—4167. I pushed the half-open barrier wide, and entered.

It was a small room, even as M. S. had forewarned me—or as the dead mind of that thing on the grate had forewarned M. S. The glow of my out-thrust match revealed a great stack of dusty boxes and crates, piled against the farther wall. Revealed, too, the black corridor beyond the entrance, and a small, upright table before me.

It was the table, and the stool beside it, that drew my attention and brought a muffled exclamation from my lips. The thing had been thrust out of its usual place, pushed aside as if some frenzied shape had lunged against it. I could make out its former position by the

marks on the dusty floor at my feet. Now it was nearer to the center of the room, and had been wrenched sidewise from its holdings. A shudder took hold of me as I looked at it. A living person, sitting on the stool before me, staring at the door, would have wrenched the table in just this manner in his frenzy to escape from the room!

The light of the match died, plunging me into a pit of gloom. I struck another and stepped closer to the table. And there, on the floor, I found two more things that brought fear to my soul. One of them was a heavy flash-lamp—a watchman's lamp—where it had evidently been dropped. Been dropped in flight! But what awful terror must have gripped the fellow to make him forsake his only means of escape through those black passages? And the second thing—a worn copy of a leather-bound book, flung open on the boards below the stool!

The flash-lamp, thank God! had not been shattered. I switched it on, directing its white circle of light over the room. This time, in the vivid glare, the room became even more unreal. Black walls, clumsy,

distorted shadows on the wall, thrown by those huge piles of wooden boxes. Shadows that were like crouching men, groping toward me. And beyond, where the single door opened into a passage of Stygian darkness, that yawning entrance was thrown into hideous detail. Had any upright figure been standing there, the light would have made an unholy phosphorescent specter out of it.

I summoned enough courage to cross the room and pull the door shut. There was no way of locking it. Had I been able to fasten it, I should surely have done so; but the room was evidently an unused chamber, filled with empty refuse. This was the reason, probably, why the watchman had made use of it as a retreat during the intervals between his rounds.

But I had no desire to ponder over the sordidness of my surroundings. I returned to my stool in silence, and stooping, picked up the fallen book from the floor. Carefully I placed the lamp on the table, where its light would shine on the open page. Then, turning the cover, I began to glance through the thing which the man before me had evidently been studying.

And before I had read two lines, the explanation of the whole horrible thing struck me. I stared dumbly down at the little book and laughed. Laughed harshly, so that the sound of my mad cackle echoed in a thousand ghastly reverberations through the dead corridors of the building.

It was a book of horror, of fantasy. A collection of weird, terrifying, supernatural tales with grotesque illustrations in funereal black and white. And the very line I had turned to, the line which had probably struck terror to that unlucky devil's soul, explained M. S.'s "decayed human form, standing in the doorway with arms extended and a frightful face of passion!" The description—the same description—lay before me, almost in my friend's words. Little wonder that the fellow on the grating below, after reading this orgy of horror, had suddenly gone mad with fright. Little wonder that the picture engraved on his dead mind was a picture of a corpse standing in the doorway of room 4167!

I glanced at that doorway and laughed. No doubt of it, it was that awful description in M. S.'s untempered

language that had made me dread my surroundings, not the loneliness and silence of the corridors about me. Now, as I stared at the room, the closed door, the shadows on the wall, I could not repress a grin.

But the grin was not long in duration. A six-hour siege awaited me before I could hear the sound of human voice again—six hours of silence and gloom. I did not relish it. Thank God the fellow before me had had foresight enough to leave his book of fantasy for my amusement!

I turned to the beginning of the story. A lovely beginning it was, outlining in some detail how a certain Jack Fulton, English adventurer, had suddenly found himself imprisoned (by a mysterious black gang of monks, or something of the sort) in a forgotten cell at the monastery of El Toro. The cell, according to the pages before me, was located in the "empty, haunted pits below the stone floors of the structure...." Lovely setting! And the brave Fulton had been secured firmly to a huge metal ring set in the farther wall, opposite the entrance.

I read the description twice. At the end of it I could not help but lift my head to stare at my own surroundings. Except for the location of the cell, I might have been in the same setting. The same darkness, same silence, same loneliness. Peculiar similarity!

And then: "Fulton lay quietly, without attempt to struggle. In the dark, the stillness of the vaults became unbearable, terrifying. Not a suggestion of sound, except the scraping of unseen rats—"

I dropped the book with a start. From the opposite end of the room in which I sat came a half inaudible scuffling noise—the sound of hidden rodents scrambling through the great pile of boxes.

Imagination? I am not sure. At the moment, I would have sworn that the sound was a definite one, that I had heard it distinctly. Now, as I recount this tale of horror, I am not sure.

But I am sure of this: There was no smile on my lips as I picked up the book again with trembling fingers and continued.

"The sound died into silence. For an eternity, the prisoner lay rigid, staring at the open door of his cell. The opening was black, deserted, like the mouth of a deep tunnel, leading to hell. And then, suddenly, from the gloom beyond that opening, came an almost noiseless, padded footfall!"

This time there was no doubt of it. The book fell from my fingers, dropped to the floor with a clatter. Yet even through the sound of its falling, I heard that fearful sound—the shuffle of a living foot! I sat motionless, staring with bloodless face at the door of room 4167. And as I stared, the sound came again, and again—*the slow tread of dragging footsteps, approaching along the black corridor without!*

I got to my feet like an automaton, swaying heavily. Every drop of courage ebbed from my soul as I stood there, one hand clutching the table, waiting....

And then, with an effort, I moved forward. My hand was outstretched to grasp the wooden handle of the door. And—I did not have the courage. Like a cowed beast I crept back to my place and slumped down on

the stool, my eyes still transfixed in a mute stare of terror.

I waited. For more than half an hour I waited, motionless. Not a sound stirred in the passage beyond that closed barrier. Not a suggestion of any living presence came to me. Then, leaning back against the wall with a harsh laugh, I wiped away the cold moisture that had trickled over my forehead into my eyes.

It was another five minutes before I picked up the book again. You call me a fool for continuing it? A fool? I tell you, even a story of horror is more comfort than a room of grotesque shadows and silence. Even a printed page is better than grim reality!

And so I read on. The story was one of suspense, madness. For the next two pages I read a cunning description of the prisoner's mental reaction. Strangely enough, it conformed precisely with my own.

"Fulton's head had fallen to his chest," the script

read. "For an endless while he did not stir, did not dare to lift his eyes. And then, after more than an hour of silent agony and suspense, the boy's head came up mechanically. Came up—and suddenly jerked rigid. A horrible scream burst from his dry lips as he stared—stared like a dead man—at the black entrance to his cell. There, standing without motion in the opening, stood a shrouded figure of death. Empty eyes, glaring with awful hate, bored into his own. Great arms, bony and rotten, extended toward him. Decayed flesh—"

I read no more. Even as I lunged to my feet, with that mad book still gripped in my hand, I heard the door of my room grind open. I screamed, screamed in utter horror at the thing I saw there. Dead? Good God, I do not know. It was a corpse, a dead human body, standing before me like some propped-up thing from the grave. A face half eaten away, terrible in its leering grin. Twisted mouth, with only a suggestion of lips, curled back over broken teeth. Hair—writhing, distorted—like a mass of moving, bloody coils. And its arms, ghastly white, bloodless, were extended toward

me, with open, clutching hands.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing a shriveled, dead body standing in an open doorway, arms outstretched for the horrified man standing in front of it. Image description End.]

It was alive! Alive! Even while I stood there, crouching against the wall, it stepped forward toward

me. I saw a heavy shudder pass over it, and the sound of its scraping feet burned its way into my soul. And then, with its second step, the fearful thing stumbled to its knees. The white, gleaming arms, thrown into streaks of living fire by the light of my lamp, flung violently upwards, twisting toward the ceiling. I saw the grin change to an expression of agony, of torment. And then the thing crashed upon me—dead.

With a great cry of fear I stumbled to the door. I groped out of that room of horror, stumbled along the corridor. No light. I left it behind, on the table, to throw a circle of white glare over the decayed, living-dead intruder who had driven me mad.

My return down those winding ramps to the lower floor was a nightmare of fear. I remember that I stumbled, that I plunged through the darkness like a man gone mad. I had no thought of caution, no thought of anything except escape.

And then the lower door, and the alley of gloom. I reached the grating, flung myself upon it and pressed my face against the bars in a futile effort to escape.

The same—as the fear-tortured man—who had—come before—me.

I felt strong hands lifting me up. A dash of cool air, and then the refreshing patter of falling rain.

It was the afternoon of the following day, December 6, when M. S. sat across the table from me in my own study. I had made a rather hesitant attempt to tell him, without dramatics and without dwelling on my own lack of courage, of the events of the previous night.

"You deserved it, Dale," he said quietly. "You are a medical man, nothing more, and yet you mock the beliefs of a scientist as great as Daimler. I wonder—do you still mock the Professor's beliefs?"

"That he can bring a dead man to life?" I smiled, a bit doubtfully.

"I will tell you something, Dale," said M. S. deliberately. He was leaning across the table, staring at me. "The Professor made only one mistake in his

great experiment. He did not wait long enough for the effect of his strange acids to work. He acknowledged failure too soon, and got rid of the body." He paused.

"When the Professor stored his patient away, Dale," he said quietly, "he stored it in room 4170, at the great warehouse. If you are acquainted with the place, you will know that room 4170 is directly across the corridor from 4167."

#11 Creatures of the Light, by Sophie Wenzel Ellis:

He had striven to perfect the faultless man of the future, and had succeeded—too well. For in the pitilessly cold eyes of Adam, his super-human creation, Dr. Mundson saw only contempt—and annihilation—for the human race.

Aproximate word count: 14,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

In a night club of many lights and much high-pitched laughter, where he had come for an hour of forgetfulness and an execrable dinner, John Northwood was suddenly conscious that Fate had begun shuffling the cards of his destiny for a dramatic game.

First, he was aware that the singularly ugly and

deformed man at the next table was gazing at him with an intense, almost excited scrutiny. But, more disturbing than this, was the scowl of hate on the face of another man, as handsome as this other was hideous, who sat in a far corner hidden behind a broad column, with rude elbows on the table, gawking first at Northwood and then at the deformed, almost hideous man.

Northwood's blood chilled over the expression on the handsome, fair-haired stranger's perfectly carved face. If a figure in marble could display a fierce, unnatural passion, it would seem no more eldritch than the hate in the icy blue eyes.

It was not a new experience for Northwood to be stared at: he was not merely a good-looking young fellow of twenty-five, he was scenery, magnificent and compelling. Furthermore, he had been in the public eye for years, first as a precocious child and, later, as a brilliant young scientist. Yet, for all his experience with hero worshippers to put an adamantine crust on his sensibilities, he grew warm-eared under the gaze of these two strangers—this hunchback with a face

like a grotesque mask in a Greek play, this other who, even handsomer than himself, chilled the blood queerly with the cold perfection of his godlike masculine beauty.

Northwood sensed something familiar about the hunchback. Somewhere he had seen that huge, round, intelligent face splattered with startling features. The very breadth of the man's massive brow was not altogether unknown to him, nor could Northwood look into the mournful, near-sighted black eyes without trying to recall when and where he had last seen them.

But this other of the marble-perfect nose and jaw, the blond, thick-waved hair, was totally a stranger, whom Northwood fervently hoped he would never know too well.

Trying to analyze the queer repugnance that he felt for this handsome, boldly staring fellow, Northwood decided: "He's like a newly-made wax figure endowed with life."

Shivering over his own fantastic thought, he again glanced swiftly at the hunchback, who he noticed was playing with his coffee, evidently to prolong the meal.

One year of calm-headed scientific teaching in a famous old eastern university had not made him callous to mysteries. Thus, with a feeling of high adventure, he finished his supper and prepared to go. From the corner of his eye, he saw the hunchback leave his seat, while the handsome man behind the column rose furtively, as though he, too, intended to follow.

Northwood was out in the dusky street about thirty seconds, when the hunchback came from the foyer. Without apparently noticing Northwood, he hailed a taxi. For a moment, he stood still, waiting for the taxi to pull up at the curb. Standing thus, with the street light limning every unnatural angle of his twisted body and every queer abnormality of his huge features, he looked almost repulsive.

On his way to the taxi, his thick shoulder jostled the younger man. Northwood felt something strike his

foot, and, stooping in the crowded street, picked up a black leather wallet.

"Wait!" he shouted as the hunchback stepped into the waiting taxi.

But the man did not falter. In a moment, Northwood lost sight of him as the taxi moved away.

He debated with himself whether or not he should attempt to follow. And while he stood thus in indecision, the handsome stranger approached him.

"Good evening to you," he said curtly. His rich, musical voice, for all its deepness, held a faint hint of the tremulous, birdlike notes heard in the voice of a young child who has not used his vocal chords long enough for them to have lost their exquisite newness.

"Good evening," echoed Northwood, somewhat uncertainly. A sudden aura of repulsion swept coldly over him. Seen close, with the brilliant light of the street directly on his too perfect face, the man was more sinister than in the café. Yet Northwood,

struggling desperately for a reason to explain his violent dislike, could not discover why he shrank from this splendid creature, whose eyes and flesh had a new, fresh appearance rarely seen except in very young boys.

"I want what you picked up," went on the stranger.

"It isn't yours!" Northwood flashed back. Ah! that effluvium of hatred which seemed to weave a tangible net around him!

"Nor is it yours. Give it to me!"

"You're insolent, aren't you?"

"If you don't give it to me, you will be sorry." The man did not raise his voice in anger, yet the words whipped Northwood with almost physical violence. "If he knew that I saw everything that happened in there—that I am talking to you at this moment—he would tremble with fear."

"But you can't intimidate me."

"No?" For a long moment, the cold blue eyes held his contemptuously. "No? I can't frighten you—you worm of the Black Age?"

Before Northwood's horrified sight, he vanished; vanished as though he had turned suddenly to air and floated away.

The street was not crowded at that time, and there was no pressing group of bodies to hide the splendid creature. Northwood gawked stupidly, mouth half open, eyes searching wildly everywhere. The man was gone. He had simply disappeared, in this sane, electric-lighted street.

Suddenly, close to Northwood's ear, grated a derisive laugh. "I can't frighten you?" From nowhere came that singularly young-old voice.

As Northwood jerked his head around to meet blank space, a blow struck the corner of his mouth. He felt the warm blood run over his chin.

"I could take that wallet from you, worm, but you may

keep it, and see me later. But remember this—the thing inside never will be yours."

The words fell from empty air.

For several minutes, Northwood waited at the spot, expecting another demonstration of the abnormal, but nothing else occurred. At last, trembling violently, he wiped the thick moisture from his forehead and dabbed at the blood which he still felt on his chin.

But when he looked at his handkerchief, he muttered:

"Well, I'll be jiggered!"

The handkerchief bore not the slightest trace of blood.

Under the light in his bedroom, Northwood examined the wallet. It was made of alligator skin, clasped with a gold signet that bore the initial M. The first pocket was empty; the second yielded an object that sent a warm flush to his face.

It was the photograph of a gloriously beautiful girl, so seductively lovely that the picture seemed almost to be alive. The short, curved upper lip, the full, delicately voluptuous lower, parted slightly in a smile that seemed to linger in every exquisite line of her face. She looked as though she had just spoken passionately, and the spirit of her words had inspired her sweet flesh and eyes.

Northwood turned his head abruptly and groaned, "Good Heavens!"

He had no right to palpitate over the picture of an unknown beauty. Only a month ago, he had become engaged to a young woman whose mind was as brilliant as her face was plain. Always he had vowed that he would never marry a pretty girl, for he detested his own masculine beauty sincerely.

He tried to grasp a mental picture of Mary Burns, who had never stirred in him the emotion that this smiling picture invoked. But, gazing at the picture, he could not remember how his fiancée looked.

Suddenly the picture fell from his fingers and dropped to the floor on its face, revealing an inscription on the back. In a bold, masculine hand, he read: "Your future wife."

"Some lucky fellow is headed for a life of bliss," was his jealous thought.

He frowned at the beautiful face. What was this girl to that hideous hunchback? Why did the handsome stranger warn him, "*The thing inside never will be yours?*"

Again he turned eagerly to the wallet.

In the last flap he found something that gave him another surprise: a plain white card on which a name and address were written by the same hand that had penned the inscription on the picture.

Emil Mundson, Ph. D.,
44-1/2 Indian Court

Emil Mundson, the electrical wizard and

distinguished scientific writer, friend of the professor of science at the university where Northwood was an assistant professor; Emil Mundson, whom, a week ago, Northwood had yearned mightily to meet.

Now Northwood knew why the hunchback's intelligent, ugly face was familiar to him. He had seen it pictured as often as enterprising news photographers could steal a likeness from the oversensitive scientist, who would never sit for a formal portrait.

Even before Northwood had graduated from the university where he now taught, he had been avidly interested in Emil Mundson's fantastic articles in scientific journals. Only a week ago, Professor Michael had come to him with the current issue of New Science, shouting excitedly:

"Did you read this, John, this article by Emil Mundson?" His shaking, gnarled old fingers tapped the open magazine.

Northwood seized the magazine and looked avidly at

the title of the article, "Creatures of the Light."

"No, I haven't read it," he admitted. "My magazine hasn't come yet."

"Run through it now briefly, will you? And note with especial care the passages I have marked. In fact, you needn't bother with anything else just now. Read this—and this—and this." He pointed out penciled paragraphs.

Northwood read:

Man always has been, always will be a creature of the light. He is forever reaching for some future point of perfected evolution which, even when his most remote ancestor was a fish creature composed of a few cells, was the guiding power that brought him up from the first stinking sea and caused him to create gods in his own image.

It is this yearning for perfection which sets man apart from all other life, which made him *man*

even in the rudimentary stages of his development. He was man when he wallowed in the slime of the new world and yearned for the air above. He will still be man when he has evolved into that glorious creature of the future whose body is deathless and whose mind rules the universe.

Professor Michael, looking over Northwood's shoulder, interrupted the reading:

"*Man always has been man*," he droned emphatically. "That's not original with friend Mundson, of course; yet it is a theory that has not received sufficient investigation." He indicated another marked paragraph. "Read this thoughtfully, John. It's the crux of Mundson's thought."

Northwood continued:

Since the human body is chemical and electrical, increased knowledge of its powers and limitations will enable us to work with Nature in her sublime but infinitely slow

processes of human evolution. We need not wait another fifty thousand years to be godlike creatures. Perhaps even now we may be standing at the beginning of the splendid bridge that will take us to that state of perfected evolution when we shall be Creatures who have reached the Light.

Northwood looked questioningly at the professor.
"Queer, fantastic thing, isn't it?"

Professor Michael smoothed his thin, gray hair with his dried-out hand. "Fantastic?" His intellectual eyes behind the thick glasses sought the ceiling. "Who can say? Haven't you ever wondered why all parents expect their children to be nearer perfection than themselves, and why is it a natural impulse for them to be willing to sacrifice themselves to better their offspring?" He paused and moistened his pale, wrinkled lips. "Instinct, Northwood. We Creatures of the Light know that our race shall reach that point in evolution when, as perfect creatures, we shall rule all matter and live forever." He punctuated the last words with blows on the table.

Northwood laughed dryly. "How many thousands of years are you looking forward, Professor?"

The professor made an obscure noise that sounded like a smothered sniff. "You and I shall never agree on the point that mental advancement may wipe out physical limitations in the human race, perhaps in a few hundred years. It seems as though your profound admiration for Dr. Mundson would win you over to this pet theory."

"But what sane man can believe that even perfectly developed beings, through mental control, could overcome Nature's fixed laws?"

"We don't know! We don't know!" The professor slapped the magazine with an emphatic hand. "Emil Mundson hasn't written this article for nothing. He's paving the way for some announcement that will startle the scientific world. I know him. In the same manner he gave out veiled hints of his various brilliant discoveries and inventions long before he offered them to the world."

"But Dr. Mundson is an electrical wizard. He would not be delving seriously into the mysteries of evolution, would he?"

"Why not?" The professor's wizened face screwed up wisely. "A year ago, when he was back from one of those mysterious long excursions he takes in that weirdly different aircraft of his, about which he is so secretive, he told me that he was conducting experiments to prove his belief that the human brain generates electric current, and that the electrical impulses in the brain set up radioactive waves that some day, among other miracles, will make thought communication possible. Perfect man, he says, will perform mental feats which will give him complete mental domination over the physical."

Northwood finished reading and turned thoughtfully to the window. His profile in repose had the straight-nosed, full-lipped perfection of a Greek coin. Old, wizened Professor Michael, gazing at him covertly, smothered a sigh.

"I wish you knew Dr. Mundson," he said. "He, the

ugliest man in the world, delights in physical perfection. He would revel in your splendid body and brilliant mind."

Northwood blushed hotly. "You'll have to arrange a meeting between us."

"I have." The professor's thin, dry lips pursed comically. "He'll drop in to see you within a few days."

And now John Northwood sat holding Dr. Mundson's card and the wallet which the scientist had so mysteriously dropped at his feet.

Here was high adventure, perhaps, for which he had been singled out by the famous electrical wizard. While excitement mounted in his blood, Northwood again examined the photograph. The girl's strange eyes, odd in expression rather than in size or shape, seemed to hold him. The young man's breath came quicker.

"It's a challenge," he said softly. "It won't hurt to see what it's all about."

His watch showed eleven o'clock. He would return the wallet that night. Into his coat pocket he slipped a revolver. One sometimes needed weapons in Indian Court.

He took a taxi, which soon turned from the well-lighted streets into a section where squalid houses crowded against each other, and dirty children swarmed in the streets in their last games of the day.

Indian Court was little more than an alley, dark and evil smelling.

The chauffeur stopped at the entrance and said:

"If I drive in, I'll have to back out, sir. Number forty-four and a half is the end house, facing the entrance."

"You've been here before?" asked Northwood.

"Last week I drove the queerest bird here—a fellow as good-looking as you, who had me follow the taxi occupied by a hunchback with a face like Old Nick." The man hesitated and went on haltingly: "It might

sound goofy, mister, but there was something funny about my fare. He jumped out, asked me the charge, and, in the moment I glanced at my taxi-meter, he disappeared. Yes, sir. Vanished, owing me four dollars, six bits. It was almost ghostlike, mister."

Northwood laughed nervously and dismissed him. He found his number and knocked at the dilapidated door. He heard a sudden movement in the lighted room beyond, and the door opened quickly.

Dr. Mundson faced him.

"I knew you'd come!" he said with a slight Teutonic accent. "Often I'm not wrong in sizing up my man. Come in."

Northwood cleared his throat awkwardly. "You dropped your wallet at my feet, Dr. Mundson. I tried to stop you before you got away, but I guess you did not hear me."

He offered the wallet, but the hunchback waved it aside.

"A ruse, of course," he confessed. "It just was my way of testing what your Professor Michael told about you—that you are extraordinarily intelligent, virile, and imaginative. Had you sent the wallet to me, I should have sought elsewhere for my man. Come in."

Northwood followed him into a living room evidently recently furnished in a somewhat hurried manner. The furniture, although rich, was not placed to best advantage. The new rug was a trifle crooked on the floor, and the lamp shades clashed in color with the other furnishings.

Dr. Mundson's intense eyes swept over Northwood's tall, slim body.

"Ah, you're a man!" he said softly. "You are what all men would be if we followed Nature's plan that only the fit shall survive. But modern science is permitting the unfit to live and to mix their defective beings with the developing race!" His huge fist gesticulated madly. "Fools! Fools! They need me and perfect men like you."

"Why?"

"Because you can help me in my plan to populate the earth with a new race of godlike people. But don't question me too closely now. Even if I should explain, you would call me insane. But watch; gradually I shall unfold the mystery before you, so that you will believe."

He reached for the wallet that Northwood still held, opened it with a monstrous hand, and reached for the photograph. "She shall bring you love. She's more beautiful than a poet's dream."

A warm flush crept over the young man's face.

"I can easily understand," he said, "how a man could love her, but for me she comes too late."

"Pooh! Fiddlesticks!" The scientist snapped his fingers. "This girl was created for you. That other—you will forget her the moment you set eyes on the sweet flesh of this Athalia. She is an houri from Paradise—a maiden of musk and incense." He held

the girl's photograph toward the young man. "Keep it. She is yours, if you are strong enough to hold her."

Northwood opened his card case and placed the picture inside, facing Mary's photograph. Again the warning words of the mysterious stranger rang in his memory: "*The thing inside never will be yours.*"

"Where to," he said eagerly; "and when do we start?"

"To the new Garden of Eden," said the scientist, with such a beatific smile that his face was less hideous.

"We start immediately. I have arranged with Professor Michael for you to go."

Northwood followed Dr. Mundson to the street and walked with him a few blocks to a garage where the scientist's motor car waited.

"The apartment in Indian Court is just a little eccentricity of mine," explained Dr. Mundson. "I need people in my work, people whom I must select through swift, sure tests. The apartment comes in handy, as to-night."

Northwood scarcely noted where they were going, or how long they had been on the way. He was vaguely aware that they had left the city behind, and were now passing through farms bathed in moonlight.

At last they entered a path that led through a bit of woodland. For half a mile the path continued, and then ended at a small, enclosed field. In the middle of this rested a queer aircraft. Northwood knew it was a flying machine only by the propellers mounted on the top of the huge ball-shaped body. There were no wings, no birdlike hull, no tail.

"It looks almost like a little world ready to fly off into space," he commented.

"It is just about that." The scientist's squat, bunched-out body, settled squarely on long, thin, straddled legs, looked gnomelike in the moonlight. "One cannot copy flesh with steel and wood, but one can make metal perform magic of which flesh is not capable. My sun-ship is not a mechanical reproduction of a bird. It is—but, climb in, young friend."

Northwood followed Dr. Mundson into the aircraft. The moment the scientist closed the metal door behind them, Northwood was instantly aware of some concealed horror that vibrated through his nerves. For one dreadful moment, he expected some terrific agent of the shadows that escaped the electric lights to leap upon him. And this was odd, for nothing could be saner than the globular interior of the aircraft, divided into four wedge-shaped apartments.

Dr. Mundson also paused at the door, puzzled, hesitant.

"Someone has been here!" he exclaimed. "Look, Northwood! The bunk has been occupied—the one in this cabin I had set aside for you."

He pointed to the disarranged bunk, where the impression of a head could still be seen on a pillow.

"A tramp, perhaps."

"No! The door was locked, and, as you saw, the fence around this field was protected with barbed wire.

There's something wrong. I felt it on my trip here all the way, like someone watching me in the dark. And don't laugh! I have stopped laughing at all things that seem unnatural. You don't know what is natural."

Northwood shivered. "Maybe someone is concealed about the ship."

"Impossible. Me, I thought so, too. But I looked and looked, and there was nothing."

All evening Northwood had burned to tell the scientist about the handsome stranger in the Mad Hatter Club. But even now he shrank from saying that a man had vanished before his eyes.

Dr. Mundson was working with a succession of buttons and levers. There was a slight jerk, and then the strange craft shot up, straight as a bullet from a gun, with scarcely a sound other than a continuous whistle.

"The vertical rising aircraft perfected," explained Dr. Mundson. "But what would you think if I told you that

there is not an ounce of gasoline in my heavier-than-air craft?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. An electrical genius would seek for a less obsolete source of power."

In the bright flare of the electric lights, the scientist's ugly face flushed. "The man who harnesses the sun rules the world. He can make the desert places bloom, the frozen poles balmy and verdant. You, John Northwood, are one of the very few to fly in a machine operated solely by electrical energy from the sun's rays."

"Are you telling me that this airship is operated with power from the sun?"

"Yes. And I cannot take the credit for its invention." He sighed. "The dream was mine, but a greater brain developed it—a brain that may be greater than I suspect." His face grew suddenly graver.

A little later Northwood said: "It seems that we must be making fabulous speed."

"Perhaps!" Dr. Mundson worked with the controls.

"Here, I've cut her down to the average speed of the ordinary airplane. Now you can see a bit of the night scenery."

Northwood peeped out the thick glass porthole. Far below, he saw two tiny streaks of light, one smooth and stationery, the other wavering as though it were a reflection in water.

"That can't be a lighthouse!" he cried.

The scientist glanced out. "It is. We're approaching the Florida Keys."

"Impossible! We've been traveling less than an hour."

"But, my young friend, do you realize that my sun-ship has a speed of over one thousand miles an hour, how much over I dare not tell you?"

Throughout the night, Northwood sat beside Dr. Mundson, watching his deft fingers control the simple-looking buttons and levers. So fast was their

flight now that, through the portholes, sky and earth looked the same: dark gray films of emptiness. The continuous weird whistle from the hidden mechanism of the sun-ship was like the drone of a monster insect, monotonous and soporific during the long intervals when the scientist was too busy with his controls to engage in conversation.

For some reason that he could not explain, Northwood had an aversion to going into the sleeping apartment behind the control room. Then, towards morning, when the suddenly falling temperature struck a biting chill throughout the sun-ship, Northwood, going into the cabin for fur coats, discovered why his mind and body shrank in horror from the cabin.

After he had procured the fur coats from a closet, he paused a moment, in the privacy of the cabin, to look at Athalia's picture. Every nerve in his body leaped to meet the magnetism of her beautiful eyes. Never had Mary Burns stirred emotion like this in him. He hung over Mary's picture, wistfully, hoping almost prayerfully that he could react to her as he did to

Athalia; but her pale, over-intellectual face left him cold.

"Cad!" he ground out between his teeth. "Forgetting her so soon!"

The two pictures were lying side by side on a little table. Suddenly an obscure noise in the room caught his attention. It was more vibration than noise, for small sounds could scarcely be heard above the whistle of the sun-ship. A slight compression of the air against his neck gave him the eery feeling that someone was standing close behind him. He wheeled and looked over his shoulder. Half ashamed of his startled gesture, he again turned to his pictures. Then a sharp cry broke from him.

Athalia's picture was gone.

He searched for it everywhere in the room, in his own pockets, under the furniture. It was nowhere to be found.

In sudden, overpowering horror, he seized the fur

coats and returned to the control room.

Dr. Mundson was changing the speed.

"Look out the window!" he called to Northwood.

The young man looked and started violently. Day had come, and now that the sun-ship was flying at a moderate speed, the ocean beneath was plainly visible; and its entire surface was covered with broken floes of ice and small, ragged icebergs. He seized a telescope and focused it below. A typical polar scene met his eyes: penguins strutted about on cakes of ice, a whale blowing in the icy water.

"A part of the Antarctic that has never been explored," said Dr. Mundson; "and there, just showing on the horizon, is the Great Ice Barrier." His characteristic smile lighted the morose black eyes. "I am enough of the dramatist to wish you to be impressed with what I shall show you within less than an hour. Accordingly, I shall make a landing and let you feel polar ice under your feet."

After less than a minute's search, Dr. Mundson found a suitable place on the ice for a landing, and, with a few deft manipulations of the controls, brought the sun-ship swooping down like an eagle on its prey.

For a long moment after the scientist had stepped out on the ice, Northwood paused at the door. His feet were chained by a strange reluctance to enter this white, dead wilderness of ice. But Dr. Mundson's impatient, "Ready?" drew from him one last glance at the cozy interior of the sun-ship before he, too, went out into the frozen stillness.

They left the sun-ship resting on the ice like a fallen silver moon, while they wandered to the edge of the Barrier and looked at the gray, narrow stretch of sea between the ice pack and the high cliffs of the Barrier. The sun of the commencing six-months' Antarctic day was a low, cold ball whose slanted rays struck the ice with blinding whiteness. There were constant falls of ice from the Barrier, which thundered into the ocean amid great clouds of ice smoke that lingered like wraiths around the edge. It was a scene of loneliness and waiting death.

"What's that?" exclaimed the scientist suddenly.

Out of the white silence shrilled a low whistle, a familiar whistle. Both men wheeled toward the sun-ship.

Before their horrified eyes, the great sphere jerked and glided up, and swerved into the heavens.

Up it soared; then, gaining speed, it swung into the blue distance until, in a moment, it was a tiny star that flickered out even as they watched.

Both men screamed and cursed and flung up their arms despairingly. A penguin, attracted by their cries, waddled solemnly over to them and regarded them with manlike curiosity.

"Stranded in the coldest spot on earth!" groaned the scientist.

"Why did it start itself, Dr. Mundson!" Northwood narrowed his eyes as he spoke.

"It didn't!" The scientist's huge face, red from cold, quivered with helpless rage. "Human hands started it."

"What! Whose hands?"

"*Ach!* Do I know?" His Teutonic accent grew more pronounced, as it always did when he was under emotional stress. "Somebody whose brain is better than mine. Somebody who found a way to hide away from our eyes. *Ach, Gott!* Don't let me think!"

His great head sank between his shoulders, giving him, in his fur suit, the grotesque appearance of a friendly brown bear.

"Doctor Mundson," said Northwood suddenly, "did you have an enemy, a man with the face and body of a pagan god—a great, blond creature with eyes as cold and cruel as the ice under our feet?"

"Wait!" The huge round head jerked up. "How do you know about Adam? You have not seen him, won't see him until we arrive at our destination."

"But I have seen him. He was sitting not thirty feet from you in the Mad Hatter's Club last night. Didn't you know? He followed me to the street, spoke to me, and then—" Northwood stopped. How could he let the insane words pass his lips?

"Then, what? Speak up!"

Northwood laughed nervously. "It sounds foolish, but I saw him vanish like that." He snapped his fingers.

"*Ach, Gott!*" All the ruddy color drained from the scientist's face. As though talking to himself, he continued:

"Then it is true, as he said. He has crossed the bridge. He has reached the Light. And now he comes to see the world he will conquer—came unseen when I refused my permission."

He was silent for a long time, pondering. Then he turned passionately to Northwood.

"John Northwood, kill me! I have brought a new

horror into the world. From the unborn future, I have snatched a creature who has reached the Light too soon. Kill me!" He bowed his great, shaggy head.

"What do you mean, Dr. Mundson: that this Adam has arrived at a point in evolution beyond this age?"

"Yes. Think of it! I visioned godlike creatures with the souls of gods. But, Heaven help us, man always will be man: always will lust for conquest. You and I, Northwood, and all others are barbarians to Adam. He and his kind will do what men always do to barbarians—conquer and kill."

"Are there more like him?" Northwood struggled with a smile of unbelief.

"I don't know. I did not know that Adam had reached a point so near the ultimate. But you have seen. Already he is able to set aside what we call natural laws."

Northwood looked at the scientist closely. The man was surely mad—mad in this desert of white death.

"Come!" he said cheerfully. "Let's build an Eskimo snow house. We can live on penguins for days. And who knows what may rescue us?"

For three hours the two worked at cutting ice blocks. With snow for mortar, they built a crude shelter which enabled them to rest out of the cold breath of the spiral polar winds that blew from the south.

Dr. Mundson was sitting at the door of their hut, moodily pulling at his strong, black pipe. As though a fit had seized him, he leaped up and let his pipe fall to the ice.

"Look!" he shouted. "The sun-ship!"

It seemed but a moment before the tiny speck on the horizon had swept overhead, a silver comet on the grayish-blue polar sky. In another moment it had swooped down, eaglewise, scarcely fifty feet from the ice hut.

Dr. Mundson and Northwood ran forward. From the metal sphere stepped the stranger of the Mad Hatter

Club. His tall, straight form, erect and slim, swung toward them over the ice.

"Adam!" shouted Dr. Mundson. "What does this mean? How dare you!"

Adam's laugh was like the happy demonstration of a boy. "So? You think you still are master? You think I returned because I revered you yet?" Hate shot viciously through the freezing blue eyes. "You worm of the Black Age!"

Northwood shuddered. He had heard those strange words addressed to himself scarcely more than twelve hours ago.

Adam was still speaking: "With a thought I could annihilate you where you are standing. But I have use for you. Get in." He swept his hand to the sun-ship.

Both men hesitated. Then Northwood strode forward until he was within three feet of Adam. They stood thus, eyeing each other, two splendid beings, one blond as a Viking, the other dark and vital.

"Just what is your game?" demanded Northwood.

The icy eyes shot forth a gleam like lightning. "I needn't tell you, of course, but I may as well let you suffer over the knowledge." He curled his lips with superb scorn. "I have one human weakness. I want Athalia." The icy eyes warmed for a fleeting second. "She is anticipating her meeting with you—bah! The taste of these women of the Black Age! I could kill you, of course; but that would only inflame her. And so I take you to her, thrust you down her throat. When she sees you, she will fly to me." He spread his magnificent chest.

"Adam!" Dr. Mundson's face was dark with anger.

"What of Eve?"

"Who are you to question my actions? What a fool you were to let me, whom you forced into life thousands of years too soon, grow more powerful than you! Before I am through with all of you petty creatures of the Black Age, you will call me more terrible than your Jehovah! For see what you have called forth from unborn time."

He vanished.

Before the startled men could recover from the shock of it, the vibrant, too-new voice went on:

"I am sorry for you, Mundson, because, like you, I need specimens for my experiments. What a splendid specimen you will be!" His laugh was ugly with significance. "Get in, worms!"

Unseen hands cuffed and pushed them into the sun-ship.

Inside, Dr. Mundson stumbled to the control room, white and drawn of face, his great brain seemingly paralyzed by the catastrophe.

"You needn't attempt tricks," went on the voice. "I am watching you both. You cannot even hide your thoughts from me."

And thus began the strange continuation of the journey. Not once, in that wild half-hour's rush over the polar ice clouds, did they see Adam. They saw and

heard only the weird signs of his presence: a puffing cigar hanging in midair, a glass of water swinging to unseen lips, a ghostly voice hurling threats and insults at them.

Once the scientist whispered: "Don't cross him; it is useless. John Northwood, you'll have to fight a demigod for your woman!"

Because of the terrific speed of the sun-ship, Northwood could distinguish nothing of the topographical details below. At the end of half-an-hour, the scientist slowed enough to point out a tall range of snow-covered mountains, over which hovered a play of colored lights like the *aurora australis*.

"Behind those mountains," he said, "is our destination."

Almost in a moment, the sun-ship had soared over the peaks. Dr. Mundson kept the speed low enough for Northwood to see the splendid view below.

In the giant cup formed by the encircling mountain range was a green valley of tropical luxuriance.

Stretches of dense forest swept half up the mountains and filled the valley cup with tangled verdure. In the center, surrounded by a broad field and a narrow ring of woods, towered a group of buildings. From the largest, which was circular, came the auroralike radiance that formed an umbrella of light over the entire valley.

"Do I guess right," said Northwood, "that the light is responsible for this oasis in the ice?"

"Yes," said Dr. Mundson. "In your American slang, it is canned sunshine containing an overabundance of certain rays, especially the Life Ray, which I have isolated." He smiled proudly. "You needn't look startled, my friend. Some of the most common things store sunlight. On very dark nights, if you have sharp eyes, you can see the radiance given off by certain flowers, which many naturalists say is trapped sunshine. The familiar nasturtium and the marigold opened for me the way to hold sunshine against the long polar night, for they taught me how to apply the

Einstein theory of bent light. Stated simply, during the polar night, when the sun is hidden over the rim of the world, we steal some of his rays; during the polar day we concentrate the light."

"But could stored sunshine alone give enough warmth for the luxuriant growth of those jungles?"

"An overabundance of the Life Ray is responsible for the miraculous growth of all life in New Eden. The Life Ray is Nature's most powerful force. Yet Nature is often niggardly and paradoxical in her use of her powers. In New Eden, we have forced the powers of creation to take ascendancy over the powers of destruction."

At Northwood's sudden start, the scientist laughed and continued: "Is it not a pity that Nature, left alone, requires twenty years to make a man who begins to die in another ten years? Such waste is not tolerated in New Eden, where supermen are younger than babes and—"

"Come, worms; let's land."

It was Adam's voice. Suddenly he materialized, a blond god, whose eyes and flesh were too new.

They were in a world of golden skylight, warmth and tropical vegetation. The field on which they had landed was covered with a velvety green growth of very soft, fine-bladed grass, sprinkled with tiny, star-shaped blue flowers. A balmy, sweet-scented wind, downy as the breeze of a dream, blew gently along the grass and tingled against Northwood's skin refreshingly. Almost instantly he had the sensation of perfect well being, and this feeling of physical perfection was part of the ecstasy that seemed to pervade the entire valley. Grass and breeze and golden skylight were saturated with a strange ether of joyousness.

At one end of the field was a dense jungle, cut through by a road that led to the towering building from which, while above in the sun-ship, they had seen the golden light issue.

From the jungle road came a man and a woman, large, handsome people, whose flesh and eyes had the

sinister newness of Adam's. Even before they came close enough to speak, Northwood was aware that while they seemed of Adam's breed, they were yet unlike him. The difference was psychical rather than physical; they lacked the aura of hate and horror that surrounded Adam. The woman drew Adam's head down and kissed him affectionately on both cheeks.

Adam, from his towering height, patted her shoulder impatiently and said: "Run on back to the laboratory, grandmother. We're following soon. You have some new human embryos, I believe you told me this morning."

"Four fine specimens, two of them being your sister's twins."

"Splendid! I was sure that creation had stopped with my generation. I must see them." He turned to the scientist and Northwood. "You needn't try to leave this spot. Of course I shall know instantly and deal with you in my own way. Wait here."

He strode over the emerald grass on the heels of the

woman.

Northwood asked: "Why does he call that girl grandmother?"

"Because she is his ancestress." He stirred uneasily.

"She is of the first generation brought forth in the laboratory, and is no different from you or I, except that, at the age of five years, she is the ancestress of twenty generations."

"My God!" muttered Northwood.

"Don't start being horrified, my friend. Forget about so-called natural laws while you are in New Eden. Remember, here we have isolated the Life Ray. But look! Here comes your Athalia!"

Northwood gazed covertly at the beautiful girl approaching them with a rarely graceful walk. She was tall, slender, round-bosomed, narrow-hipped, and she held her lovely body in the erect poise of splendid health. Northwood had a confused realization of uncovered bronzy hair, drawn to the back of a white

neck in a bunch of short curls; of immense soft black eyes; lips the color of blood, and delicate, plump flesh on which the golden skylight lingered graciously. He was instantly glad to see that while she possessed the freshness of young girlhood, her skin and eyes did not have the horrible newness of Adam's.

When she was still twenty feet distant, Northwood met her eyes and she smiled shyly. The rich, red blood ran through her face; and he, too, flushed.

She went to Dr. Mundson and, placing her hands on his thick shoulders, kissed him affectionately.

"I've been worried about you, Daddy Mundson." Her rich contralto voice matched her exotic beauty. "Since you and Adam had that quarrel the day you left, I did not see him until this morning, when he landed the sun-ship alone."

"And you pleaded with him to return for us?"

"Yes." Her eyes drooped and a hot flush swept over her face.

Dr. Mundson smiled. "But I'm back now, Athalia, and I've brought some one whom I hope you will be glad to know."

Reaching for her hand, he placed it simply in Northwood's.

"This is John, Athalia. Isn't he handsomer than the pictures of him which I telegraphed to you? God bless both of you."

He walked ahead and turned his back.

A magical half hour followed for Northwood and Athalia. The girl told him of her past life, how Dr. Mundson had discovered her one year ago working in a New York sweat shop, half dead from consumption. Without friends, she was eager to follow the scientist to New Eden, where he promised she would recover her health immediately.

"And he was right, John," she said shyly. "The Life Ray, that marvelous energy ray which penetrates to the utmost depths of earth and ocean, giving to the

cells of all living bodies the power to grow and remain animate, has been concentrated by Dr. Mundson in his stored sunshine. The Life Ray healed me almost immediately."

Northwood looked down at the glorious girl beside him, whose eyes already fluttered away from his like shy black butterflies. Suddenly he squeezed the soft hand in his and said passionately:

"Athalia! Because Adam wants you and will get you if he can, let us set aside all the artificialities of civilization. I have loved you madly ever since I saw your picture. If you can say the same to me, it will give me courage to face what I know lies before me."

Athalia, her face suddenly tender, came closer to him.

"John Northwood, I love you."

Her red lips came temptingly close; but before he could touch them, Adam suddenly pushed his body between him and Athalia. Adam was pale, and all the iciness was gone from his blue eyes, which were deep

and dark and very human. He looked down at Athalia, and she looked up at him, two handsome specimens of perfect manhood and womanhood.

"Fast work, Athalia!" The new vibrant voice was strained. "I was hoping you would be disappointed in him, especially after having been wooed by me this morning. I could take you if I wished, of course; but I prefer to win you in the ancient manner. Dismiss him!" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder in Northwood's direction.

Athalia flushed vividly and looked at him almost compassionately. "I am not great enough for you, Adam. I dare not love you."

Adam laughed, and still oblivious of Northwood and Dr. Mundson, folded his arms over his breast. With the golden skylight on his burnished hair, he was a valiant, magnificent spectacle.

"Since the beginning of time, gods and archangels have looked upon the daughters of men and found them fair. Mate with me, Athalia, and I, fifty thousand

years beyond the creature Mundson has selected for you, will make you as I am, the deathless overlord of life and all nature."

He drew her hand to his bosom.

For one dark moment, Northwood felt himself seared by jealousy, for, through the plump, sweet flesh of Athalia's face, he saw the red blood leap again. How could she withhold herself from this splendid superman?

But her answer, given with faltering voice, was the old, simple one: "I have promised him, Adam. I love him." Tears trembled on her thick lashes.

"So! I cannot get you in the ancient manner. Now I'll use my own."

He seized her in his arms crushed her against him, and, laughing over her head at Northwood, bent his glistening head and kissed her on the mouth.

There was a blinding flash of blue electric sparks—

and nothing else. Both Adam and Athalia had vanished.

Adam's voice came in a last mocking challenge: "I shall be what no other gods before me have been—a good sport. I'll leave you both to your own devices, until I want you again."

White-lipped and trembling, Northwood groaned: "What has he done now?"

Dr. Mundson's great head drooped. "I don't know. Our bodies are electric and chemical machines; and a super intelligence has discovered new laws of which you and I are ignorant."

"But Athalia...."

"She is safe; he loves her."

"Loves her!" Northwood shivered. "I cannot believe that those freezing eyes could ever look with love on a woman."

"Adam is a man. At heart he is as human as the first man-creature that wallowed in the new earth's slime." His voice dropped as though he were musing aloud. "It might be well to let him have Athalia. She will help to keep vigor in the new race, which would stop reproducing in another few generations without the injection of Black Age blood."

"Do you want to bring more creatures like Adam into the world?" Northwood flung at him. "You have tampered with life enough, Dr. Mundson. But, although Adam has my sympathy, I'm not willing to turn Athalia over to him."

"Well said! Now come to the laboratory for chemical nourishment and rest under the Life Ray."

They went to the great circular building from whose highest tower issued the golden radiance that shamed the light of the sun, hanging low in the northeast.

"John Northwood," said Dr. Mundson, "with that laboratory, which is the center of all life in New Eden, we'll have to whip Adam. He gave us what he called a

'sporting chance' because he knew that he is able to send us and all mankind to a doom more terrible than hell. Even now we might be entering some hideous trap that he has set for us."

They entered by a side entrance and went immediately to what Dr. Mundson called the Rest Ward. Here, in a large room, were ranged rows of cots, on many of which lay men basking in the deep orange flood of light which poured from individual lamps set above each cot.

"It is the Life Ray!" said Dr. Mundson reverently. "The source of all growth and restoration in Nature. It is the power that bursts open the seed and brings forth the shoot, that increases the shoot into a giant tree. It is the same power that enables the fertilized ovum to develop into an animal. It creates and recreates cells almost instantly; accordingly, it is the perfect substitute for sleep. Stretch out, enjoy its power; and while you rest, eat these nourishing tablets."

Northwood lay on a cot, and Dr. Mundson turned the Life Ray on him. For a few minutes a delicious

drowsiness fell upon him, producing a spell of perfect peace which the cells of his being seemed to drink in. For another delirious, fleeting space, every inch of him vibrated with a thrilling sensation of freshness. He took a deep, ecstatic breath and opened his eyes.

"Enough," said Dr. Mundson, switching off the Ray. "After three minutes of rejuvenation, you are commencing again with perfect cells. All ravages from disease and wear have been corrected."

Northwood leaped up joyously. His handsome eyes sparkled, his skin glowed. "I feel great! Never felt so good since I was a kid."

A pleased grin spread over the scientist's homely face. "See what my discovery will mean to the world! In the future we shall all go to the laboratory for recuperation and nourishment. We'll have almost twenty-four hours a day for work and play."

He stretched out on the bed contentedly. "Some day, when my work is nearly done, I shall permit the Life Ray to cure my hump."

"Why not now?"

Dr. Mundson sighed. "If I were perfect, I should cease to be so overwhelmingly conscious of the importance of perfection." He settled back to enjoyment of the Life Ray.

A few minutes later, he jumped up, alert as a boy. "*Ach!* That's fine. Now I'll show you how the Life Ray speeds up development and produces four generations of humans a year."

With restored energy, Northwood began thinking of Athalia. As he followed Dr. Mundson down a long corridor, he yearned to see her again, to be certain that she was safe. Once he imagined he felt a gentle, soft-fleshed touch against his hand, and was disappointed not to see her walking by his side. Was she with him, unseen? The thought was sweet.

Before Dr. Mundson opened the massive bronze door at the end of the corridor, he said:

"Don't be surprised or shocked over anything you see

here, John Northwood. This is the Baby Laboratory."

They entered a room which seemed no different from a hospital ward. On little white beds lay naked children of various sizes, perfect, solemn-eyed youngsters and older children as beautiful as animated statues. Above each bed was a small Life Ray projector. A white-capped nurse went from bed to bed.

"They are recuperating from the daily educational period," said the scientist. "After a few minutes of this they will go into the growing room, which I shall have to show you through a window. Should you and I enter, we might be changed in a most extraordinary manner." He laughed mischievously. "But, look, Northwood!"

He slid back a panel in the wall, and Northwood peered in through a thick pane of clear glass. The room was really an immense outdoor arena, its only carpet the fine-bladed grass, its roof the blue sky cut in the middle by an enormous disc from which shot the aurora of trapped sunshine which made a golden

umbrella over the valley. Through openings in the bottom of the disc poured a fine rain of rays which fell constantly upon groups of children, youths and young girls, all clad in the merest scraps of clothing. Some were dancing, others were playing games, but all seemed as supremely happy as the birds and butterflies which fluttered about the shrubs and flowers edging the arena.

"I don't expect you to believe," said Dr. Mundson, "that the oldest young man in there is three months old. You cannot see visible changes in a body which grows as slowly as the human being, whose normal period of development is twenty years or more. But I can give you visible proof of how fast growth takes place under the full power of the Life Ray. Plant life, which, even when left to nature, often develops from seed to flower within a few weeks or months, can be seen making its miraculous changes under the Life Ray. Watch those gorgeous purple flowers over which the butterflies are hovering."

Northwood followed his pointing finger. Near the glass window through which they looked grew an

enormous bank of resplendent violet colored flowers, which literally enshrouded the entire bush with their royal glory. At first glance it seemed as though a violent wind were snatching at flower and bush, but closer inspection proved that the agitation was part of the plant itself. And then he saw that the movements were the result of perpetual composition and growth.

He fastened his eyes on one huge bud. He saw it swell, burst, spread out its passionate purple velvet, lift the broad flower face to the light for a joyous minute. A few seconds later a butterfly lighted airily to sample its nectar and to brush the pollen from its yellow dusted wings. Scarcely had the winged visitor flown away than the purple petals began to wither and fall away, leaving the seed pod on the stem. The visible change went on in this seed pod. It turned rapidly brown, dried out, and then sent the released seeds in a shower to the rich black earth below.

Scarcely had the seeds touched the ground than they sent up tiny green shoots that grew larger each moment. Within ten minutes there was a new plant a foot high. Within half an hour, the plant budded,

blossomed, and cast forth its own seed.

"You understand?" asked the scientist. "Development is going on as rapidly among the children. Before the first year has passed, the youngest baby will have grandchildren; that is, if the baby tests out fit to pass its seed down to the new generation. I know it sounds absurd. Yet you saw the plant."

"But Doctor," Northwood rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, "Nature's forces of destruction, of tearing down, are as powerful as her creative powers. You have discovered the ultimate in creation and upbuilding. But perhaps—oh, Lord, it is too awful to think!"

"Speak, Northwood!" The scientist's voice was impatient.

"It is nothing!" The pale young man attempted a smile. "I was only imagining some of the horror that could be thrust on the world if a supermind like Adam's should discover Nature's secret of death and destruction and speed it up as you have sped the life force."

"Ach Gott!" Dr. Mundson's face was white. "He has his own laboratory, where he works every day. Don't talk so loud. He might be listening. And I believe he can do anything he sets out to accomplish."

Close to Northwood's ear fell a faint, triumphant whisper: "Yes, he can do anything. How did you guess, worm?"

It was Adam's voice.

"Now come and see the Leyden jar mothers," said Dr. Mundson. "We do not wait for the child to be born to start our work."

He took Northwood to a laboratory crowded with strange apparatus, where young men and women worked. Northwood knew instantly that these people, although unusually handsome and strong, were not of Adam's generation. None of them had the look of newness which marked those who had grown up under the Life Ray.

"They are the perfect couples whom I combed the

world to find," said the scientist. "From their eugenic marriages sprang the first children that passed through the laboratory. I had hoped," he hesitated and looked sideways at Northwood, "I had dreamed of having the children of you and Athalia to help strengthen the New Race."

A wave of sudden disgust passed over Northwood.

"Thanks," he said tartly. "When I marry Athalia, I intend to have an old-fashioned home and a Black Age family. I don't relish having my children turned into—experiments."

"But wait until you see all the wonders of the laboratory! That is why I am showing you all this."

Northwood drew his handkerchief and mopped his brow. "It sickens me, Doctor! The more I see, the more pity I have for Adam—and the less I blame him for his rebellion and his desire to kill and to rule. Heavens! What a terrible thing you have done, experimenting with human life."

"Nonsense! Can you say that all life—all matter—is not the result of scientific experiment? Can you?" His black gaze made Northwood uncomfortable. "Buck up, young friend, for now I am going to show you a marvelous improvement on Nature's bungling ways—the Leyden jar mother." He raised his voice and called, "Lilith!"

The woman whom they had met on the field came forward.

"May we take a peep at Lona's twins?" asked the scientist. "They are about ready to go to the growing dome, are they not?"

"In five more minutes," said the woman. "Come see."

She lifted one of the black velvet curtains that lined an entire side of the laboratory and thereby disclosed a globular jar of glass and metal, connected by wires to a dynamo. Above the jar was a Life Ray projector. Lilith slid aside a metal portion of the jar, disclosing through the glass underneath the squirming, kicking body of a baby, resting on a bed of soft, spongy

substance, to which it was connected by the navel cord.

"The Leyden jar mother," said Dr. Mundson. "It is the dream of us scientists realized. The human mother's body does nothing but nourish and protect her unborn child, a job which science can do better. And so, in New Eden, we take the young embryo and place it in the Leyden jar mother, where the Life Ray, electricity, and chemical food shortens the period of gestation to a few days."

At that moment a bell under the Leyden jar began to ring. Dr. Mundson uncovered the jar and lifted out the child, a beautiful, perfectly formed boy, who began to cry lustily.

"Here is one baby who'll never be kissed," he said.

"He'll be nourished chemically, and, at the end of the week, will no longer be a baby. If you are patient, you can actually see the processes of development taking place under the Life Ray, for babies develop very fast."

Northwood buried his face in his hands. "Lord! This is awful. No childhood; no mother to mould his mind! No parents to watch over him, to give him their tender care!"

"Awful, fiddlesticks! Come see how children get their education, how they learn to use their hands and feet so they need not pass through the awkwardness of childhood."

He led Northwood to a magnificent building whose façade of white marble was as simply beautiful as a Greek temple. The side walls, built almost entirely of glass, permitted the synthetic sunshine to sweep from end to end. They first entered a library, where youths and young girls poured over books of all kinds. Their manner of reading mystified Northwood. With a single sweep of the eye, they seemed to devour a page, and then turned to the next. He stepped closer to peer over the shoulder of a beautiful girl. She was reading "Euclid's Elements of Geometry," in Latin, and she turned the pages as swiftly as the other girl occupying her table, who was devouring "Paradise Lost."

Dr. Mundson whispered to him: "If you do not believe that Ruth here is getting her Euclid, which she probably never saw before to-day, examine her from the book; that is, if you are a good enough Latin scholar."

Ruth stopped her reading to talk to him, and, in a few minutes, had completely dumbfounded him with her pedantic replies, which fell from lips as luscious and unformed as an infant's.

"Now," said Dr. Mundson, "test Rachael on her Milton. As far as she has read, she should not misquote a line, and her comments will probably prove her scholarly appreciation of Milton."

Word for word, Rachael was able to give him "Paradise Lost" from memory, except the last four pages, which she had not read. Then, taking the book from him, she swept her eyes over these pages, returned the book to him, and quoted copiously and correctly.

Dr. Mundson gloated triumphantly over his

astonishment. "There, my friend. Could you now be satisfied with old-fashioned children who spend long, expensive years in getting an education? Of course, your children will not have the perfect brains of these, yet, developed under the Life Ray, they should have splendid mentality.

"These children, through selective breeding, have brains that make everlasting records instantly. A page in a book, once seen, is indelibly retained by them, and understood. The same is true of a lecture, of an explanation given by a teacher, of even idle conversation. Any man or woman in this room should be able to repeat the most trivial conversation days old."

"But what of the arts, Dr. Mundson? Surely even your supermen and women cannot instantly learn to paint a masterpiece or to guide their fingers and their brains through the intricacies of a difficult musical composition."

"No?" His dark eyes glowed. "Come see!"

Before they entered another wing of the building, they heard a violin being played masterfully.

Dr. Mundson paused at the door.

"So that you may understand what you shall see, let me remind you that the nerve impulses and the coordinating means in the human body are purely electrical. The world has not yet accepted my theory, but it will. Under superman's system of education, the instantaneous records made on the brain give immediate skill to the acting parts of the body. Accordingly, musicians are made over night."

He threw open the door. Under a Life Ray projector, a beautiful, Juno-esque woman was playing a violin. Facing her, and with eyes fastened to hers, stood a young man, whose arms and slender fingers mimicked every motion she made. Presently she stopped playing and handed the violin to him. In her own masterly manner, he repeated the score she had played.

"That is Eve," whispered Dr. Mundson. "I had selected her as Adam's wife. But he does not want her, the

most brilliant woman of the New Race."

Northwood gave the woman an appraising look. "Who wants a perfect woman? I don't blame Adam for preferring Athalia. But how is she teaching her pupil?"

"Through thought vibration, which these perfect people have developed until they can record permanently the radioactive waves of the brains of others."

Eve turned, caught Northwood's eyes in her magnetic blue gaze, and smiled as only a goddess can smile upon a mortal she has marked as her own. She came toward him with outflung hands.

"So you have come!" Her vibrant contralto voice, like Adam's, held the birdlike, broken tremulo of a young child's. "I have been waiting for you, John Northwood."

Her eyes, as blue and icy as Adam's, lingered long on him, until he flinched from their steely magnetism.

She slipped her arm through his and drew him gently but firmly from the room, while Dr. Mundson stood gaping after them.

They were on a flagged terrace arched with roses of gigantic size, which sent forth billows of sensuous fragrance. Eve led him to a white marble seat piled with silk cushions, on which she reclined her superb body, while she regarded him from narrowed lids.

"I saw your picture that he televisioned to Athalia," she said. "What a botch Dr. Mundson has made of his mating." Her laugh rippled like falling water. "I want you, John Northwood!"

Northwood started and blushed furiously. Smile dimples broke around her red, humid lips.

"Ah, you're old-fashioned!"

Her large, beautiful hand, fleshed more tenderly than any woman's hand he had ever seen, went out to him appealingly. "I can bring you amorous delight that your Athalia never could offer in her few years of

youth. And I'll never grow old, John Northwood."

She came closer until he could feel the fragrant warmth of her tawny, ribbon bound hair pulse against his face. In sudden panic he drew back.

"But I am pledged to Athalia!" tumbled from him. "It is all a dreadful mistake, Eve. You and Adam were created for each other."

"Hush!" The lightning that flashed from her blue eyes changed her from seductress to angry goddess.

"Created for each other! Who wants a made-to-measure lover?"

The luscious lips trembled slightly, and into the vivid eyes crept a suspicion of moisture. Eternal Eve's weapons! Northwood's handsome face relaxed with pity.

"I want you, John Northwood," she continued shamelessly. "Our love will be sublime." She leaned heavily against him, and her lips were like a blood red flower pressed against white satin. "Come, beloved,

kiss me!"

Northwood gasped and turned his head. "Don't, Eve!"

"But a kiss from me will set you apart from all your generation, John Northwood, and you shall understand what no man of the Black Age could possibly fathom."

Her hair had partly fallen from its ribbon bandage and poured its fragrant gold against his shoulder.

"For God's sake, don't tempt me!" he groaned. "What do you mean?"

"That mental and physical and spiritual contact with me will temporarily give you, a three-dimension creature, the power of the new sense, which your race will not have for fifty thousand years."

White-lipped and trembling, he demanded: "Explain!"

Eve smiled. "Have you not guessed that Adam has developed an additional sense? You've seen him

vanish. He and I have the sixth sense of Time Perception—the new sense which enables us to penetrate what you of the Black Age call the Fourth Dimension. Even you whose mentalities are framed by three dimensions have this sixth sense instinct. Your very religion is based on it, for you believe that in another life you shall step into Time, or, as you call it, eternity." She leaned closer so that her hair brushed his cheek. "What is eternity, John Northwood? Is it not keeping forever ahead of the Destroyer? The future is eternal, for it is never reached. Adam and I, through our new sense which comprehends Time and Space, can vanish by stepping a few seconds into the future, the Fourth Dimension of Space. Death can never reach us, not even accidental death, unless that which causes death could also slip into the future, which is not yet possible."

"But if the Fourth Dimension is future Time, why can one in the third dimension feel the touch of an unseen presence in the Fourth Dimension—hear his voice, even?"

"Thought vibration. The touch is not really felt nor the

voice heard: they are only imagined. The radioactive waves of the brain of even you Black Age people are swift enough to bridge Space and Time. And it is the mind that carries us beyond the third dimension."

Her red mouth reached closer to him, her blue eyes touched hidden forces that slept in remote cells of his being. "You are going into Eternal Time, John Northwood, Eternity without beginning or end. You understand? You feel it? Comprehend it? Now for the contact—kiss me!"

Northwood had seen Athalia vanish under Adam's kiss. Suddenly, in one mad burst of understanding, he leaned over to his magnificent temptress.

For a split second he felt the sweet pressure of baby-soft lips, and then the atoms of his body seemed to fly asunder. Black chaos held him for a frightful moment before he felt sanity return.

He was back on the terrace again, with Eve by his side. They were standing now. The world about him looked the same, yet there was a subtle change in

everything.

Eve laughed softly. "It is puzzling, isn't it? You're seeing everything as in a mirror. What was left before is now right. Only you and I are real. All else is but a vision, a dream. For now you and I are existing one minute in future time, or, more simply, we are in the Fourth Dimension. To everything in the third dimension, we are invisible. Let me show you that Dr. Mundson cannot see you."

They went back to the room beyond the terrace. Dr. Mundson was not present.

"There he goes down the jungle path," said Eve, looking out a window. She laughed. "Poor old fellow. The children of his genius are worrying him."

They were standing in the recess formed by a bay window. Eve picked up his hand and laid it against her face, giving him the full, blasting glory of her smiling blue eyes.

Northwood, looking away miserably, uttered a low cry.

Coming over the field beyond were Adam and Athalia. By the trimming on the blue dress she wore, he could see that she was still in the Fourth Dimension, for he did not see her as a mirror image.

A look of fear leaped to Eve's face. She clutched Northwood's arm, trembling.

"I don't want Adam to see that I have passed you beyond," she gasped. "We are existing but one minute in the future. Always Adam and I have feared to pass too far beyond the sweetness of reality. But now, so that Adam may not see us, we shall step five minutes into what-is-yet-to-be. And even he, with all his power, cannot see into a future that is more distant than that in which he exists."

She raised her humid lips to his. "Come, beloved."

Northwood kissed her. Again came the moment of confusion, of the awful vacancy that was like death, and then he found himself and Eve in the laboratory, following Adam and Athalia down a long corridor. Athalia was crying and pleading frantically with

Adam. Once she stopped and threw herself at his feet in a gesture of dramatic supplication, arms outflung, streaming eyes wide open with fear.

Adam stooped and lifted her gently and continued on his way, supporting her against his side.

Eve dug her fingers into Northwood's arm. Horror contorted her face, horror mixed with rage.

"My mind hears what he is saying, understands the vile plan he has made, John Northwood. He is on his way to his laboratory to destroy not only you and most of these in New Eden, but me as well. He wants only Athalia."

Striding forward like an avenging goddess, she pulled Northwood after her.

"Hurry!" she whispered. "Remember, you and I are five minutes in the future, and Adam is only one. We are witnessing what will occur four minutes from now. We yet have time to reach the laboratory before him and be ready for him when he enters. And because he

will have to go back to Present Time to do his work of destruction, I will be able to destroy him. Ah!"

Fierce joy burned in her flashing blue eyes, and her slender nostrils quivered delicately. Northwood, peeping at her in horror, knew that no mercy could be expected of her. And when she stopped at a certain door and inserted a key, he remembered Athalia. What if she should enter with Adam in Present Time?

They were inside Adam's laboratory, a huge apartment filled with queer apparatus and cages of live animals. The room was a strange paradox. Part of the equipment, the walls, and the floor was glistening with newness, and part was moulding with extreme age. The powers of disintegration that haunt a tropical forest seemed to be devouring certain spots of the room. Here, in the midst of bright marble, was a section of wall that seemed as old as the pyramids. The surface of the stone had an appalling mouldiness, as though it had been lifted from an ancient graveyard where it had lain in the festering ground for unwholesome centuries.

Between cracks in this stained and decayed section of stone grew fetid moss that quivered with the microscopic organisms that infest age-rotten places. Sections of the flooring and woodwork also reeked with mustiness. In one dark, webby corner of the room lay a pile of bleached bones, still tinted with the ghastly grays and pinks of putrefaction. Northwood, overwhelmingly nauseated, withdrew his eyes from the bones, only to see, in another corner, a pile of worm-eaten clothing that lay on the floor in the outline of a man.

Faint with the reek of ancient mustiness, Northwood retreated to the door, dizzy and staggering.

"It sickens you," said Eve, "and it sickens me also, for death and decay are not pleasant. Yet Nature, left to herself, reduces all to this. Every grave that has yawned to receive its prey hides corruption no less shocking. Nature's forces of creation and destruction forever work in partnership. Never satisfied with her composition, she destroys and starts again, building, building towards the ultimate of perfection. Thus, it is natural that if Dr. Mundson isolated the Life Ray,

Nature's supreme force of compensation, isolation of the Death Ray should closely follow. Adam, thirsting for power, has succeeded. A few sweeps of his unholy ray of decomposition will undo all Dr. Mundson's work in this valley and reduce it to a stinking holocaust of destruction. And the time for his striking has come!"

She seized his face and drew it toward her. "Quick!" she said. "We'll have to go back to the third dimension. I could leave you safe in the fourth, but if anything should happen to me, you would be stranded forever in future time."

She kissed his lips. In a moment, he was back in the old familiar world, where right is right and left is left. Again the subtle change wrought by Eve's magic lips had taken place.

Eve went to a machine standing in a corner of the room.

"Come here and get behind me, John Northwood. I want to test it before he enters."

Northwood stood behind her shoulder.

"Now watch!" she ordered. "I shall turn it on one of those cages of guinea pigs over there."

She swung the projector around, pointed it at the cage of small, squealing animals, and threw a lever. Instantly a cone of black mephitis shot forth, a loathsome, bituminous stream of putrefaction that reeked of the grave and the cesspool, of the utmost reaches of decay before the dust accepts the disintegrated atoms. The first touch of seething, pitchy destruction brought screams of sudden agony from the guinea pigs, but the screams were cut short as the little animals fell in shocking, instant decay. The very cage which imprisoned them shriveled and retreated from the hellish, devouring breath that struck its noisome rot into the heart of the wood and the metal, reducing both to revolting ruin.

Eve cut off the frightful power, and the black cone disappeared, leaving the room putrid with its defilement.

"And Adam would do that to the world," she said, her blue eyes like electric-shot icicles. "He would do it to you, John Northwood—and to me!" Her full bosom strained under the passion beneath.

"Listen!" She raised her hand warningly. "He comes! The destroyer comes!"

A hand was at the door. Eve reached for the lever, and, the same moment, Northwood leaned over her imploringly.

"If Athalia is with him!" he gasped. "You will not harm her?"

A wild shriek at the door, a slight scuffle, and then the doorknob was wrenched as though two were fighting over it.

"For God's sake, Eve!" implored Northwood. "Wait! Wait!"

"No! She shall die, too. You love her!"

Icy, cruel eyes cut into him, and a new-fleshed hand tried to push him aside. The door was straining open. A beloved voice shrieked. "John!"

Eve and Northwood both leaped for the lever. Under her tender white flesh she was as strong as a man. In the midst of the struggle, her red, humid lips approached his—closer. Closer. Their merest pressure would thrust him into Future Time, where the laboratory and all it contained would be but a shadow, and where he would be helpless to interfere with her terrible will.

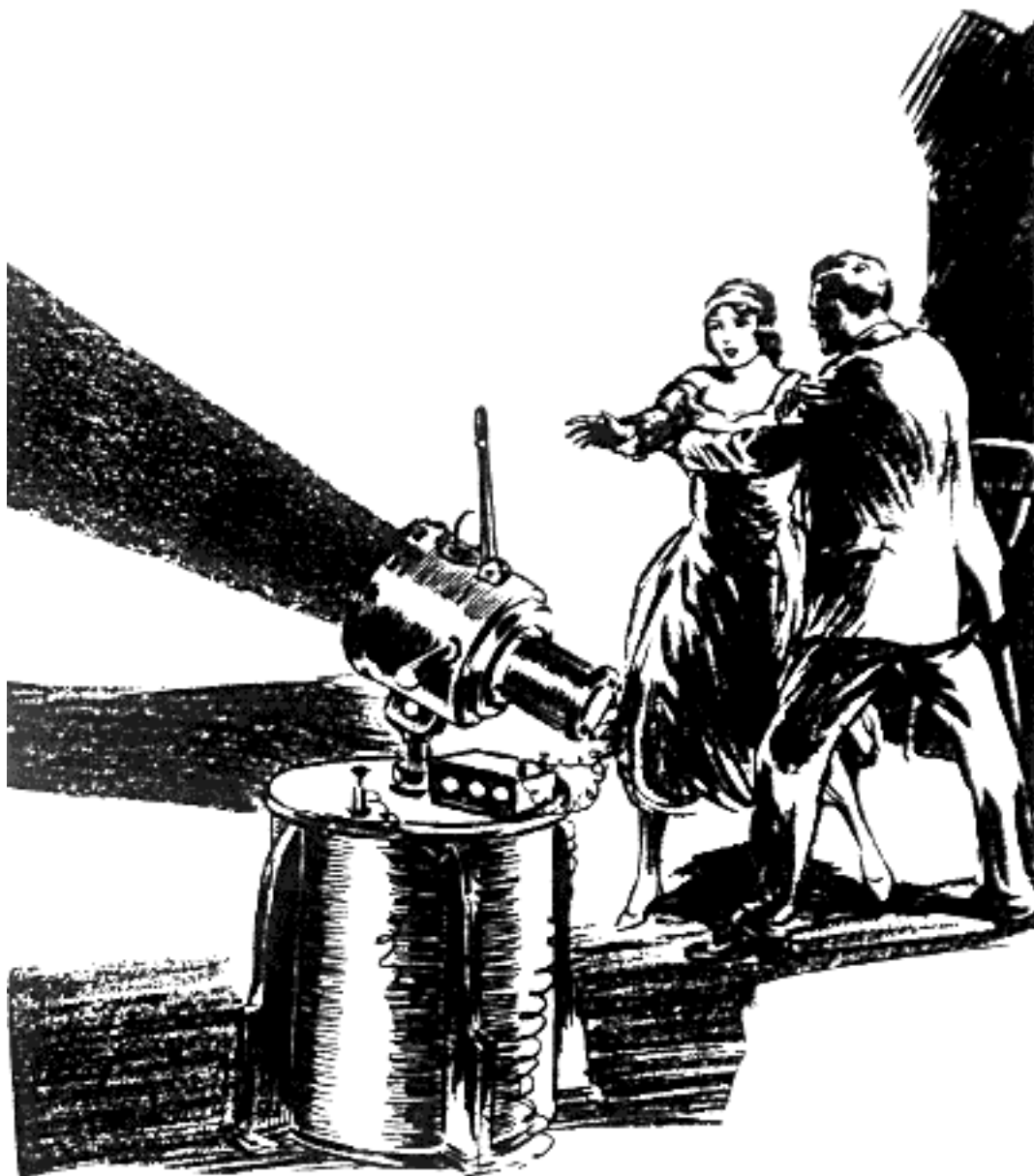
He saw the door open and Adam stride into the room. Behind him, lying prone in the hall where she had probably fainted, was Athalia.



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In a mad burst of strength he touched the lever together with Eve.

The projector, belching forth its stinking breath of corruption swung in a mad arc over the ceiling, over the walls—and then straight at Adam.



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Then, quicker than thought, came the accident. Eve, attempting to throw Northwood off, tripped, fell half over the machine, and, with a short scream of despair, dropped into the black path of destruction.

Northwood paused, horrified. The Death Ray was pointed at an inner wall of the room, which, even as he looked, crumbled and disappeared, bringing down upon him dust more foul than any obscenity the bowels of the earth might yield. In an instant the black cone ate through the outer parts of the building, where crashing stone and screams that were more horrible because of their shortness followed the ruin that swept far into the fair reaches of the valley.

The paralyzing odor of decay took his breath, numbed his muscles, until, of all that huge building, the wall behind him and one small section of the room by the doorway alone remained whole. He was trying to nerve himself to reach for the lever close to that quiet formless thing still partly draped over the machine, when a faint sound in the door electrified him. At first, he dared not look, but his own name, spoken almost in a gasp, gave him courage.

Athalia lay on the floor, apparently untouched.

He jerked the lever violently before running to her, exultant with the knowledge that his own efforts to

keep the ray from the door had saved her.

"And you're not hurt!" He gathered her close.

"John! I saw it get Adam." She pointed to a new mound of mouldy clothes on the floor. "Oh, it is hideous for me to be so glad, but he was going to destroy everything and everyone except me. He made the ray projector for that one purpose."

Northwood looked over the pile of putrid ruins which a few minutes ago had been a building. There was not a wall left intact.

"His intention is accomplished, Athalia," he said sadly. "Let's get out before more stones fall."

In a moment they were in the open. An ominous stillness seemed to grip the very air—the awful silence of the polar wastes which lay not far beyond the mountains.

"How dark it is, John!" cried Athalia. "Dark and cold!"

"The sunshine projector!" gasped Northwood. "It must have been destroyed. Look, dearest! The golden light has disappeared."

"And the warm air of the valley will lift immediately. That means a polar blizzard." She shuddered and clung closer to him. "I've seen Antarctic storms, John. They're death."

Northwood avoided her eyes. "There's the sun-ship. We'll give the ruins the once over in case there are any survivors; then we'll save ourselves."

Even a cursory examination of the mouldy piles of stone and dust convinced them that there could be no survivors. The ruins looked as though they had lain in those crumbling piles for centuries. Northwood, smothering his repugnance, stepped among them—among the green, slimy stones and the unspeakable revolting débris, staggering back and faint and shocked when he came upon dust that was once human.

"God!" he groaned, hands over eyes. "We're alone,

Athalia! Alone in a charnal house. The laboratory housed the entire population, didn't it?"

"Yes. Needing no sleep nor food, we did not need houses. We all worked here, under Dr. Mundson's generalship, and, lately under Adam's, like a little band of soldiers fighting for a great cause."

"Let's go to the sun-ship, dearest."

"But Daddy Mundson was in the library," sobbed Athalia. "Let's look for him a little longer."

Sudden remembrance came to Northwood. "No, Athalia! He left the library. I saw him go down the jungle path several minutes before I and Eve went to Adam's laboratory."

"Then he might be safe!" Her eyes danced. "He might have gone to the sun-ship."

Shivering, she slumped against him. "Oh, John! I'm cold."

Her face was blue. Northwood jerked off his coat and wrapped it around her, taking the intense cold against his unprotected shoulders. The low, gray sky was rapidly darkening, and the feeble light of the sun could scarcely pierce the clouds. It was disturbing to know that even the summer temperature in the Antarctic was far below zero.

"Come, girl," said Northwood gravely. "Hurry! It's snowing."

They started to run down the road through the narrow strip of jungle. The Death Ray had cut huge swathes in the tangle of trees and vines, and now areas of heaped débris, livid with the colors of recent decay, exhaled a mephitic humidity altogether alien to the snow that fell in soft, slow flakes. Each hesitated to voice the new fear: had the sun-ship been destroyed?

By the time they reached the open field, the snow stung their flesh like sharp needles, but it was not yet thick enough to hide from them a hideous fact.

The sun-ship was gone.

It might have occupied one of several black, foul areas on the green grass, where the searching Death Ray had made the very soil putrefy, and the rocks crumble into shocking dust.

Northwood snatched Athalia to him, too full of despair to speak. A sudden terrific flurry of snow whirled around them, and they were almost blown from their feet by the icy wind that tore over the unprotected field.

"It won't be long," said Athalia faintly. "Freezing doesn't hurt, John, dear."

"It isn't fair, Athalia! There never would have been such a marriage as ours. Dr. Mundson searched the world to bring us together."

"For scientific experiment!" she sobbed. "I'd rather die, John. I want an old-fashioned home, a Black Age family. I want to grow old with you and leave the earth to my children. Or else I want to die here now

under the kind, white blanket the snow is already spreading over us." She drooped in his arms.

Clinging together, they stood in the howling wind, looking at each other hungrily, as though they would snatch from death this one last picture of the other.

Northwood's freezing lips translated some of the futile words that crowded against them. "I love you because you are not perfect. I hate perfection!"

"Yes. Perfection is the only hopeless state, John. That is why Adam wanted to destroy, so that he might build again."

They were sitting in the snow now, for they were very tired. The storm began whistling louder, as though it were only a few feet above their heads.

"That sounds almost like the sun-ship," said Athalia drowsily.

"It's only the wind. Hold your face down so it won't strike your flesh so cruelly."

"I'm not suffering. I'm getting warm again." She smiled at him sleepily.

Little icicles began to form on their clothing, and the powdery snow frosted their uncovered hair.

Suddenly came a familiar voice: "*Ach Gott!*"

Dr. Mundson stood before them, covered with snow until he looked like a polar bear.

"Get up!" he shouted. "Quick! To the sun-ship!"

He seized Athalia and jerked her to her feet. She looked at him sleepily for a moment, and then threw herself at him and hugged him frantically.

"You're not dead?"

Taking each by the arm, he half dragged them to the sun-ship, which had landed only a few feet away. In a few minutes he had hot brandy for them.

While they sipped greedily, he talked, between

working the sun-ship's controls.

"No, I wouldn't say it was a lucky moment that drew me to the sun-ship. When I saw Eve trying to charm John, I had what you American slangists call a hunch, which sent me to the sun-ship to get it off the ground so that Adam couldn't commandeer it. And what is a hunch but a mental penetration into the Fourth Dimension?" For a long moment, he brooded, absent-minded. "I was in the air when the black ray, which I suppose is Adam's deviltry, began to destroy everything it touched. From a safe elevation I saw it wreck all my work." A sudden spasm crossed his face. "I've flown over the entire valley. We're the only survivors—thank God!"

"And so at last you confess that it is not well to tamper with human life?" Northwood, warmed with hot brandy, was his old self again.

"Oh, I have not altogether wasted my efforts. I went to elaborate pains to bring together a perfect man and a perfect woman of what Adam called our Black Age." He smiled at them whimsically.

"And who can say to what extent you have thus furthered natural evolution?" Northwood slipped his arm around Athalia. "Our children might be more than geniuses, Doctor!"

Dr. Mundson nodded his huge, shaggy head gravely.

"The true instinct of a Creature of the Light," he declared.

#12 Into Space, by Sterner St. Paul Meek:

What was the extraordinary connection between Dr. Livermore's sudden disappearance and the coming of a new satellite to the Earth?

Aproximate word count: 4,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Many of my readers will remember the mysterious radio messages which were heard by both amateur and professional short wave operators during the nights of the twenty-third and twenty-fourth of last September, and even more will remember the astounding discovery made by Professor Montescue of the Lick Observatory on the night of September twenty-fifth. At the time, some inspired writers tried to connect the two events, maintaining that the discovery of the fact that the earth had a new satellite

coincident with the receipt of the mysterious messages was evidence that the new planetoid was inhabited and that the messages were attempts on the part of the inhabitants to communicate with us.

The fact that the messages were on a lower wave length than any receiver then in existence could receive with any degree of clarity, and the additional fact that they appeared to come from an immense distance lent a certain air of plausibility to these ebullitions in the Sunday magazine sections. For some weeks the feature writers harped on the subject, but the hurried construction of new receivers which would work on a lower wave length yielded no results, and the solemn pronouncements of astronomers to the effect that the new celestial body could by no possibility have an atmosphere on account of its small size finally put an end to the talk. So the matter lapsed into oblivion.

While quite a few people will remember the two events I have noted, I doubt whether there are five hundred people alive who will remember anything at all about the disappearance of Dr. Livermore of the

University of Calvada on September twenty-third. He was a man of some local prominence, but he had no more than a local fame, and few papers outside of California even noted the event in their columns. I do not think that anyone ever tried to connect up his disappearance with the radio messages or the discovery of the new earthly satellite; yet the three events were closely bound up together, and but for the Doctor's disappearance, the other two would never have happened.

Dr. Livermore taught physics at Calvada, or at least he taught the subject when he remembered that he had a class and felt like teaching. His students never knew whether he would appear at class or not; but he always passed everyone who took his courses and so, of course, they were always crowded. The University authorities used to remonstrate with him, but his ability as a research worker was so well known and recognized that he was allowed to go about as he pleased. He was a bachelor who lived alone and who had no interests in life, so far as anyone knew, other than his work.

I first made contact with him when I was a freshman at Calvada, and for some unknown reason he took a liking to me. My father had insisted that I follow in his footsteps as an electrical engineer; as he was paying my bills, I had to make a show at studying engineering while I clandestinely pursued my hobby, literature. Dr. Livermore's courses were the easiest in the school and they counted as science, so I regularly registered for them, cut them, and attended a class in literature as an auditor. The Doctor used to meet me on the campus and laughingly scold me for my absence, but he was really in sympathy with my ambition and he regularly gave me a passing mark and my units of credit without regard to my attendance, or, rather, lack of it.

When I graduated from Calvada I was theoretically an electrical engineer. Practically I had a pretty good knowledge of contemporary literature and knew almost nothing about my so-called profession. I stalled around Dad's office for a few months until I landed a job as a cub reporter on the San Francisco *Graphic* and then I quit him cold. When the storm

blew over, Dad admitted that you couldn't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and agreed with a grunt to my new line of work. He said that I would probably be a better reporter than an engineer because I couldn't by any possibility be a worse one, and let it go at that. However, all this has nothing to do with the story. It just explains how I came to be acquainted with Dr. Livermore, in the first place, and why he sent for me on September twenty-second, in the second place.

The morning of the twenty-second the City Editor called me in and asked me if I knew "Old Liverpills."

"He says that he has a good story ready to break but he won't talk to anyone but you," went on Barnes. "I offered to send out a good man, for when Old Liverpills starts a story it ought to be good, but all I got was a high powered bawling out. He said that he would talk to you or no one and would just as soon talk to no one as to me any longer. Then he hung up. You'd better take a run out to Calvada and see what he has to say. I can have a good man rewrite your drivel when you get back."

I was more or less used to that sort of talk from Barnes so I paid no attention to it. I drove my flivver down to Calvada and asked for the Doctor.

"Dr. Livermore?" said the bursar. "Why, he hasn't been around here for the last ten months. This is his sabbatical year and he is spending it on a ranch he owns up at Hat Creek, near Mount Lassen. You'll have to go there if you want to see him."

I knew better than to report back to Barnes without the story, so there was nothing to it but to drive up to Hat Creek, and a long, hard drive it was. I made Redding late that night; the next day I drove on to Burney and asked for directions to the Doctor's ranch.

"So you're going up to Doc Livermore's, are you?" asked the Postmaster, my informant. "Have you got an invitation?"

I assured him that I had.

"It's a good thing," he replied, "because he don't allow anyone on his place without one. I'd like to go up

there myself and see what's going on, but I don't want to get shot at like old Pete Johnson did when he tried to drop in on the Doc and pay him a little call. There's something mighty funny going on up there."

Naturally I tried to find out what was going on but evidently the Postmaster, who was also the express agent, didn't know. All he could tell me was that a "lot of junk" had come for the Doctor by express and that a lot more had been hauled in by truck from Redding.

"What kind of junk?" I asked him.

"Almost everything, Bub: sheet steel, machinery, batteries, cases of glass, and Lord knows what all. It's been going on ever since he landed there. He has a bunch of Indians working for him and he don't let a white man on the place."

Forced to be satisfied with this meager information, I started old Lizzie and lit out for the ranch. After I had turned off the main trail I met no one until the ranch house was in sight. As I rounded a bend in the road which brought me in sight of the building, I was

forced to put on my brakes at top speed to avoid running into a chain which was stretched across the road. An Indian armed with a Winchester rifle stood behind it, and when I stopped he came up and asked my business.

"My business is with Dr. Livermore," I said tartly.

"You got letter?" he inquired.

"No," I answered.

"No ketchum letter, no ketchum Doctor," he replied, and walked stolidly back to his post.

"This is absurd," I shouted, and drove Lizzie up to the chain. I saw that it was merely hooked to a ring at the end, and I climbed out and started to take it down. A thirty-thirty bullet embedded itself in the post an inch or two from my head, and I changed my mind about taking down that chain.

"No ketchum letter, no ketchum Doctor," said the Indian laconically as he pumped another shell into his

gun.

I was balked, until I noticed a pair of telephone wires running from the house to the tree to which one end of the chain was fastened.

"Is that a telephone to the house?" I demanded.

The Indian grunted an assent.

"Dr. Livermore telephoned me to come and see him," I said. "Can't I call him up and see if he still wants to see me?"

The Indian debated the question with himself for a minute and then nodded a doubtful assent. I cranked the old coffee mill type of telephone which I found, and presently heard the voice of Dr. Livermore.

"This is Tom Faber, Doctor," I said. "The *Graphic* sent me up to get a story from you, but there's an Indian here who started to murder me when I tried to get past your barricade."

"Good for him," chuckled the Doctor. "I heard the shot, but didn't know that he was shooting at you. Tell him to talk to me."

The Indian took the telephone at my bidding and listened for a minute.

"You go in," he agreed when he hung up the receiver.

He took down the chain and I drove on up to the house, to find the Doctor waiting for me on the veranda.

"Hello, Tom," he greeted me heartily. "So you had trouble with my guard, did you?"

"I nearly got murdered," I said ruefully.

"I expect that Joe would have drilled you if you had tried to force your way in," he remarked cheerfully. "I forgot to tell him that you were coming to-day. I told him you would be here yesterday, but yesterday isn't to-day to that Indian. I wasn't sure you would get here at all, in point of fact, for I didn't know whether that

old fool I talked to in your office would send you or some one else. If anyone else had been sent, he would have never got by Joe, I can tell you. Come in. Where's your bag?"

"I haven't one," I replied. "I went to Calvada yesterday to see you, and didn't know until I got there that you were up here."

The Doctor chuckled.

"I guess I forgot to tell where I was," he said. "That man I talked to got me so mad that I hung up on him before I told him. It doesn't matter, though. I can dig you up a new toothbrush, and I guess you can make out with that. Come in."

I followed him into the house, and he showed me a room fitted with a crude bunk, a washstand, a bowl and a pitcher.

"You won't have many luxuries here, Tom," he said, "but you won't need to stay here for more than a few days. My work is done: I am ready to start. In fact, I

would have started yesterday instead of to-day, had you arrived. Now don't ask any questions; it's nearly lunch time."

"What's the story, Doctor?" I asked after lunch as I puffed one of his excellent cigars. "And why did you pick me to tell it to?"

"For several reasons," he replied, ignoring my first question. "In the first place, I like you and I think that you can keep your mouth shut until you are told to open it. In the second place, I have always found that you had the gift of vision or imagination and have the ability to believe. In the third place, you are the only man I know who had the literary ability to write up a good story and at the same time has the scientific background to grasp what it is all about. Understand that unless I have your promise not to write this story until I tell you that you can, not a word will I tell you."

I reflected for a moment. The *Graphic* would expect the story when I got back, but on the other hand I knew that unless I gave the desired promise, the Doctor wouldn't talk.

"All right," I assented, "I'll promise."

"Good!" he replied. "In that case, I'll tell you all about it. No doubt you, like the rest of the world, think that I'm crazy?"

"Why, not at all," I stammered. In point of fact, I had often harbored such a suspicion.

"Oh, that's all right," he went on cheerfully. "I *am* crazy, crazy as a loon, which, by the way, is a highly sensible bird with a well balanced mentality. There is no doubt that I am crazy, but my craziness is not of the usual type. Mine is the insanity of genius."

He looked at me sharply as he spoke, but long sessions at poker in the San Francisco Press Club had taught me how to control my facial muscles, and I never batted an eye. He seemed satisfied, and went on.

"From your college work you are familiar with the laws of magnetism," he said. "Perhaps, considering just what your college career really was, I might

better say that you are supposed to be familiar with them."

I joined with him in his laughter.

"It won't require a very deep knowledge to follow the thread of my argument," he went on. "You know, of course, that the force of magnetic attraction is inversely proportional to the square of the distances separating the magnet and the attracted particles, and also that each magnetized particle had two poles, a positive and a negative pole, or a north pole and a south pole, as they are usually called?"

I nodded.

"Consider for a moment that the laws of magnetism, insofar as concerns the relation between distance and power of attraction, are exactly matched by the laws of gravitation."

"But there the similarity between the two forces ends," I interrupted.

"But there the similarity does *not* end," he said sharply. "That is the crux of the discovery which I have made: that magnetism and gravity are one and the same, or, rather, that the two are separate, but similar manifestations of one force. The parallel between the two grows closer with each succeeding experiment. You know, for example, that each magnetized particle has two poles. Similarly each gravitized particle, to coin a new word, had two poles, one positive and one negative. Every particle on the earth is so oriented that the negative poles point toward the positive center of the earth. This is what causes the commonly known phenomena of gravity or weight."

"I can prove the fallacy of that in a moment," I retorted.

"There are none so blind as those who will not see," he quoted with an icy smile. "I can probably predict your puerile argument, but go ahead and present it."

"If two magnets are placed so that the north pole of one is in juxtaposition to the south pole of the other,

they attract one another," I said. "If the position of the magnets be reversed so that the two similar poles are opposite, they will repel. If your theory were correct, a man standing on his head would fall off the earth."

"Exactly what I expected," he replied. "Now let me ask you a question. Have you ever seen a small bar magnet placed within the field of attraction of a large electromagnet? Of course you have, and you have noticed that, when the north pole of the bar magnet was pointed toward the electromagnet, the bar was attracted. However, when the bar was reversed and the south pole pointed toward the electromagnet, the bar was still attracted. You doubtless remember that experiment."

"But in that case the magnetism of the electromagnet was so large that the polarity of the small magnet was reversed!" I cried.

"Exactly, and the field of gravity of the earth is so great compared to the gravity of a man that when he stands on his head, his polarity is instantly reversed."

I nodded. His explanation was too logical for me to pick a flaw in it.

"If that same bar magnet were held in the field of the electromagnet with its north pole pointed toward the magnet and then, by the action of some outside force of sufficient power, its polarity were reversed, the bar would be repelled. If the magnetism were neutralized and held exactly neutral, it would be neither repelled nor attracted, but would act only as the force of gravity impelled it. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," I assented.

"That, then, paves the way for what I have to tell you. I have developed an electrical method of neutralizing the gravity of a body while it is within the field of the earth, and also, by a slight extension, a method of entirely reversing its polarity."

I nodded calmly.

"Do you realize what this means?" he cried.

"No," I replied, puzzled by his great excitement.

"Man alive," he cried, "it means that the problem of aerial flight is entirely revolutionized, and that the era of interplanetary travel is at hand! Suppose that I construct an airship and then render it neutral to gravity. It would weigh nothing, *absolutely nothing*! The tiniest propeller would drive it at almost incalculable speed with a minimum consumption of power, for the only resistance to its motion would be the resistance of the air. If I were to reverse the polarity, it would be repelled from the earth with the same force with which it is now attracted, and it would rise with the same acceleration as a body falls toward the earth. It would travel to the moon in two hours and forty minutes."

"Air resistance would—"

"There is no air a few miles from the earth. Of course, I do not mean that such a craft would take off from the earth and land on the moon three hours later. There are two things which would interfere with that. One is the fact that the propelling force, the gravity of

the earth, would diminish as the square of the distance from the center of the earth, and the other is that when the band of neutral attraction, or rather repulsion, between the earth and the moon had been reached, it would be necessary to decelerate so as to avoid a smash on landing. I have been over the whole thing and I find that it would take twenty-nine hours and fifty-two minutes to make the whole trip. The entire thing is perfectly possible. In fact, I have asked you here to witness and report the first interplanetary trip to be made."

"Have you constructed such a device?" I cried.

"My space ship is finished and ready for your inspection," he replied. "If you will come with me, I will show it to you."

Hardly knowing what to believe, I followed him from the house and to a huge barnlike structure, over a hundred feet high, which stood nearby. He opened the door and switched on a light, and there before me stood what looked at first glance to be a huge artillery shell, but of a size larger than any ever made. It was

constructed of sheet steel, and while the lower part was solid, the upper sections had huge glass windows set in them. On the point was a mushroom shaped protuberance. It measured perhaps fifty feet in diameter and was one hundred and forty feet high, the Doctor informed me. A ladder led from the floor to a door about fifty feet from the ground.

I followed the Doctor up the ladder and into the space flier. The door led us into a comfortable living room through a double door arrangement.

"The whole hull beneath us," explained the Doctor, "is filled with batteries and machinery except for a space in the center, where a shaft leads to a glass window in the bottom so that I can see behind me, so to speak. The space above is filled with storerooms and the air purifying apparatus. On this level is my bedroom, kitchen, and other living rooms, together with a laboratory and an observatory. There is a central control room located on an upper level, but it need seldom be entered, for the craft can be controlled by a system of relays from this room or from any other room in the ship. I suppose that you are more or less

familiar with imaginative stories of interplanetary travel?"

I nodded an assent.

"In that case there is no use in going over the details of the air purifying and such matters," he said. "The story writers have worked out all that sort of thing in great detail, and there is nothing novel in my arrangements. I carry food and water for six months and air enough for two months by constant renovating. Have you any question you wish to ask?"

"One objection I have seen frequently raised to the idea of interplanetary travel is that the human body could not stand the rapid acceleration which would be necessary to attain speed enough to ever get anywhere. How do you overcome this?"

"My dear boy, who knows what the human body can stand? When the locomotive was first invented learned scientists predicted that the limit of speed was thirty miles an hour, as the human body could not stand a higher speed. To-day the human body stands a

speed of three hundred and sixty miles an hour without ill effects. At any rate, on my first trip I intend to take no chances. We know that the body can stand an acceleration of thirty-two feet per second without trouble. That is the rate of acceleration due to gravity and is the rate at which a body increases speed when it falls. This is the acceleration which I will use.

"Remember that the space traveled by a falling body in a vacuum is equal to one half the acceleration multiplied by the square of the elapsed time. The moon, to which I intend to make my first trip, is only 280,000 miles, or 1,478,400,000 feet, from us. With an acceleration of thirty-two feet per second, I would pass the moon two hours and forty minutes after leaving the earth. If I later take another trip, say to Mars, I will have to find a means of increasing my acceleration, possibly by the use of the rocket principle. Then will be time enough to worry about what my body will stand."

A short calculation verified the figures the Doctor had given me, and I stood convinced.

"Are you really going?" I asked.

"Most decidedly. To repeat, I would have started yesterday, had you arrived. As it is, I am ready to start at once. We will go back to the house for a few minutes while I show you the location of an excellent telescope through which you may watch my progress, and instruct you in the use of an ultra-short-wave receiver which I am confident will pierce the Heaviside layer. With this I will keep in communication with you, although I have made no arrangements for you to send messages to me on this trip. I intend to go to the moon and land. I will take atmosphere samples through an air port and, if there is an atmosphere which will support life, I will step out on the surface. If there is not, I will return to the earth."

A few minutes was enough for me to grasp the simple manipulations which I would have to perform, and I followed him again to the space flier.

"How are you going to get it out?" I asked.

"Watch," he said.

He worked some levers and the roof of the barn folded back, leaving the way clear for the departure of the huge projectile. I followed him inside and he climbed the ladder.

"When I shut the door, go back to the house and test the radio," he directed.

The door clanged shut and I hastened into the house. His voice came plainly enough. I went back to the flier and waved him a final farewell, which he acknowledged through a window; then I returned to the receiver. A loud hum filled the air, and suddenly the projectile rose and flew out through the open roof, gaining speed rapidly until it was a mere speck in the sky.



IMAGEDescription

It vanished. I had no trouble in picking him up with the telescope. In fact, I could see the Doctor through one of the windows.

"I have passed beyond the range of the atmosphere, Tom," came his voice over the receiver, "and I find that everything is going exactly as it should. I feel no

discomfort, and my only regret is that I did not install a transmitter in the house so that you could talk to me; but there is no real necessity for it. I am going to make some observations now, but I will call you again with a report of progress in half-an-hour."

For the rest of the afternoon and all of that night I received his messages regularly, but with the coming of daylight they began to fade. By nine o'clock I could get only a word here and there. By noon I could hear nothing. I went to sleep hoping that the night would bring better reception, nor was I disappointed. About eight o'clock I received a message, rather faintly, but none the less distinctly.

"I regret more than ever that I did not install a transmitter so that I could learn from you whether you are receiving my messages," his voice said faintly. "I have no idea of whether you can hear me or not, but I will keep on repeating this message every hour while my battery holds out. It is now thirty hours since I left the earth and I should be on the moon, according to my calculations. But I am not, and never will be. I am caught at the neutral point where the

gravity of the earth and the moon are exactly equal.

"I had relied on my momentum to carry me over this point. Once over it, I expected to reverse my polarity and fall on the moon. My momentum did not do so. If I keep my polarity as it was when left the earth, both the earth and the moon repel me. If I reverse it, they both attract me, and again I cannot move. If I had equipped my space flier with a rocket so that I could move a few miles, or even a few feet, from the dead line, I could proceed, but I did not do so, and I cannot move forward or back. Apparently I am doomed to stay here until my air gives out. Then my body, entombed in my space ship, will endlessly circle the earth as a satellite until the end of time. There is no hope for me, for long before a duplicate of my device equipped with rockets could be constructed and come to my rescue, my air would be exhausted. Good-by, Tom. You may write your story as soon as you wish. I will repeat my message in one hour. Good-by!"

At nine and at ten o'clock the message was repeated. At eleven it started again but after a few sentences the sound suddenly ceased and the receiver went

dead. I thought that the fault was with the receiver and I toiled feverishly the rest of the night, but without result. I learned later that the messages heard all over the world ceased at the same hour.

The next morning Professor Montescue announced his discovery of the world's new satellite.

#13 Mad Music, by Anthony Pelcher:

The sixty stories of the perfectly constructed colossus building had mysteriously crashed! What was the connection between this catastrophe and the weird strains of the mad musician's violin?

Aproximate word count: 6,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

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To the accompaniment of a crashing roar, not unlike rumbling thunder, the proud Colossus Building, which a few minutes before had reared its sixty stories of artistic architecture towards the blue dome of the sky, crashed in a rugged, dusty heap of stone, brick, cement and mortar. The steel framework, like the skeleton of some prehistoric monster, still reared to dizzy heights but in a bent and twisted shape of grotesque outline.

The sixty stories of the perfectly constructed Colossus building had mysteriously crashed! What was the connection between this catastrophe and the weird strains of the Mad Musician's violin?

No one knew how many lives were snuffed out in the avalanche.

As the collapse occurred in the early dawn it was not believed the death list would be large. It was admitted, however, that autos, cabs and surface cars may have been caught under the falling rock. One train was known to have been wrecked in the subway due to a cave-in from the surface under the ragged mountain of debris.

The litter fairly filled a part of Times Square, the most congested cross-roads on God's footstool. Straggling brick and rock had rolled across the street to the west and had crashed into windows and doors of innocent small tradesmen's shops.

A few minutes after the crash a mad crowd of people had piled from subway exits as far away as Penn

Station and Columbus Circle and from cross streets. These milled about, gesticulating and shouting hysterically. All neighboring police stations were hard put to handle the growing mob.

Hundreds of dead and maimed were being carried to the surface from the wrecked train in the subway. Trucks and cabs joined the ambulance crews in the work of transporting these to morgues and hospitals. As the morning grew older and the news of the disaster spread, more milling thousands tried to crowd into the square. Many were craning necks hopelessly on the outskirts of the throng, blocks away, trying vainly to get a view of what lay beyond.

The fire department and finally several companies of militia joined the police in handling the crowd. Newsies, never asleep, yowled their "Wuxtras" and made much small money.

The newspapers devoted solid pages in attempting to describe what had happened. Nervously, efficient reporters had written and written, using all their best adjectives and inventing new ones in attempts to

picture the crash and the hysterics which followed.

When the excitement was at its height a middle-aged man, bleeding at the head, clothes torn and dusty, staggered into the West 47th street police station. He found a lone sergeant at the desk.

The police sergeant jumped to his feet as the bedraggled man entered and stumbled to a bench.

"I'm Pat Brennan, street floor watchman of the Colossus," he said. "I ran for it. I got caught in the edge of the wreck and a brick clipped me. I musta been out for some time. When I came around I looked back just once at the wreck and then I beat it over here. Phone my boss."

"I'll let you phone your boss," said the sergeant, "but first tell me just what happened."

"Earthquake, I guess. I saw the floor heaving in waves. Glass was crashing and falling into the street. All windows in the arcade buckled, either in or out. I ran into the street and looked up. God, what a sight!

The building from sidewalk to towers was rocking and waving and twisting and buckling and I saw it was bound to crumple, so I lit out and ran. I heard a roar like all Hell broke loose and then something nicked me and my light went out."

"How many got caught in the building?"

"Nobody got out but me, I guess. There weren't many tenants. The building is all rented, but not everybody had moved in yet and those as had didn't spend their nights there. There was a watchman for every five stories. An engineer and his crew. Three elevator operators had come in. There was no names of tenants in or out on my book after 4 A.M. The crash musta come about 6. That's all."

Throughout the country the news of the crash was received with great interest and wonderment, but in one small circle it caused absolute consternation. That was in the offices of the Muller Construction Company, the builders of the Colossus. Jason V. Linane, chief engineer of the company, was in conference with its president, James J. Muller.

Muller sat with his head in his hands, and his face wore an expression of a man in absolute anguish. Linane was pacing the floor, a wild expression in his eyes, and at times he muttered and mumbled under his breath.

In the other offices the entire force from manager to office boys was hushed and awed, for they had seen the expressions on the faces of the heads of the concern when they stalked into the inner office that morning.

Muller finally looked up, rather hopelessly, at Linane.

"Unless we can prove that the crash was due to some circumstance over which we had no control, we are ruined," he said, and there actually were tears in his eyes.

"No doubt about that," agreed Linane, "but I can swear that the Colossus went up according to specifications and that every ounce and splinter of material was of the best. The workmanship was faultless. We have built scores of the biggest blocks in

the world and of them all this Colossus was the most perfect. I had prided myself on it. Muller, it was perfection. I simply cannot account for it. I cannot. It should have stood up for thousands of years. The foundation was solid rock. It positively was not an earthquake. No other building in the section was even jarred. No other earthquake was ever localized to one half block of the earth's crust, and we can positively eliminate an earthquake or an explosion as the possible cause. I am sure we are not to blame, but we will have to find the exact cause."

"If there was some flaw?" questioned Muller, although he knew the answer.

"If there was some flaw, then we're sunk. The newspapers are already clamoring for probes, of us, of the building, of the owners and everybody and everything. We have got to have something damned plausible when we go to bat on this proposition or every dollar we have in the world will have to be paid out."

"That is not all," said Muller: "not only will we be

penniless, but we may have to go to jail and we will never be able to show our faces in reputable business circles again. Who was the last to go over that building?"

"I sent Teddy Jenks. He is a cub and is swell headed and too big for his pants, but I would bank my life on his judgment. He has the judgment of a much older man and I would also bank my life and reputation on his engineering skill and knowledge. He pronounced the building positively O.K.—100 per cent."

"Where is Jenks?"

"He will be here as soon as his car can drive down from Tarrytown. He should be here now."

As they talked Jenks, the youngest member of the engineering force, entered. He entered like a whirlwind. He threw his hat on the floor and drew out a drawer of a cabinet. He pulled out the plans for the Colossus, big blue prints, some of them yards in extent, and threw them on the floor. Then he dropped to his knees and began poring over them.

"This is a hell of a time for you to begin getting around," exploded Muller. "What were you doing, cabareting all night?"

"It sure is terrible—awful," said Jenks, half to himself.

"Answer me," thundered Muller.

"Oh yes," said Jenks, looking up. He saw the look of anguish on his boss's face and forgot his own excitement in sympathy. He jumped to his feet, placed his arm about the shoulders of the older man and led him to a chair. Linane only scowled at the young man.

"I was delayed because I stopped by to see the wreck. My God, Mr. Muller, it is awful." Jenks drew his hand across his eye as if to erase the scene of the wrecked building. Then patting the older man affectionately on the back he said:

"Buck up. I'm on the job, as usual. I'll find out about it. It could not have been our fault. Why man, that building was as strong as Gibraltar itself!"

"You were the last to inspect it," accused Muller, with a break in his voice.

"Nobody knows that better than I, and I can swear by all that's square and honest that it was no fault of the material or the construction. It must have been—"

"Must have been what?"

"I'll be damned if I know."

"That's like him," said Linane, who, while really kindly intentioned, had always rather enjoyed prodding the young engineer.

"Like me, like the devil," shouted Jenks, glaring at Linane. "I suppose you know all about it, you're so blamed wise."

"No, I don't know," admitted Linane. "But I do know that you don't like me to tell you anything.

Nevertheless, I am going to tell you that you had better get busy and find out what caused it, or—"

"That's just what I'm doing," said Jenks, and he dived for his plans on the floor.

Newspaper reporters, many of them, were fighting outside to get in. Muller looked at Linane when a stenographer had announced the reporters for the tenth time.

"We had better let them in," he said, "it looks bad to crawl for cover."

"What are you going to tell them?" asked Linane.

"God only knows," said Muller.

"Let me handle them," said Jenks, looking up confidently.

The newspapermen had rushed the office. They came in like a wild wave. Questions flew like feathers at a cock-fight.

Muller held up his hand and there was something in his grief-stricken eyes that held the gentlemen of the

press in silence. They had time to look around. They saw the handsome, dark-haired, brown-eyed Jenks poring over the plans. Dust from the carpet smudged his knees, and he had rubbed some of it over a sweating forehead, but he still looked the picture of self-confident efficiency.

"Gentlemen," said Muller slowly, "I can answer all your questions at once. Our firm is one of the oldest and staunchest in the trade. Our buildings stand as monuments to our integrity—"

"All but one," said a young Irishman.

"You are right. All but one," confessed Muller. "But that one, believe me, has been visited by an act of God. Some form of earthquake or some unlooked for, uncontrolled, almost unbelievable catastrophe has happened. The Muller company stands back of its work to its last dollar. Gentlemen, you know as much as we do. Mr. Jenks there, whose reputation as an engineer is quite sturdy, I assure you, was the last to inspect the building. He passed upon it when it was finished. He is at your service."

Jenks arose, brushed some dust from his knees.

"You look like you'd been praying," bandied the Irishman.

"Maybe I have. Now let me talk. Don't broadside me with questions. I know what you want to know. Let me talk."

The newspapermen were silent.

"There has been talk of probing this disaster, naturally," began Jenks. "You all know, gentlemen, that we will aid any inquiry to our utmost. You want to know what we have to say about it—who is responsible. In a reasonable time I will have a statement to make that will be startling in the extreme. I am not sure of my ground now."

"How about the ground under the Colossus?" said the Irishman.

"Don't let's kid each other," pleaded Jenks. "Look at Mr. Muller: it is as if he had lost his whole family. We

are good people. I am doing all I can. Mr. Linane, who had charge of the construction, is doing all he can. We believe we are blameless. If it is proven otherwise we will acknowledge our fault, assume financial responsibility, and take our medicine. Believe me, that building was perfection plus, like all our buildings. That covers the entire situation."

Hundreds of questions were parried and answered by the three engineers, and the reporters left convinced that if the Muller Construction Company was responsible, it was not through any fault of its own.

The fact that Jenks and Linane were not strong for each other, except to recognize each other's ability as engineers, was due to an incident of the past. This incident had caused a ripple of mirth in engineering circles when it happened, and the laugh was on the older man, Linane.

It was when radio was new. Linane, a structural engineer, had paid little attention to radio. Jenks was the kind of an engineer who dabbled in all sciences. He knew his radio.

When Jenks first came to work with a technical sheepskin and a few tons of brass, Linane accorded him only passing notice. Jenks craved the plaudits of the older man and his palship. Linane treated him as a son, but did not warm to his social advances.

"I'm as good an engineer as he is," mused Jenks, "and if he is going to high-hat me, I'll just put a swift one over on him and compel his notice."

The next day Jenks approached Linane in conference and said:

"I've got a curious bet on, Mr. Linane. I am betting sound can travel a mile quicker than it travels a quarter of a mile."

"What?" said Linane.

"I'm betting fifty that sound can travel a mile quicker than it can travel a quarter of a mile."

"Oh no—it can't," insisted Linane.

"Oh yes—it can!" decided Jenks.

"I'll take some of that fool money myself," said Linane.

"How much?" asked Jenks.

"As much as you want."

"All right—five hundred dollars."

"How you going to prove your contention?"

"By stop watches, and your men can hold the watches. We'll bet that a pistol shot can be heard two miles away quicker than it can be heard a quarter of a mile away."

"Sound travels about a fifth of a mile a second. The rate varies slightly according to temperature," explained Linane. "At the freezing point the rate is 1,090 feet per second and increases a little over one foot for every degree Fahrenheit."

"Hot or cold," breezed Jenks, "I am betting you five

hundred dollars that sound can travel two miles quicker than a quarter-mile."

"You're on, you damned idiot!" shouted the completely exasperated Linane.

Jenks let Linane's friends hold the watches and his friend held the money. Jenks was to fire the shot.

Jenks fired the shot in front of a microphone on a football field. One of Linane's friends picked the sound up instantaneously on a three-tube radio set two miles away. The other watch holder was standing in the open a quarter of a mile away and his watch showed a second and a fraction.

All hands agreed that Jenks had won the bet fairly. Linane never exactly liked Jenks after that.

Then Jenks rather aggravated matters by a habit. Whenever Linane would make a very positive statement Jenks would look owl-eyed and say: "Mr. Linane, I'll have to sound you out about that." The heavy accent on the word "sound" nettled Linane

somewhat.

Linane never completely forgave Jenks for putting over this "fast one." Socially they were always more or less at loggerheads, but neither let this feeling interfere with their work. They worked together faithfully enough and each recognized the ability of the other.

And so it was that Linane and Jenks, their heads together, worked all night in an attempt to find some cause that would tie responsibility for the disaster on mother nature.

They failed to find it and, sleepy-eyed, they were forced to admit failure, so far.

The newspapers, to whom Muller had said that he would not shirk any responsibility, began a hue and cry for the arrest of all parties in any way concerned with the direction of the building of the Colossus.

When the death list from the crash and subway wreck reached 97, the press waxed nasty and demanded the

arrest of Muller, Linane and Jenks in no uncertain tones.

Half dead from lack of sleep, the three men were taken by the police to the district attorney's offices and, after a strenuous grilling, were formally placed under arrest on charges of criminal negligence. They put up a \$50,000 bond in each case and were permitted to go and seek further to find the cause of what the newspapers now began calling the "Colossal Failure."

Several days were spent by Linane and Jenks in examining the wreckage which was being removed from Times Square, truckload after truckload, to a point outside the city. Here it was again sorted and examined and piled for future disposal.

So far as could be found every brick, stone and ounce of material used in the building was perfect. Attorneys, however, assured Linane, Jenks and Muller that they would have to find the real cause of the disaster if they were to escape possible long prison sentences.

Night after night Jenks courted sleep, but it would not come. He began to grow wan and haggard.

Jenks took to walking the streets at night, mile after mile, thinking, always thinking, and searching his mind for a solution of the mystery.

It was evening. He had walked past the scene of the Colossus crash several times. He found himself on a side street. He looked up and saw in electric lights:

TOWN HALL

Munsterbergen, the Mad Musician

Concert Here To-night.

He took five dollars from his pocket and bought a ticket. He entered with the crowd and was ushered to a seat. He looked neither to the right or left. His eyes were sunken, his face lined with worry.

Something within Jenks caused him to turn slightly. He was curiously aware of a beautiful girl who sat beside him. She had a mass of golden hair which

seemed to defy control. It was wild, positively tempestuous. Her eyes were deep blue and her skin as white as fleecy clouds in spring. He was dimly conscious that those glorious eyes were troubled.

She glanced at him. She was aware that he was suffering. A great surge of sympathy welled in her heart. She could not explain the feeling.

A great red plush curtain parted in the center and drew in graceful folds to the edges of the proscenium. A small stage was revealed.

A tousle-headed man with glaring, beady black eyes, dressed in black evening clothes stepped forward and bowed. Under his arm was a violin. He brought the violin forward. His nose, like the beak of some great bird, bobbed up and down in acknowledgment of the plaudits which greeted him. His long nervous fingers began to caress the instrument and his lips began to move.

Jenks was aware that he was saying something, but was not at all interested. What he said was this:

"Maybe, yes, I couldn't talk so good English, but you could understood it, yes? Und now I tell you dot I never play the compositions of any man. I axtemporize exgloosively. I chust blay und blay, und maybe you should listen, yes? If I bleeze you I am chust happy."

Jenks' attention was drawn to him. He noted his wild appearance.

"He sure looks mad enough," mused Jenks.

The violinist flipped the fiddle up under his chin. He drew the bow over the strings and began a gentle melody that reminded one of rain drops falling on calm waters.

Jenks forgot his troubles. He forgot everything. He slumped in his seat and his eyes closed. The rain continued falling from the strings of the violin.

Suddenly the melody changed to a glad little lilting measure, as sweet as love itself. The sun was coming out again and the birds began to sing. There was the

trill of a canary with the sun on its cage. There was the song of the thrush, the mocking-bird and the meadow lark. These blended finally into a melodious burst of chirping melody which seemed a chorus of the wild birds of the forest and glen. Then the lilting love measure again. It tore at the heart strings, and brought tears to one's eyes.

Unconsciously the girl next to Jenks leaned towards him. Involuntarily he leaned to meet her. Their shoulders touched. The cloud of her golden hair came to rest against his dark locks. Their hands found each other with gentle pressure. Both were lost to the world.

Abruptly the music changed. There was a succession of broken treble notes that sounded like the crackling of flames. Moans deep and melancholy followed. These grew more strident and prolonged, giving place to abject howls, suggesting the lamentations of the damned.

The hands of the boy and girl gripped tensely. They could not help shuddering.

The violin began to produce notes of a leering, jeering character, growing more horrible with each measure until they burst in a loud guffaw of maniacal laughter.

The whole performance was as if someone had taken a heaven and plunged it into a hell.

The musician bowed jerkily, and was gone.

There was no applause, only wild exclamations. Half the house was on its feet. The other half sat as if glued to chairs.

The boy and the girl were standing, their hands still gripping tensely.

"Come, let's get out of here," said Jenks. The girl took her wrap and Jenks helped her into it. Hand in hand they fled the place.

In the lobby their eyes met, and for the first time they realized they were strangers. Yet deep in their hearts was a feeling that their fates had been sealed.

"My goodness!" burst from the girl.

"It can't be helped now," said Jenks decisively.

"What can't be helped?" asked the girl, although she knew in her heart.

"Nothing can be helped," said Jenks. Then he added: "We should know each other by this time. We have been holding hands for an hour."

The girl's eyes flared. "You have no right to presume on that situation," she said.

Jenks could have kicked himself. "Forgive me," he said. "It was only that I just wanted so to know you. Won't you let me see you home?"

"You may," said the girl simply, and she led the way to her own car.

They drove north.

Their bodies seemed like magnets. They were again

shoulder to shoulder, holding hands.

"Will you tell me your name?" pleaded Jenks.

"Surely," replied the girl. "I am Elaine Linane."

"What?" exploded Jenks. "Why, I work with a Linane, an engineer with the Muller Construction Company."

"He is my father," she said.

"Why, we are great friends," said the boy. "I am Jenks, his assistant—at least we work together."

"Yes, I have heard of you," said the girl. "It is strange, the way we met. My father admires your work, but I am afraid you are not great friends." The girl had forgotten her troubles. She chuckled. She had heard the way Jenks had "sounded" her father out.

Jenks was speechless. The girl continued:

"I don't know whether to like you or to hate you. My father is an old dear. You were cruel to him."

Jenks was abject. "I did not mean to be," he said. "He rather belittled me without realizing it. I had to make my stand. The difference in our years made him take me rather too lightly. I had to compel his notice, if I was to advance."

"Oh!" said the girl.

"I am sorry—so sorry."

"You might not have been altogether at fault," said the girl. "Father forgets at times that I have grown up. I resent being treated like a child, but he is the soul of goodness and fatherly care."

"I know that," said Jenks.

Every engineer knows his mathematics. It was this fact, coupled with what the world calls a "lucky break," that solved the Colossus mystery. Nobody can get around the fact that two and two make four.

Jenks had happened on accomplishment to advance in the engineering profession, and it was well for him

that he had reached a crisis. He had never believed in luck or in hunches, so it was good for him to be brought face to face with the fact that sometimes the footsteps of man are guided. It made him begin to look into the engineering of the universe, to think more deeply, and to acknowledge a Higher Power.

With Linane he had butted into a stone wall. They were coming to know what real trouble meant. The fact that they were innocent did not make the steel bars of a cage any more attractive. Their troubles began to wrap about them with the clammy intimacy of a shroud. Then came the lucky break.

Next to his troubles, Jenks' favorite topic was the Mad Musician. He tried to learn all he could about this uncanny character at whose concert he had met the girl of his life. He learned two facts that made him perk up and think.

One was that the Mad Musician had had offices and a studio in the Colossus and was one of the first to move in. The other was that the Mad Musician took great delight in shattering glassware with notes of or

vibrations from a violin. Nearly everyone knows that a glass tumbler can be shattered by the proper note sounded on a violin. The Mad Musician took delight in this trick. Jenks courted his acquaintance, and saw him shatter a row of glasses of different sizes by sounding different notes on his fiddle. The glasses crashed one after another like gelatine balls hit by the bullets of an expert rifleman.

Then Jenks, the engineer who knew his mathematics, put two and two together. It made four, of course.

"Listen, Linane," he said to his co-worker: "this fiddler is crazier than a flock of cuckoos. If he can crack crockery with violin sound vibrations, is it not possible, by carrying the vibrations to a much higher power, that he could crack a pile of stone, steel, brick and cement, like the Colossus?"

"Possible, but hardly probable. Still," Linane mused, "when you think about it, and put two and two together.... Let's go after him and see what he is doing now."

Both jumped for their coats and hats. As they fared forth, Jenks cinched his argument:

"If a madman takes delight in breaking glassware with a vibratory wave or vibration, how much more of a thrill would he get by crashing a mountain?"

"Wild, but unanswerable," said Linane.

Jenks had been calling on the Mad Musician at his country place. "He had a studio in the Colossus," he reminded Linane. "He must have re-opened somewhere else in town. I wonder where."

"Musicians are great union men," said Linane. "Phone the union."

Teddy Jenks did, but the union gave the last known town address as the Colossus.

"He would remain in the same district around Times Square," reasoned Jenks. "Let's page out the big buildings and see if he is not preparing to crash another one."

"Fair enough," said Linane, who was too busy with the problem at hand to choose his words.

Together the engineers started a canvass of the big buildings in the theatrical district. After four or five had been searched without result they entered the 30-story Acme Theater building.

Here they learned that the Mad Musician had leased a four-room suite just a few days before. This suite was on the fifteenth floor, just half way up in the big structure.

They went to the manager of the building and frankly stated their suspicions. "We want to enter that suite when the tenant is not there," they explained, "and we want him forestalled from entering while we are examining the premises."

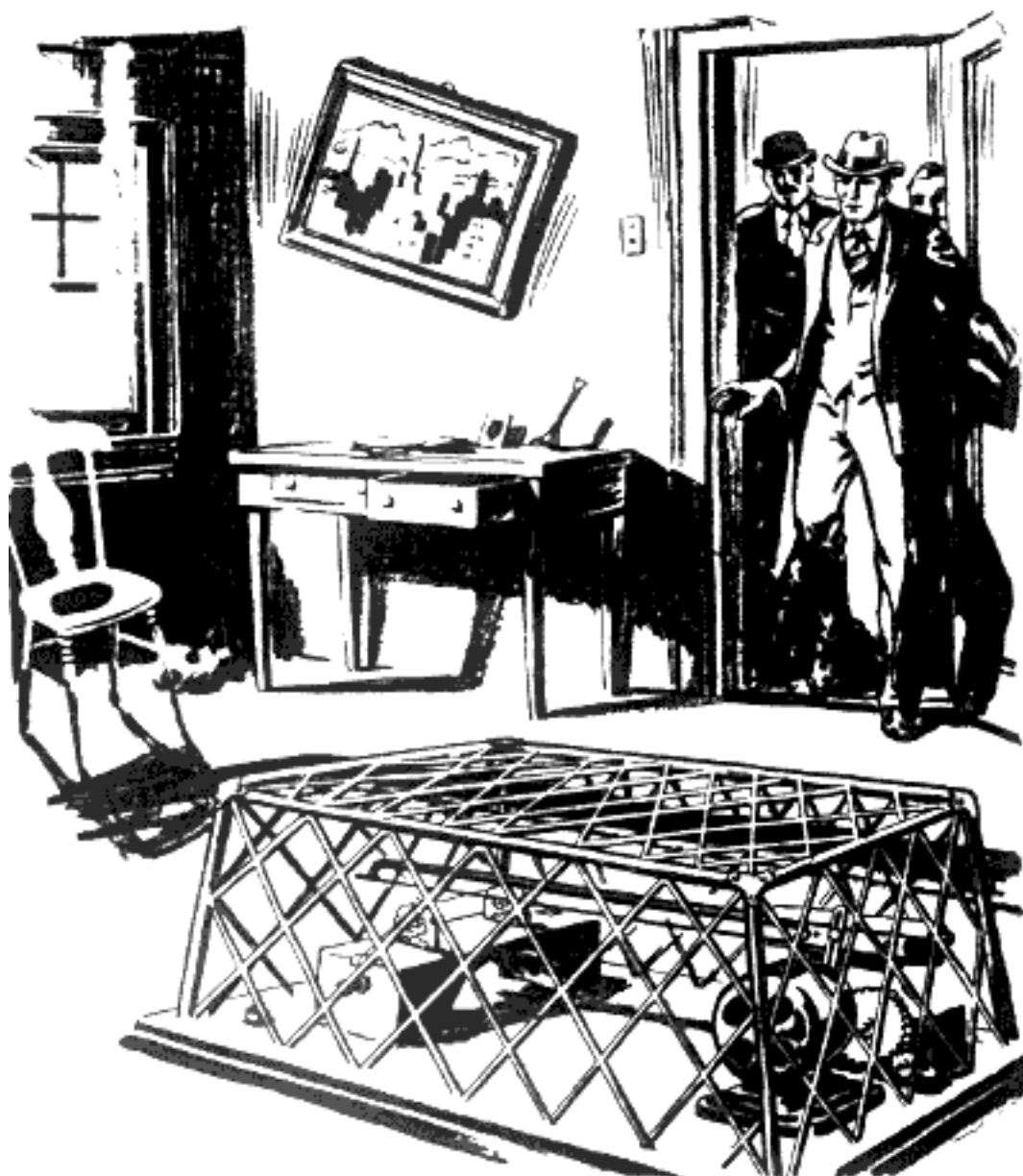
"Hadn't we better notify the police?" asked the building manager, who had broken out in a sweat when he heard the dire disaster which might be in store for the stately Acme building.

"Not yet," said Linane. "You see, we are not sure: we have just been putting two and two together."

"We'll get the building detective, anyway," insisted the manager.

"Let him come along, but do not let him know until we are sure. If we are right we will find a most unusual infernal machine," said Linane.

The three men entered the suite with a pass-key. The detective was left outside in the hall to halt anyone who might disturb the searchers. It was as Jenks had thought. In an inner room they found a diabolical machine—a single string stretched across two bridges, one of brass and one of wood. A big horsehair bow attached to a shaft operated by a motor was automatically sawing across the string.



IMAGEDescription

The note resulting was evidently higher than the range of the human ear, because no audible sound resulted. It was later estimated that the destructive note was several octaves higher than the highest note

on a piano.

The entire machine was enclosed in a heavy wire-net cage, securely bolted to the floor. Neither the string or bow could be reached. It was evidently the Mad Musician's idea that the devilish contrivance should not be reached by hands other than his own.

How long the infernal machine had been operating no one knew, but the visitors were startled when the building suddenly began to sway perceptibly. Jenks jumped forward to stop the machine but could not find a switch.

"See if the machine plugs in anywhere in a wall socket!" he shouted to Linane, who promptly began examining the walls. Jenks shouted to the building manager to phone the police to clear the streets around the big building.

"Tell the police that the Acme Theater building may crash at any moment," he instructed.

The engineers were perfectly cool in face of the great

peril, but the building manager lost his head completely and began to run around in circles muttering: "Oh, my God, save me!" and other words of supplication that blended into an incoherent babel.

Jenks rushed to the man, trying to still his wild hysteria.

The building continued to sway dangerously.

Jenks looked from a window. An enormous crowd was collecting, watching the big building swinging a foot out of plumb like a giant pendulum. The crowd was growing. Should the building fall the loss of life would be appalling. It was mid-morning. The interior of the building teemed with thousands of workers, for all floors above the third were offices.

Teddy Jenks turned suddenly. He heard the watchman in the hall scream in terror. Then he heard a body fall. He rushed to the door to see the Mad Musician standing over the prostrate form of the detective, a devilish grin on his distorted countenance.

The madman turned, saw Jenks, and started to run. Jenks took after him. Up the staircase the madman rushed toward the roof. Teddy followed him two floors and then rushed out to take the elevators. The building in its mad swaying had made it impossible for the lifts to be operated. Teddy realized this with a distraught gulp in his throat. He returned to the stairway and took up the pursuit of the madman.

The corridors were beginning to fill with screaming men and wailing girls. It was a sight never to be forgotten.

Laboriously Jenks climbed story after story without getting sight of the madman. Finally he reached the roof. It was waving like swells on a lake before a breeze. He caught sight of the Mad Musician standing on the street wall, thirty stories from the street, a leer on his devilish visage. He jumped for him.

The madman grasped him and lifted him up to the top of the wall as a cat might have lifted a mouse. Both men were breathing heavily as a result of their 15-story climb.

The madman tried to throw Teddy Jenks to the street below. Teddy clung to him. The two battled desperately as the building swayed.

The dense crowd in the street had caught sight of the two men fighting on the narrow coping, and the shout which rent the air reached the ears of Jenks.

The mind of the engineer was still working clearly, but a wild fear gripped his heart. His strength seemed to be leaving him. The madman pushed him back, bending his spine with brute strength. Teddy was forced to the narrow ledge that had given the two men footing. The fingers of the madman gripped his throat.

He was dimly conscious that the swaying of the building was slowing down. His reason told him that Linane had found the wall socket and had stopped the sawing of the devil's bow on the engine of hell.

He saw the madman draw a big knife. With his last remaining strength he reached out and grasped the wrist above the hand which held the weapon. In spite

of all he could do he saw the madman inching the knife nearer and nearer his throat.

Grim death was peering into the bulging eyes of Teddy Jenks, when his engineering knowledge came to his rescue. He remembered the top stories of the Acme building were constructed with a step of ten feet in from the street line, for every story of construction above the 24th floor.

"If we fall," he reasoned, "we can only fall one story." Then he deliberately rolled his own body and the weight of the madman, who held him, over the edge of the coping. At the same time he twisted the madman's wrist so the point of the knife pointed to the madman's body.

There was a dim consciousness of a painful impact. Teddy had fallen underneath, but the force of the two bodies coming together had thrust the knife deep into the entrails of the Mad Musician.

Clouds which had been collecting in the sky began a splattering downpour. The storm grew in fury and

lightning tore the heavens, while thunder boomed and crackled. The rain began falling in sheets.

This served to revive the unconscious Teddy. He painfully withdrew his body from under that of the madman. The falling rain, stained with the blood of the Mad Musician, trickled over the edge of the building.

Teddy dragged himself through a window and passed his hand over his forehead, which was aching miserably. He tried to get to his feet and fell back, only to try again. Several times he tried and then, his strength returning, he was able to walk.

He made his way to the studio where he had left Linane and found him there surrounded by police, reporters and others. The infernal machine had been rendered harmless, but was kept intact as evidence.

Catching sight of Teddy, Linane shouted with joy. "I stopped the damned thing," he chuckled, like a pleased schoolboy. Then, observing Teddy's exhausted condition he added:

"Why, you look like you have been to a funeral!"

"I have," said Teddy. "You'll find that crazy fiddler dead on the twenty-ninth story. Look out the window of the thirtieth story," he instructed the police, who had started to recover the body. "He stabbed himself. He is either dead or dying."

It proved that he was dead.

No engineering firm is responsible for the actions of a madman. So the Muller Construction Company was given a clean bill of health.

Jenks and Elaine Linane were with the girl's father in his study. They were asking for the paternal blessing.

Linane was pretending to be hard to convince.

"Now, my daughter," he said, "this young man takes \$500 of my good money by sounding me out, as he calls it. Then he comes along and tries to take my daughter away from me. It is positively high-handed. It dates back to the football game—"

"Daddy, dear, don't be like that!" said Elaine, who was on the arm of his chair with her own arms around him.

"I tell you, Elaine, this dates back to the fall of 1927."

"It dates back to the fall of Eve," said Elaine. "When a girl finds her man, no power can keep him from her. If you won't give me to Teddy Jenks, I'll elope with him."

"Well, all right then. Kiss me," said Linane as he turned towards his radio set.

"One and one makes one," said Teddy Jenks.

Every engineer knows his mathematics.

#14 The Thief of Time, by Sterner St. Paul Meek:

The teller turned to the stacked pile of bills. They were gone! And no one had been near!

Aproximate word count: 8,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Harvey Winston, paying teller of the First National Bank of Chicago, stripped the band from a bundle of twenty dollar bills, counted out seventeen of them and added them to the pile on the counter before him.

The teller turned to the stacked pile of bills. They were gone! And no one had been near!

"Twelve hundred and thirty-one tens," he read from the payroll change slip before him. The paymaster of the Cramer Packing Company nodded an assent and Winston turned to the stacked bills in his rear

currency rack. He picked up a handful of bundles and turned back to the grill. His gaze swept the counter where, a moment before, he had stacked the twenties, and his jaw dropped.

"You got those twenties, Mr. Trier?" he asked.

"Got them? Of course not, how could I?" replied the paymaster. "There they are...."

His voice trailed off into nothingness as he looked at the empty counter.

"I must have dropped them," said Winston as he turned. He glanced back at the rear rack where his main stock of currency was piled. He stood paralyzed for a moment and then reached under the counter and pushed a button.

The bank resounded instantly to the clangor of gongs and huge steel grills shot into place with a clang, sealing all doors and preventing anyone from entering or leaving the bank. The guards sprang to their stations with drawn weapons and from the inner

offices the bank officials came swarming out. The cashier, followed by two men, hurried to the paying teller's cage.

"What is it, Mr. Winston?" he cried.

"I've been robbed!" gasped the teller.

"Who by? How?" demanded the cashier.

"I—I don't know, sir," stammered the teller. "I was counting out Mr. Trier's payroll, and after I had stacked the twenties I turned to get the tens. When I turned back the twenties were gone."

"Where had they gone?" asked the cashier.

"I don't know, sir. Mr. Trier was as surprised as I was, and then I turned back, thinking that I had knocked them off the counter, and I saw at a glance that there was a big hole in my back racks. You can see yourself, sir."

The cashier turned to the paymaster.

"Is this a practical joke, Mr. Trier?" he demanded sharply.

"Of course not," replied the paymaster. "Winston's grill was closed. It still is. Granted that I might have reached the twenties he had piled up, how could I have gone through a grill and taken the rest of the missing money without his seeing me? The money disappeared almost instantly. It was there a moment before, for I noticed when Winston took the twenties from his rack that it was full."

"But someone must have taken it," said the bewildered cashier. "Money doesn't walk off of its own accord or vanish into thin air—"

A bell interrupted his speech.

"There are the police," he said with an air of relief. "I'll let them in."

The smaller of the two men who had followed the cashier from his office when the alarm had sounded stepped forward and spoke quietly. His voice was low

and well pitched yet it carried a note of authority and power that held his auditors' attention while he spoke. The voice harmonized with the man. The most noticeable point about him was the inconspicuousness of his voice and manner, yet there was a glint of steel in his gray eyes that told of enormous force in him.

"I don't believe that I would let them in for a few moments, Mr. Rogers," he said. "I think that we are up against something a little different from the usual bank robbery."

"But, Mr. Carnes," protested the cashier, "we must call in the police in a case like this, and the sooner they take charge the better chance there will be of apprehending the thief."

"Suit yourself," replied the little man with a shrug of his shoulders. "I merely offered my advice."

"Will you take charge, Mr. Carnes?" asked the cashier.

"I can't supersede the local authorities in a case like this," replied Carnes. "The secret service is primarily

interested in the suppression of counterfeiting and the enforcement of certain federal statutes, but I will be glad to assist the local authorities to the best of my ability, provided they desire my help. My advice to you would be to keep out the patrolmen who are demanding admittance and get in touch with the chief of police. I would ask that his best detective together with an expert finger-print photographer be sent here before anyone else is admitted. If the patrolmen are allowed to wipe their hands over Mr. Winston's counter they may destroy valuable evidence."

"You are right, Mr. Carnes," exclaimed the cashier. "Mr. Jervis, will you tell the police that there is no violence threatening and ask them to wait for a few minutes? I'll telephone the chief of police at once."

As the cashier hurried away to his telephone Carnes turned to his companion who had stood an interested, although silent spectator of the scene. His companion was a marked contrast to the secret service operator. He stood well over six feet in height, and his protruding jaw and shock of unruly black hair combined with his massive shoulders and chest to

give him the appearance of a man who labored with his hands—until one looked at them. His hands were in strange contrast to the rest of him. Long, slim, mobile hands they were, with tapering nervous fingers—the hands of a thinker or of a musician. Telltale splotches of acid told of hours spent in a laboratory, a tale that was confirmed by the almost imperceptible stoop of his shoulders.

"Do you agree with my advice, Dr. Bird?" asked Carnes deferentially.

The noted scientist, who from his laboratory in the Bureau of Standards had sent forth many new things in the realms of chemistry and physics, and who, incidentally, had been instrumental in solving some of the most baffling mysteries which the secret service had been called upon to face, grunted.

"It didn't do any harm," he said, "but it is rather a waste of time. The thief wore gloves."

"How in thunder do you know that?" demanded Carnes.

"It's merely common sense. A man who can do what he did had at least some rudiments of intelligence, and even the feeblest-minded crooks know enough to wear gloves nowadays."

Carnes stepped a little closer to the doctor.

"Another reason why I didn't want patrolmen tramping around," he said in an undertone, "is this. If Winston gave the alarm quickly enough, the thief is probably still in the building."

"He's a good many miles away by now," replied Dr. Bird with a shrug of his shoulders.

Carnes' eyes opened widely. "Why?—how?—who?" he stammered. "Have you any idea of who did it, or how it was done?"

"Possibly I have an idea," replied Dr. Bird with a cryptic smile. "My advice to you, Carnes, is to keep away from the local authorities as much as possible. I want to be present when Winston and Trier are questioned and I may possibly wish to ask a few

questions myself. Use your authority that far, but no farther. Don't volunteer any information and especially don't let my name get out. We'll drop the counterfeiting case we were summoned here on for the present and look into this a little on our own hook. I will want your aid, so don't get tied up with the police."

"At that, we don't want the police crossing our trail at every turn," protested Carnes.

"They won't," promised the doctor. "They will never get any evidence on this case, if I am right, and neither will we—for the present. Our stunt is to lie low and wait for the next attempt of this nature and thus accumulate some evidence and some idea of where to look."

"Will there be another attempt?" asked Carnes.

"Surely. You don't expect a man who got away with a crime like this to quit operations just because a few flatfeet run around and make a hullabaloo about it, do you? I may be wrong in my assumption, but if I am

right, the most important thing is to keep all reference to my name or position out of the press reports."

The cashier hastened up to them.

"Detective-Captain Sturtevant will be here in a few minutes with a photographer and some other men," he said. "Is there anything that we can do in the meantime, Mr. Carnes?"

"I would suggest that Mr. Trier and his guard and Mr. Winston go into your office," replied Carnes. "My assistant and I would like to be present during the questioning, if there are no objections."

"I didn't know that you had an assistant with you," answered the cashier.

Carnes indicated Dr. Bird.

"This gentleman is Mr. Berger, my assistant," he said. "Do you understand?"

"Certainly. I am sure there will be no objection to your presence, Mr. Carnes," replied the cashier as he led the way to his office.

A few minutes later Detective-Captain Sturtevant of the Chicago police was announced. He acknowledged the introductions gruffly and got down to business at once.

"What were the circumstances of the robbery?" he asked.

Winston told his story, Trier and the guard confirming it.

"Pretty thin!" snorted the detective when they had finished. He whirled suddenly on Winston.

"Where did you hide the loot?" he thundered.

"Why—uh—er—what do you mean?" gulped the teller.

"Just what I said," replied the detective. "Where did you hide the loot?"

"I didn't hide it anywhere," said the teller. "It was stolen."

"You had better think up a better one," sneered Sturtevant. "If you think that you can make me believe that that money was stolen from you in broad daylight with two men in plain sight of you who didn't see it, you might just as well get over it. I know that you have some hiding place where you have slipped the stuff and the quicker you come clean and spill it, the better it will be for you. Where did you hide it?"

"I didn't hide it!" cried the teller, his voice trembling. "Mr. Trier can tell you that I didn't touch it from the time I laid it down until I turned back."

"That's right," replied the paymaster. "He turned his back on me for a moment, and when he turned back, it was gone."

"So you're in on it too, are you?" said Sturtevant.

"What do you mean?" demanded the paymaster hotly.

"Oh nothing, nothing at all," replied the detective. "Of course Winston didn't touch it and it disappeared and you never saw it go, although you were within three feet of it all the time. Did *you* see anything?" he demanded of the guard.

"Nothing that I am sure of," answered the guard. "I thought that a shadow passed in front of me for an instant, but when I looked again, it was gone."

Dr. Bird sat forward suddenly. "What did this shadow look like?" he asked.

"It wasn't exactly a shadow," said the guard. "It was as if a person had passed suddenly before me so quickly that I couldn't see him. I seemed to feel that there was someone there, but I didn't rightly *see* anything."

"Did you notice anything of the sort?" demanded the doctor of Trier.

"I don't know," replied Trier thoughtfully. "Now that Williams has mentioned it, I did seem to feel a breath

of air or a motion as though something had passed in front of me. I didn't think of it at the time."

"Was this shadow opaque enough to even momentarily obscure your vision?" went on the doctor.

"Not that I am conscious of. It was just a breath of air such as a person might cause by passing very rapidly."

"What made you ask Trier if he had the money when you turned around?" asked the doctor of Winston.

"Say-y-y," broke in the detective. "Who the devil are you, and what do you mean by breaking into my examination and stopping it?"

Carnes tossed a leather wallet on the table.

"There are my credentials," he said in his quiet voice. "I am chief of one section of the United States Secret Service as you will see, and this is Mr. Berger, my assistant. We were in the bank, engaged on a

counterfeiting case, when the robbery took place. We have had a good deal of experience along these lines and we are merely anxious to aid you."

Sturtevant examined Carnes' credentials carefully and returned them.

"This is a Chicago robbery," he said, "and we have had a little experience in robberies and in apprehending robbers ourselves. I think that we can get along without your help."

"You have had more experience with robberies than with apprehending robbers if the papers tell the truth," said Dr. Bird with a chuckle.

The detective's face flushed.

"That will be enough from you, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," he said. "If you open your mouth again, I'll arrest you as a material witness and as a possible accomplice."

"That sounds like Chicago methods," said Carnes quietly. "Now listen to me, Captain. My assistant and I

are merely trying to assist you in this case. If you don't desire our assistance we'll proceed along our own lines without interfering, but in the meantime remember that this is a National Bank, and that our questions will be answered. The United States is higher than even the Chicago police force, and I am here under orders to investigate a counterfeiting case. If I desire, I can seal the doors of this bank and allow no one in or out until I have the evidence I desire. Do you understand?"

Sturtevant sprang to his feet with an oath, but the sight of the gold badge which Carnes displayed stopped him.

"Oh well," he said ungraciously. "I suppose that no harm will come of letting Winston answer your fool questions, but I'll warn you that I'll report to Washington that you are interfering with the course of justice and using your authority to aid the getaway of a criminal."

"That is your privilege," replied Carnes quietly. "Mr. Winston, will you answer Mr. Berger's question?"

"Why, I asked him because he was right close to the money and I thought that he might have reached through the wicket and picked it up. Then, too—"

He hesitated for a moment and Dr. Bird smiled encouragingly.

"What else?" he asked.

"Why, I can't exactly tell. It just seemed to me that I had heard the rustle that bills make when they are pulled across a counter. When I saw them gone, I thought that he might have taken them. Then when I turned toward him, I seemed to hear the rustle of bills behind me, although I knew that I was alone in the cage. When I looked back the money was gone."

"Did you see or hear anything like a shadow or a person moving?"

"No—yes—I don't know. Just as I turned around it seemed to me that the rear door to my cage had moved and there may have been a shadow for an instant. I don't know. I hadn't thought of it before."

"How long after that did you ring the alarm gongs?"

"Not over a second or two."

"That's all," said Dr. Bird.

"If your high and mightiness has no further questions to ask, perhaps you will let me ask a few," said Sturtevant.

"Go ahead, ask all you wish," replied Dr. Bird with a laugh. "I have all the information I desire here for the present. I may want to ask other questions later, but just now I think we'll be going."

"If you find any strange finger-prints on Winston's counter, I'll be glad to have them compared with our files," said Carnes.

"I am not bothering with finger-prints," snorted the detective. "This is an open and shut case. There would be lots of Winston's finger-prints there and no others. There isn't the slightest doubt that this is an inside case and I have the men I want right here. Mr.

Rogers, your bank is closed for to-day. Everyone in it will be searched and then all those not needed to close up will be sent away. I will get a squad of men here to go over your building and locate the hiding place. Your money is still on the premises unless these men slipped it to a confederate who got out before the alarm was given. I'll question the guards about that. If that happened, a little sweating will get it out of them."

"Are you going to arrest me?" demanded Trier in surprise.

"Yes, dearie," answered the detective. "I am going to arrest you and your two little playmates if these Washington experts will allow me to. You will save a lot of time and quite a few painful experiences if you will come clean now instead of later."

"I demand to see my lawyer and to communicate with my firm," said the paymaster.

"Time enough for that when I am through with you," replied the detective.

He turned to Carnes.

"Have I your gracious permission to arrest these three criminals?" he asked.

"Yes indeed, Captain," replied Carnes sweetly. "You have my gracious permission to make just as big an ass of yourself as you wish. We're going now."

"By the way, Captain," said Dr. Bird as he followed Carnes out. "When you get through playing with your prisoners and start to look for the thief, here is a tip. Look for a left-handed man who has a thorough knowledge of chemistry and especially toxicology."

"It's easy enough to see that he was left-handed if he pulled that money out through the grill from the positions occupied by Trier and his guard, but what the dickens led you to suspect that he is a chemist and a toxicologist?" asked Carnes as he and the doctor left the bank.

"Merely a shrewd guess, my dear Watson," replied the doctor with a chuckle. "I am likely to be wrong, but

there is a good chance that I am right. I am judging solely from the method used."

"Have you solved the method?" demanded Carnes in amazement. "What on earth was it? The more I have thought about it, the more inclined I am to believe that Sturtevant is right and that it is an inside job. It seems to me impossible that a man could have entered in broad daylight and lifted that money in front of three men and within sight of a hundred more without some one getting a glimpse of him. He must have taken the money out in a grip or a sack or something like that, yet the bank record shows that no one but Trier entered with a grip and no one left with a package for ten minutes before Trier entered."

"There may be something in what you say, Carnes, but I am inclined to have a different idea. I don't think it is the usual run of bank robbery, and I would rather not hazard a guess just now. I am going back to Washington to-night. Before I go any further into the matter, I need some rather specialized knowledge that I don't possess and I want to consult with Dr. Knolles. I'll be back in a week or so and then we can

look into that counterfeiting case after we get this disposed of."

"What am I to do?" asked Carnes.

"Sit around the lobby of your hotel, eat three meals a day, and read the papers. If you get bored, I would recommend that you pay a visit to the Art Institute and admire the graceful lions which adorn the steps. Artistic contemplations may well improve your culture."

"All right," replied Carnes. "I'll assume a pensive air and moon at the lions, but I might do better if you told me what I was looking for."

"You are looking for knowledge, my dear Carnes," said the doctor with a laugh. "Remember the saying of the sages: To the wise man, no knowledge is useless."

A huge Martin bomber roared down to a landing at the Maywood airdrome, and a burly figure descended from the rear cockpit and waved his hand jovially to

the waiting Carnes. The secret service man hastened over to greet his colleague.

"Have you got that truck I wired you to have ready?" demanded the doctor.

"Waiting at the entrance; but say, I've got some news for you."

"It can wait. Get a detail of men and help us to unload this ship. Some of the cases are pretty heavy."

Carnes hurried off and returned with a gang of laborers, who took from the bomber a dozen heavy packing cases of various sizes, several of them labelled either "Fragile" or "Inflammable" in large type.

"Where do they go, Doctor?" he asked when the last of them had been loaded onto the waiting truck.

"To the First National Bank," replied Dr. Bird, "and Casey here goes with them. You know Casey, don't you, Carnes? He is the best photographer in the

Bureau."

"Shall I go along too?" asked Carnes as he acknowledged the introduction.

"No need for it. I wired Rogers and he knows the stuff is coming and what to do with it. Unpack as soon as you get there, Casey, and start setting up as soon as the bank closes."

"All right, Doctor," replied Casey as he mounted the truck beside the driver.

"Where do we go, Doctor?" asked Carnes as the truck rolled off.

"To the Blackstone Hotel for a bath and some clean clothes," replied the doctor. "And now, what is the news you have for me?"

"The news is this, Doctor. I carried out your instructions diligently and, during the daylight hours, the lions have not moved."

Dr. Bird looked contrite.

"I beg your pardon, Carnes," he said. "I really didn't think when I left you so mystified how you must have felt. Believe me, I had my own reasons, excellent ones, for secrecy."

"I have usually been able to maintain silence when asked to," replied Carnes stiffly.

"My dear fellow, I didn't mean to question your discretion. I know that whatever I tell you is safe, but there are angles to this affair that are so weird and improbable that I don't dare to trust my own conclusions, let alone share them. I'll tell you all about it soon. Did you get those tickets I wired for?"

"Of course I got them, but what have two tickets to the A. A. U. track meet this afternoon got to do with a bank robbery?"

"One trouble with you, Carnes," replied the doctor with a judicial air, "is that you have no idea of the importance of proper relaxation. Is it possible that

you have no desire to see Ladd, this new marvel who is smashing records right and left, run? He performs for the Illinois Athletic Club this afternoon, and it would not surprise me to see him lower the world's record again. He has already lowered the record for the hundred yard dash from nine and three-fifths to eight and four-fifths. There is no telling what he will do."

"Are we going to waste the whole afternoon just to watch a man run?" demanded Carnes in disgust.

"We will see many men run, my dear fellow, but there is only one in whom I have a deep abiding interest, and that is Mr. Ladd. Have you your binoculars with you?"

"No."

"Then by all means beg, borrow or steal two pairs before this afternoon. We might easily miss half the fun without them. Are our seats near the starting line for the sprints?"

"Yes. The big demand was for seats near the finish line."

"The start will be much more interesting, Carnes. I was somewhat of a minor star in track myself in my college days and it will be of the greatest interest to me to observe the starting form of this new speed artist. Now Carnes, don't ask any more questions. I may be barking up the wrong tree and I don't want to give you a chance to laugh at me. I'll tell you what to watch for at the track."

The sprinters lined up on the hundred yard mark and Dr. Bird and Carnes sat with their glasses glued to their eyes watching the slim figure in the colors of the Illinois Athletic Club, whose large "62" on his back identified him as the new star.

"On your mark!" cried the starter. "Get set!"

"Ah!" cried Dr. Bird. "Did you see that Carnes?"

The starting gun cracked and the runners were off on their short grind. Ladd leaped into the lead and

rapidly distanced the field, his legs twinkling under him almost faster than the eye could follow. He was fully twenty yards in the lead when his speed suddenly lessened and the balance of the runners closed up the gap he had opened. His lead was too great for them, and he was still a good ten yards in the lead when he crossed the tape. The official time was posted as eight and nine-tenths seconds.

"Another thirty yards and he would have been beaten," said Carnes as he lowered his glasses.

"That is the way he has won all of his races," replied the doctor. "He piles up a huge lead at first and then loses a good deal at the finish. His speed doesn't hold up. Never mind that, though, it is only an additional point in my favor. Did you notice his jaws just before the gun went?"

"They seemed to clench and then he swallowed, but most of them did some thing like that."

"Watch him carefully for the next heat and see if he puts anything into his mouth. That is the important

thing."

Dr. Bird sank into a brown study and paid no attention to the next few events, but he came to attention promptly when the final heat of the hundred yard dash was called. With his glasses he watched Ladd closely as the runner trotted up to the starting line.

"There, Carnes!" he cried suddenly. "Did you see?"

"I saw him wipe his mouth," said Carnes doubtfully.

"All right, now watch his jaws just before the gun goes."

The final heat was a duplicate of the first preliminary. Ladd took an early lead which he held for three-fourths of the distance to the tape, then his pace slackened and he finished only a bare ten yards ahead of the next runner. The time tied his previous world's record of eight and four-fifths seconds.

"He crunched and swallowed all right, Doctor," said Carnes.

"That is all I wanted to be sure of. Now Carnes, here is something for you to do. Get hold of the United States Commissioner and get a John Doe warrant and go back to the hotel with it and wait for me. I may phone you at any minute and I may not. If I don't, wait in your room until you hear from me. Don't leave it for a minute."

"Where are you going, Doctor?"

"I'm going down and congratulate Mr. Ladd. An old track man like me can't let such an opportunity pass."

"I don't know what this is all about, Doctor," replied Carnes, "but I know you well enough to obey orders and to keep my mouth shut until it is my turn to speak."

Few men could resist Dr. Bird when he set out to make a favorable impression, and even a world's champion is apt to be flattered by the attention of one of the greatest scientists of his day, especially when that scientist has made an enviable reputation as an athlete in his college days and can talk the jargon of

the champion's particular sport. Henry Ladd promptly capitulated to the charm of the doctor and allowed himself to be led away to supper at Bird's club. The supper passed off pleasantly, and when the doctor requested an interview with the young athlete in a private room, he gladly consented. They entered the room together, remained for an hour and a half, and then came out. The smile had left Ladd's face and he appeared nervous and distracted. The doctor talked cheerfully with him but kept a firm grip on his arm as they descended the stairs together. They entered a telephone booth where the doctor made several calls, and then descended to the street, where they entered a taxi.

"Maywood airdrome," the doctor told the driver.

Two hours later the big Martin bomber which had carried the doctor to Chicago roared away into the night, and Bird turned back, reentered the taxi, and headed for the city alone.

When Carnes received the telephone call, which was one of those the doctor made from the booth in his

club, he hurried over to the First National Bank. His badge secured him an entrance and he found Casey busily engaged in rigging up an elaborate piece of apparatus on one of the balconies where guards were normally stationed during banking hours.

"Dr. Bird said to tell you to keep on the job all night if necessary," he told Casey. "He thinks he will need your machine to-morrow."

"I'll have it ready to turn on the power at four A.M.," replied Casey.

Carnes watched him curiously for a while as he soldered together the electrical connections and assembled an apparatus which looked like a motion picture projector.

"What are you setting up?" he asked at length.

"It is a high speed motion picture camera," replied Casey, "with a telescopic lens. It is a piece of apparatus which Dr. Bird designed while he was in Washington last week and which I made from his

sketches, using some apparatus we had on hand. It's a dandy, all right."

"What is special about it?"

"The speed. You know how fast an ordinary movie is taken, don't you? No? Well, it's sixteen exposures per second. The slow pictures are taken sometimes at a hundred and twenty-eight or two hundred and fifty-six exposures per second, and then shown at sixteen. This affair will take half a million pictures per second."

"I didn't know that a film would register with that short an exposure."

"That's slow," replied Casey with a laugh. "It all depends on the light. The best flash-light powder gives a flash about one ten-thousandth of a second in duration, but that is by no means the speed limit of the film. The only trouble is enough light and sufficient shutter speed. Pictures have been taken by means of spark photography with an exposure of less than one three-millionth of a second. The whole

secret of this machine lies in the shutter. This big disc with the slots in the edge is set up before the lens and run at such a speed that half a million slots per second pass before the lens. The film, which is sixteen millimeter X-ray film, travels behind the lens at a speed of nearly five miles per second. It has to be gradually worked up to this speed, and after the whole thing is set up, it takes it nearly four hours to get to full speed."

"At that speed, it must take a million miles of film before you get up steam."

"It would, if the film were being exposed. There is only about a hundred yards of film all told, which will run over these huge drums in an endless belt. There is a regular camera shutter working on an electric principle which remains closed. When the switch is tripped, the shutter opens in about two thirty-thousandths of a second, stays open just one one-hundredth of a second, and then closes. This time is enough to expose nearly all of our film. When we have our picture, I shut the current down, start applying a magnetic brake, and let it slow down. It takes over an

hour to stop it without breaking the film. It sounds complicated, but it works all right."

"Where is your switch?"

"That is the trick part of it. It is a remote control affair. The shutter opens and starts the machine taking pictures when the back door of the paying teller's cage is opened half an inch. There is also a hand switch in the line that can be opened so that you can open the door without setting off the camera, if you wish. When the hand switch is closed and the door opened, this is what happens. The shutter on the camera opens, the machine takes five thousand pictures during the next hundredth of a second, and then the shutter closes. Those five thousand exposures will take about five minutes to show at the usual rate of sixteen per second."

"You said that you had to get plenty of light. How are you managing that?"

"The camera is equipped with a special lens ground out of rock crystal. This lens lets in ultra-violet light

which the ordinary lens shuts out, and X-ray film is especially sensitive to ultra-violet light. In order to be sure that we get enough illumination, I will set up these two ultra-violet floodlights to illumine the cage. The teller will have to wear glasses to protect his eyes and he'll get well sunburned, but something has to be sacrificed to science, as Dr. Bird is always telling me."

"It's too deep for me," said Carnes with a sigh. "Can I do anything to help? The doctor told me to stand by and do anything I could."

"I might be able to use you a little if you can use tools," said Casey with a grin. "You can start bolting together that light proof shield if you want to."

"Well, Carnes, did you have an instructive night?" asked Dr. Bird cheerfully as he entered the First National Bank at eight-thirty the next morning.

"I don't see that I did much good, Doctor. Casey would have had the machine ready on time anyway, and I'm no machinist."

"Well, frankly, Carnes, I didn't expect you to be of much help to him, but I did want you to see what Casey was doing, and a little of it was pretty heavy for him to handle alone. I suppose that everything is ready?"

"The motor reached full speed about fifteen minutes ago and Casey went out to get a cup of coffee. Would you mind telling me the object of the whole thing?"

"Not at all. I plan to make a permanent record of the work of the most ingenious bank robber in the world. I hope he keeps his word."

"What do you mean?"

"Three days ago when Sturtevant sweated a 'confession' out of poor Winston, the bank got a message that the robbery would be repeated this morning and dared them to prevent it. Rogers thought it was a hoax, but he telephoned me and I worked the Bureau men night and day to get my camera ready in time for him. I am afraid that I can't do much to prevent the robbery, but I may be able to

take a picture of it and thus prevent other cases of a like nature."

"Was the warning written?"

"No. It was telephoned from a pay station in the loop district, and by the time it was traced and men got there, the telephoner was probably a mile away. He said that he would rob the same cage in the same manner as he did before."

"Aren't you taking any special precautions?"

"Oh, yes, the bank is putting on extra guards and making a lot of fuss of that sort, probably to the great amusement of the robber."

"Why not close the cage for the day?"

"Then he would rob a different one and we would have no way of photographing his actions. To be sure, we will put dummy money there, bundles with bills on the outside and paper on the inside, so if I don't get a picture of him, he won't get much. Every bill in the

cage will be marked as well."

"Did he say at what time he would operate?"

"No, he didn't, so we'll have to stand by all day. Oh, hello, Casey, is everything all right?"

"As sweet as chocolate candy, Doctor. I have tested it out thoroughly, and unless we have to run it so long that the film wears out and breaks, we are sitting pretty. If we don't get the pictures you are looking for, I'm a dodo, and I haven't been called that yet."

"Good work, Casey. Keep the bearings oiled and pray that the film doesn't break."

The bank had been opened only ten minutes when the clangor of gongs announced a robbery. It was practically a duplicate of the first. The paying teller had turned from his window to take some bills from his rack and had found several dozens of bundles missing. As the gongs sounded, Dr. Bird and Casey leaped to the camera.

"She snapped, Doctor!" cried Casey as he threw two switches. "It'll take an hour to stop and half a day to develop the film, but I ought to be able to show you what we got by to-night."

"Good enough!" cried Dr. Bird. "Go ahead while I try to calm down the bank officials. Will you have everything ready by eight o'clock?"

"Easy, Doctor," replied Casey as he turned to the magnetic brake.

By eight o'clock quite a crowd had assembled in a private room at the Blackstone Hotel. Besides Dr. Bird and Carnes, Rogers and several other officials of the First National Bank were present, together with Detective-Captain Sturtevant and a group of the most prominent scientists and physicians gathered from the schools of the city.

"Gentlemen," said Dr. Bird when all had taken seats facing a miniature moving picture screen on one wall, "to-night I expect to show you some pictures which will, I am sure, astonish you. It marks the advent of a

new departure in transcendental medicine. I will be glad to answer any questions you may wish to ask and to explain the pictures after they are shown, but before we start a discussion, I will ask that you examine what I have to show you. Lights out, please!"

He stepped to the rear of the room as the lights went out. As his eyes grew used to the dimness of the room he moved forward and took a vacant seat. His hand fumbled in his pocket for a second.

"Now!" he cried suddenly.

In the momentary silence which followed his cry, two dull metallic clicks could be heard, and a quick cry that was suddenly strangled as Dr. Bird clamped his hand over the mouth of the man who sat between him and Carnes.

"All right, Casey," called the doctor.

The whir of a projection machine could be heard and on the screen before them leaped a picture of the paying teller's cage of the First National Bank.

Winston's successor was standing motionless at the wicket, his lips parted in a smile, but the attention of all was riveted on a figure who moved at the back of the cage. As the picture started, the figure was bent over an opened suitcase, stuffing into it bundles of bills. He straightened up and reached to the rack for more bills, and as he did so he faced the camera full for a moment. He picked up other bundles of bills, filled the suitcase, fastened it in a leisurely manner, opened the rear door of the cage and walked out.

"Again, please!" called Dr. Bird. "And stop when he faces us full."

The picture was repeated and stopped at the point indicated.

"Lights, please!" cried the doctor.

The lights flashed on and Dr. Bird rose to his feet, pulling up after him the wilted figure of a middle-aged man.

"Gentlemen," said the doctor in ringing tones, "allow

me to present to you Professor James Kirkwood of the faculty of the Richton University, formerly known as James Collier of the Bureau of Standards, and robber of the First National Bank."

Detective-Captain Sturtevant jumped to his feet and cast a searching glance at the captive.

"He's the man all right," he cried. "Hang on to him until I get a wagon here!"

"Oh, shut up!" said Carnes. "He's under federal arrest just now, charged with the possession of narcotics. When we are through with him, you can have him if you want him."

"How did you get that picture, Doctor?" cried the cashier. "I watched that cage every minute during the morning and I'll swear that man never entered and stole that money as the picture shows, unless he managed to make himself invisible."



IMAGE DESCRIPTION

"You're closer to the truth than you suspect, Mr. Rogers," said Dr. Bird. "It is not quite a matter of invisibility, but something pretty close to it. It is a matter of catalysts."

"What kind of cats?" asked the cashier.

"Not cats, Mr. Rogers, catalysts. Catalysts is the name of a chemical reaction consisting essentially of a decomposition and a new combination effected by means of a catalyst which acts on the compound bodies in question, but which goes through the reaction itself unchanged. There are a great many of them which are used in the arts and in manufacturing, and while their action is not always clearly understood, the results are well known and can be banked on.

"One of the commonest instances of the use of a catalyst is the use of sponge platinum in the manufacture of sulphuric acid. I will not burden you with the details of the 'contact' process, as it is known, but the combination is effected by means of finely divided platinum which is neither changed, consumed or wasted during the process. While there are a number of other catalysts known, for instance iron in reactions in which metallic magnesium is concerned, the commonest are the metals of the platinum group.

"Less is known of the action of catalysts in the organic reactions, but it has been the subject of intensive study by Dr. Knolles of the Bureau of Standards for several years. His studies of the effects of different colored lights, that is, rays of different wave-lengths, on the reactions which constitute growth in plants have had a great effect on hothouse forcing of plants and promise to revolutionize the truck gardening industry. He has speeded up the rate of growth to as high as ten times the normal rate in some cases.

"A few years ago, he and his assistant, James Collier, turned their attention toward discovering a catalyst which would do for the metabolic reactions in animal life what his light rays did for plants. What his method was, I will not disclose for obvious reasons, but suffice it to say that he met with great success. He took a puppy and by treating it with his catalytic drugs, made it grow to maturity, pass through its entire normal life span, and die of old age in six months."

"That is very interesting, Doctor, but I fail to see what bearing it has on the robbery."

"Mr. Rogers, how, on a dark day and in the absence of a timepiece, would you judge the passage of time?"

"Why, by my stomach, I guess."

"Exactly. By your metabolic rate. You eat a meal, it digests, you expend the energy which you have taken into your system, your stomach becomes empty and your system demands more energy. You are hungry and you judge that some five or six hours must have passed since you last ate. Do you follow?"

"Certainly."

"Let us suppose that by means of some tonic, some catalytic drug, your rate of metabolism and also your rate of expenditure of energy has been increased six fold. You would eat a meal and in one hour you would be hungry again. Having no timepiece, and assuming that you were in a light-proof room, you would judge that some five hours had passed, would you not?"

"I expect so."

"Very well. Now suppose that this accelerated rate of digestion and expenditure of energy continued. You would be sleepy in perhaps three hours, would sleep about an hour and a quarter, and would then wake, ready for your breakfast. In other words, you would have lived through a day in four hours."

"What advantage would there be in that?"

"None, from your standpoint. It would, however, increase the rate of reproduction of cattle greatly and might be a great boom to agriculture, but we will not discuss this phase now. Suppose it were possible to increase your rate of metabolism and expenditure of energy, in other words, your rate of living, not six times, but thirty thousand times. In such a case you would live five minutes in one one-hundredth of a second."

"Naturally, and you would live a year in about seventeen and one-half minutes, and a normal lifespan of seventy years in about twenty hours. You would be as badly off as any common may-fly."

"Agreed, but suppose that you could so regulate the dose of your catalyst that its effect would last for only one one-hundredth of a second. During that short period of time, you would be able to do the work that would ordinarily take you five minutes. In other words, you could enter a bank, pack a satchel with currency and walk out. You would be working in a leisurely manner, yet your actions would have been so quick that no human eye could have detected them. This is my theory of what actually took place. For verification, I will turn to Dr. Kirkwood, as he prefers to be known now."

"I don't know how you got that picture, but what you have said is about right," replied the prisoner.

"I got that picture by using a speed of thirty thousand times the normal sixteen exposures per second," replied Dr. Bird. "That figure I got from Dr. Knolles, the man who perfected the secret you stole when you left the Bureau three years ago. You secured only part of it and I suppose it took all your time since to perfect and complete it. You gave yourself away when you experimented on young Ladd. I was a track man

myself in my college days and when I saw an account of his running, I smelt a rat, so I came back and watched him. As soon as I saw him crush and swallow a capsule just as the gun was fired, I was sure, and got hold of him. He was pretty stubborn, but he finally told me what name you were running under now, and the rest was easy. I would have got you in time anyway, but your bravado in telling us when you would next operate gave me the idea of letting you do it and photographing you at work. That is all I have to say. Captain Sturtevant, you can take your prisoner whenever you want him."

"I reckoned without you, Dr. Bird, but the end hasn't come yet. You may send me up for a few years, but you'll never find that money. I'm sure of that."

"Tut, tut, Professor," laughed Carnes. "Your safety deposit box in the Commercial National is already sealed until a court orders it opened. The bills you took this morning were all marked, so that is merely additional proof, if we needed it. You surely didn't think that such a transparent device as changing your name from 'James Collier' to 'John Collyer' and

signing with your left hand instead of your right would fool the secret service, did you? Remember, your old Bureau records showed you to be ambidextrous."

"What about Winston's confession?" asked Rogers suddenly.

"Detective-Captain Sturtevant can explain that to a court when Mr. Winston brings suit against him for false arrest and brutal treatment," replied Carnes.

"A very interesting case, Carnes," remarked the doctor a few hours later. "It was an enjoyable interlude in the routine of most of the cases on which you consult me, but our play time is over. We'll have to get after that counterfeiting case to-morrow."

March 1930

#15 Cold Light, by Sterner St. Paul Meek:

How could a human body be found actually splintered--broken into sharp fragments like a shattered glass! Once again Dr. Bird probes deep into an amazing mystery.

Aproximate word count: 7,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

“Confound it, Carnes, I am on my vacation!”

“I know it, Doctor, and I hate to disturb you, but I felt that I simply had to. I have one of the weirdest cases on my hands that I have ever been mixed up in and I think that you’ll forgive me for calling you when I tell you about it.”

How could a human body be found actually splintered--broken into sharp fragments like a

shattered glass! Once again Dr. Bird probes deep into an amazing mystery.

Dr. Bird groaned into the telephone transmitter.

“I took a vacation last summer, or tried to, and you hauled me away from the best fishing I have found in years to help you on a case. This year I traveled all the way from Washington to San Francisco to get away from you and the very day that I get here you are after me. I won’t have anything to do with it. Where are you, anyway?”

“I am at Fallon, Nevada, Doctor. I’m sorry that you won’t help me out because the case promises to be unusually interesting. Let me at least tell you about it.”

Dr. Bird groaned louder than ever into the telephone transmitter.

“All right, go ahead and tell me about it if it will relieve your mind, but I have given you my final answer. I am not a bit interested in it.”

“That is quite all right, Doctor, I 296 don’t expect you to touch it. I hope, however, that you will be able to give me an idea of where to start. Did you ever see a man’s body broken in pieces?”

“Do you mean badly smashed up?”

“No indeed, I mean just what I said, broken in pieces. Legs snapped off as though the entire flesh had become brittle.”

“No, I didn’t, and neither did anyone else.”

“I have seen it, Doctor.”

“Hooey! What had you been drinking?”

Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service chuckled softly to himself. The voice of the famous scientist of the Bureau of Standards plainly showed an interest which was quite at variance with his words.

“I was quite sober, Doctor, and so was Hughes, and

we both saw it.”

“Who is Hughes?”

“He is an air mail pilot, one of the crack fliers of the Transcontinental Airmail Corporation. Let me tell you the whole thing in order.”

“All right. I have a few minutes to spare, but I’ll warn you again that I don’t intend to touch the case.”

“Suit yourself, Doctor. I have no authority to requisition your services. As you know, the T.A.C. has been handling a great deal of the transcontinental air mail with a pretty clean record on accidents. The day before yesterday, a special plane left Washington to carry two packages from there to San Francisco. One of them was a shipment of jewels valued at a quarter of a million, consigned to a San Francisco firm and the other was a sealed packet from the War Department. No one was supposed to know the contents of that packet except the Chief of Staff who delivered it to the plane personally, but rumors got out, as usual, and it was popularly supposed to

contain certain essential features of the Army's war plans. This much is certain: The plane carried not only the regular T.A.C. pilot and courier, but also an army courier, and it was guarded during the trip by an army plane armed with small bombs and a machine-gun. I rode in it. My orders were simply to guard the ship until it landed at Mills Field and then to guard the courier from there to the Presidio of San Francisco until his packet was delivered personally into the hands of the Commanding General of the Ninth Corps Area.

"The trip was quiet and monotonous until after we left Salt Lake City at dawn this morning. Nothing happened until we were about a hundred miles east of Reno. We had taken elevation to cross the Stillwater Mountains and were skimming low over them, my plane trailing the T.A.C. plane by about half a mile. I was not paying any particular attention to the other ship when I suddenly felt our plane leap ahead. It was a fast Douglas and the pilot gave it the gun and made it move, I can tell you. I yelled into the speaking tube and asked what was the reason. My pilot yelled back

that the plane ahead was in trouble.

“As soon as it was called to my attention I could see myself that it wasn’t acting normally. It was losing elevation and was pursuing a very erratic course. Before we could reach it it lost flying speed and fell into a spinning nose dive and headed for the ground. I watched, expecting every minute to see the crew make parachute jumps, but they didn’t and the plane hit the ground with a terrific crash.”

“It caught fire, of course?”

“No, Doctor, that is one of the funny things about the accident. It didn’t. It hit the ground in an open place free from brush and literally burst into pieces, but it didn’t flame up. We headed directly for the scene of the crash and we encountered another funny thing. We almost froze to death.”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I say. Of course, it’s 297 pretty cold at that altitude all the time, but this cold was like

nothing I had ever encountered. It seemed to freeze the blood in our veins and it congealed frost on the windshields and made the motor miss for a moment. It was only momentary and it only existed directly over the wrecked plane. We went past it and swung around in a circle and came back over the wreck, but we didn't feel the cold again.

“The next thing we tried to do was to find a landing place. That country is pretty rugged and rough and there wasn't a flat place for miles that was large enough to land a ship on. Hughes and I talked it over and there didn't seem to be much of anything that we could do except to go on until we found a landing place. I had had no experience in parachute jumping and I couldn't pilot the plane if Hughes jumped. We swooped down over the wreck as close as we dared and that was when we saw the condition of the bodies. The whole plane was cracked up pretty badly, but the weird part of it was the fact that the bodies of the crew had broken into pieces, as though they had been made of glass.



IMAGEDescription

Arms and legs were detached from the torsos and lying at a distance. There was no sign of blood on the ground. We saw all this with our naked eyes from close at hand and verified it by observations through binoculars from a greater height.

“When we had made our observations and marked the location of the wreck as closely as we could, we

headed east until we found a landing place near Fallon. Hughes dropped me here and went on to Reno, or to San Francisco if necessary, to report the accident and get more planes to aid in the search. I was wholly at sea, but it seemed to be in your line and as I knew that you were at the St. Francis, I called you up.”

“What are your plans?”

“I made none until I talked with you. The country where the wreck occurred is unbelievably wild and we can’t get near it with any transportation other than burros. The only thing that I can see to do is to gather together what transportation I can and head for the wreck on foot to rescue the packets and to bring out the bodies. Can you suggest anything better?”

“When do you expect to start?”

“As soon as I can get my pack train together. Possibly in three or four hours.”

“Carnes, are you sure that those bodies were broken into bits? An arm or a leg might easily be torn off in a complete crash.”

“They were smashed into bits as nearly as I could tell, Doctor. Hughes is an old flier and he has seen plenty of crashes but he never saw anything like this. It beats anything that I ever saw.”

“If your observations were accurate, there could be only one cause and that one is a patent impossibility. I haven’t a bit of equipment here, but I expect that I can get most of the stuff I want from the University of California across the bay at Berkeley. I can get a plane at Crissy Field. I’ll tell you what to do, Carnes. Get your burro train together and start as soon as you can, but leave me half a dozen burros and a guide at Fallon. I’ll get up there as soon as I can and I’ll try to overtake you before you get to the wreck. If I don’t, don’t disturb anything any more than you can help until my arrival. Do you understand?”

“I thought that you were on your vacation, Doctor.”

“Oh shut up! Like most of my vacations, this one will have to be postponed. I’ll move as swiftly as I can and I ought to be at Fallon to-night if I’m lucky and don’t run into any obstacles. Burros are fairly slow, but I’ll make the best time possible.”

“I rather expected you would, Doctor. I can’t get my pack train together until evening, so I’ll wait for you right here. I’m mighty glad that you are going to get in on it.”

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Silently Carnes and Dr. Bird surveyed the wreck of the T.A.C. plane. The observations of the secret service operative had been correct. The bodies of the unfortunate crew had been broken into fragments. Their limbs had not been twisted off as a freak of the fall but had been cleanly broken off, as though the bodies had suddenly become brittle and had shattered on their impact with the ground. Not only the bodies, but the ship itself had been broken up. Even the clothing of the men was in pieces or had long splits in the fabric whose edges were as clean as though they

had been cut with a knife.

Dr. Bird picked up an arm which had belonged to the pilot and examined it. The brittleness, if it had ever existed, was gone and the arm was limp.

“No *rigor mortis*,” commented the Doctor. “How long ago was the wreck?”

“About seventy-two hours ago.”

“Hm-m! What about those packets that were on the plane?”

Carnes stepped forward and gingerly inspected first the body of the army courier and then that of the courier of the T.A.C.

“Both gone, Doctor,” he reported, straightening up.

Dr. Bird’s face fell into grim lines.

“There is more to this case than appears on the surface, Carnes,” he said. “This was no ordinary

wreck. Bring up that third burro; I want to examine these fragments a little. Bill," he went on to one of the two guides who had accompanied them from Fallon, "you and Walter scout around the ground and see what you can find out. I especially wish to know whether anyone has visited the scene of the wreck."

The guides consulted a moment and started out. Carnes drove up the burro the Doctor had indicated and Dr. Bird unpacked it. He opened a mahogany case and took from it a high powered microscope. Setting the instrument up on a convenient rock, he subjected portions of the wreck, including several fragments of flesh, to a careful scrutiny. When he had completed his observations he fell into a brown study, from which he was aroused by Carnes.

"What did you find out about the cause of the wreck, Doctor?"

"I don't know what to think. The immediate cause was that everything was frozen. The plane ran into a belt of cold which froze up the motor and which probably killed the crew instantly. It was undoubtedly the

aftermath of that cold which you felt when you swooped down over the wreck.”

“It seems impossible that it could have suddenly got cold enough to freeze everything up like that.”

“It does, and yet I am confident that that is what happened. It was no ordinary cold, Carnes; it was cold of the type that infests interstellar space; cold beyond any conception you have of cold, cold near the range of the absolute zero of temperature, nearly four hundred and fifty degrees below zero on the Fahrenheit scale. At such temperatures, things which are ordinarily quite flexible and elastic, such as rubber, or flesh, become as brittle as glass and would break in the manner which these bodies have broken. An examination of the tissues of the flesh shows that it has been submitted to some temperature that is very low in the scale, probably below that of liquid air. Such a temperature would produce instant death and the other phenomena which we can observe.”

“What could cause such a low temperature, Doctor?”

“I don’t know yet, although I hope to find out before we are finished. Cold is a funny thing, Carnes. Ordinarily it is considered as simply the absence of heat; and yet I have always held it to be a definite negative quantity. All through nature we observe that every force has its opposite or negative force to oppose it. We have positive and negative electrical charges, positive and negative, or north and south, magnetic poles. We have gravity and its opposite apery, and I believe cold is really negative heat.”

“I never heard of anything like that, Doctor. I always thought that things were cold because heat was taken from them--not because cold was added. It sounds preposterous.”

“Such is the common idea, and yet I cannot accept it, for it does not explain all the recorded phenomena. You are familiar with a searchlight, are you not?”

“In a general way, yes.”

“A searchlight is merely a source of light, and of course, of heat, which is placed at the focus of a

parabolic reflector so that all of the rays emanating from the source travel in parallel lines. A searchlight, of course, gives off heat. If we place a lens of the same size as the searchlight aperture in the path of the beam and concentrate all the light, and heat, at one spot, the focal point of the lens, the temperature at that point is the same as the temperature of the source of the light, less what has been lost by radiation. You understand that, do you not?"

"Certainly."

"Suppose that we place at the center of the aperture of the searchlight a small opaque disc which is permeable neither to heat nor light, in such a manner as to interrupt the central portion of the beam. As a result, the beam will go out in the form of a hollow rod, or pipe, of heat and light with a dark, cold core. This core will have the temperature of the surrounding air plus the small amount which has radiated into it from the surrounding pipe. If we now pass this beam of light through a lens in order to concentrate the beam, both the pipe of heat and the cold core will focus. If we place a temperature

measuring device near the focus of the dark core, we will find that the temperature is lower than the surrounding air. This means that we have focused or concentrated cold.”

“That sounds impossible. But I can offer no other criticism.”

“Nevertheless, it is experimentally true. It is one of the facts which lead me to consider cold as negative heat. However, this is true of cold, as it is of the other negative forces; they exist and manifest themselves only in the presence of the positive forces. No one has yet concentrated cold except in the presence of heat, as I have outlined. How this cold belt which the T.A.C. plane encountered came to be there is another question. The thing which we have to determine is whether it was caused by natural or artificial forces.”

“Both of the packets which the plane carried are gone, Doctor,” observed Carnes.

“Yes, and that seems to add weight to the possibility that the cause was artificial, but it is far from

conclusive. The packets might not have been on the men when the plane fell, or someone may have passed later and taken them for safekeeping.”

The doctor’s remarks were interrupted by the guides.

“Someone has been here since the wreck, Doctor,” said Bill. “Walter and I found tracks where two men came up here and prowled around for some time and then left by the way they came. They went off toward the northwest, and we followed their trail for about forty rods and then lost it. We weren’t able to pick it up again.”

“Thanks, Bill,” replied the doctor. “Well, Carnes, that seems to add more weight to the theory that the spot of cold was made and didn’t just happen. If a prospecting party had just happened along they would either have left the wreck alone or would have made some attempt to enter the bodies. That cold belt must have been produced artificially by men who planned to rob this plane after bringing it down and who were near at hand to get their plunder. Is there any chance of following that trail?”

“I doubt it, Doc. Walter and I scouted around quite a little, but we couldn’t pick it up again.”

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“Is there any power line passing within twenty miles of here?”

“None that Walter and I know of, Doc.”

“Funny! Such a device as must have been used would need power and lots of it for operation. Well, I’ll try my luck. Carnes, help me unpack and set up the rest of my apparatus.”

With the aid of the operative, Dr. Bird unpacked two of the burros and extracted from cases where they were carefully packed and padded some elaborate electrical and optical apparatus. The first was a short telescope of large diameter which he mounted on a base in such a manner that it could be elevated or depressed and rotated in any direction. At the focal point of the telescope was fastened a small knot of wire from which one lead ran to the main piece of

apparatus, which he sat on a flat rock. The other lead from the wire knot ran into a sealed container surrounded by a water bath under which a spirit lamp burned. From the container another lead led to the main apparatus. This main piece consisted of a series of wire coils mounted on a frame and attached to the two leads. The doctor took from a padded case a tiny magnet suspended on a piece of wire of exceedingly small diameter which he fastened in place inside the coils. Cemented to the magnet was a tiny mirror.

“What is that apparatus?” asked Carnes as the doctor finished his set-up and surveyed it with satisfaction.

“Merely a thermocouple attached to a D’Arsonval galvanometer,” replied the doctor. “This large, squat telescope catches and concentrates on the thermocouple and the galvanometer registers the temperature.”

“You’re out of my depth. What is a thermocouple?”

“A juncture of two wires made of dissimilar metals, in this case of platinum and of platinum-iridium alloy.

When the temperatures of the two junctions are the same, the system is in equilibrium. When they are at different temperatures, an electrical potential is set up, which causes a current to flow from one to the other through the galvanometer. The galvanometer consists of a magnet set up inside coils through which the current I spoke of flows. This current causes the magnet to rotate and by watching the mirror, the rotation can be detected and measured.

“What are you going to use it for?”

“I am going to try to locate somewhere in these hills a

patch of local cold. It may not work, but I have hopes. If you will manipulate the telescope so as to search the hills around here, I will watch the galvanometer."

For several minutes Carnes swung the telescope around. Twice Dr. Bird stopped him and decreased the sensitiveness of his instrument by introducing more resistance in the lines in order to keep the magnet from twisting clear around, due to the fluctuations in the heats received on account of the varying conditions of reflection. As Carnes swung the telescope again the magnet swung around sharply, nearly to a right angle to its former position.

"Stop!" cried the doctor. "Read your azimuth."

Carnes read the compass bearing on the protractor attached to the frame which supported the telescope. Dr. Bird took a pair of binoculars and looked long and earnestly in the indicated direction. With a sigh he laid down the glasses.

“I can’t see a thing, Carnesy,” he said. “We’ll have to move over to the next crest and make a new set-up. Plant a rod on the hill so that we can get an azimuth bearing and get the airline distance with a range finder.”

On the hilltop which Dr. Bird had pointed out the apparatus was again set up. For several minutes Carnes swept the hills before an exclamation from the doctor told him to pause. He read the new azimuth, and the doctor laid off the two readings on a sheet of paper with a protractor and made a few calculations.

“I don’t know,” he said reflectively when he had finished his computations. “This darned instrument is still so sensitive that you may have merely focused on a deep shadow or a cold spring or something of that sort, but the magnet kicked clear around and it may mean that we have located what we are looking for. It should be about two miles away and almost due west of here.”

“There is no spring that I know of, Doc, and I think I know of every water hole in this country,” remarked

Bill.

“There could hardly be a spring at this elevation, anyway,” replied the doctor. “Maybe it is what we are seeking. We’ll start out in that direction, anyway. Bill, you had better take the lead, for you know the country. Spread out a little so that we won’t be too bunched if anything happens.”

For three-quarters of an hour the little group of men made their way through the wilderness in the direction indicated by the doctor. Presently Bill, who was in the lead, held up his hand with a warning gesture. The other three closed up as rapidly as cautious progress would allow.

“What is it, Bill?” asked the doctor in an undertone.

“Slip up ahead and look over that crest.”

The doctor obeyed instructions. As he glanced over he gave vent to a low whistle of surprise and motioned for Carnes to join him. The operative crawled up and glanced over the crest. In a hollow before them was a

crude one-storied house, and erected on an open space before it was a massive piece of apparatus. It consisted of a number of huge metallic cylinders, from which lines ran to a silvery concave mirror mounted on an elaborate frame which would allow it to be rotated so as to point in any direction.

“What is it?” whispered Carnes.

“Some kind of a projector,” muttered the doctor. “I never saw one quite like it, but it is meant to project something. I can’t make out the curve of that mirror. It isn’t a parabola and it isn’t an ellipse. It must be a high degree subcatenary or else built on a transcendental function.”

He raised himself to get a clearer view, and as he did so a puff of smoke came from the house, to be followed in a moment by a sharp crack as a bullet flattened itself a few inches from his head. The doctor tumbled back over the crest out of sight of the house. Bill and Walter hurried forward, their rifles held ready for action.

“Get out on the flanks, men,” directed the doctor.

“The man we want is in a house in that hollow. He’s armed, and he means business.”

Bill and Walter crawled under the shelter of the rocks to a short distance away and then, rifles ready, advanced to the attack. A report came from the hollow and a bullet whined over Bill’s head. Almost instantly a crack came from Walter’s rifle and splinters flew from the building in the hollow a few inches from a loophole, through which projected the barrel of a rifle.

The rifle barrel swung rapidly in a circle and barked in Walter’s direction; but as it did so, Bill’s gun spoke and again splinters flew from the building.

“Good work!” ejaculated Dr. Bird as he watched the slow advance of the two guides. “If we just had rifles we could 302 join in the party, but it’s a little far for effective pistol work. Let’s go ahead, and we may get close enough to do a little shooting.”

Pistols in hand, Carnes and the doctor crawled over

the crest and joined the advance. Again and again the rifle spoke from the hollow and was answered by the vicious barks of the rifles in the hands of the guides, Carnes and the doctor resting their pistols on rocks and sending an occasional bullet toward the loophole. The conditions of light and the moving target were not conducive to good marksmanship on the part of the besieged man, and none of the attackers were hit. Presently Walter succeeded in sending a bullet through the loophole. The rifle barrel suddenly disappeared. With a shout the four men rose from their cover and advanced toward the building at a run.

As they did so an ominous whirring sound came from the apparatus in front of the house and a sudden chill filled the air.

“Back!” shouted Dr. Bird. “Back below the hill if you value your lives!”

He turned and raced at full speed toward the sheltering crest of the hill, the others following him closely. The whirring sound continued, and the

concave reflector turned with a grating sound on its gears. As the path of its rays struck the ground the rocks became white with frost and one rock split with a sharp report, one fragment rolling down the slope, carrying others in its trail.

With panic-stricken faces the four men raced toward the sheltering crest, but remorselessly the reflector swung around in their direction. The intense cold numbed the racing men, cutting off their breath and impeding their efforts for speed.

“Stop!” cried the doctor suddenly. “Fire at that reflector! It’s our only chance!”

He set the example by turning and emptying his pistol futilely at the turning mirror. Bill, Walter and Carnes followed his example. Nearer and nearer to them came the deadly ray. Bill was the nearest to its path, and he suddenly stiffened and fell forward, his useless gun still grasped in his hands. As his body struck the ground it rolled down hill for a few feet, the deadly ray following it. His head struck a rock, and Carnes gave a cry of horror as it broke into fragments.

Walter threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired again and again at the rotating disc. The cold had become intense and he could not control the actions of his muscles and his rifle wavered about. He threw himself flat on the ground, and, with an almost superhuman effort, steadied himself for a moment and fired. His aim was true, and with a terrific crash the reflector split into a thousand fragments. Dr. Bird staggered to his feet.

“It’s out of order for a moment!” he cried. “To the house while we can!”

As swiftly as his numbed feet would allow him, he stumbled toward the house. The muzzle of the rifle again projected from the loophole and with its crack the doctor staggered for a moment and then fell. Walter’s rifle spoke again and the rifle disappeared through the loophole with a spasmodic jerk. Carnes stumbled over the doctor.

“Are you hit badly?” he gasped through chattering teeth.

“I’m not hit at all,” muttered the doctor. “I stumbled and fell just as he fired. Look out! He’s going to shoot again!”

The rifle barrel came slowly into view through the loophole. Walter fired, but his bullet went wild. Carnes threw himself behind a rock for protection.

The rifle swung in Walter’s direction and paused. As it did so, from the house came a strangled cry and a sound as of a blow. The rifle barrel disappeared, and the sounds of a struggle came from the building.

“Come on!” cried Carnes as he rose to his feet, and made his stumbling way forward, the others following at the best speed which their numbed limbs would allow.

As they reached the door they were aware of a struggle which was going on inside. With an oath the doctor threw his massive frame against the door. It creaked, but the solid oak of which it was composed was proof against the attack, and he drew back for another onslaught. From the house came a pistol

shot, followed by a despairing cry and a guttural shout. Reinforced by Carnes, the doctor threw his weight against the door again. With a rending crash it gave, and they fell sprawling into the cabin. The doctor was the first one on his feet.

“Who are you?” asked a voice from one corner. The doctor whirled like a flash and covered the speaker with his pistol.

“Put them up!” he said tersely.

“I am unarmed,” the voice replied. “Who are you?”

“We’re from the United States Secret Service,” replied Carnes who had gained his feet. “The game is up for you, and you’d better realize it.”

“Secret Service! Thank God!” cried the voice. “Get Koskoff—he has the plans. He has gone out through the tunnel!”

“Where is it?” demanded Carnes.

“The entrance is that iron plate on the floor.”

Carnes and the doctor jumped at the plate and tried to lift it, without result. There was no handle or projection on which they could take hold.

“Not that way,” cried the voice. “That cover is fastened on the inside. Go outside the building; he’ll come out about two hundred yards north. Shoot him as he appears or he’ll get away.”

The three men nearly tumbled over each other to get through the doorway into the bitter cold outside. As they emerged from the cabin the gaze of the guide swept the surrounding hills.

“There he goes!” he cried.

“Get him!” said Carnes sharply.

Walter ran forward a few feet and dropped prone on the ground, cuddling the stock of his rifle to his cheek. Two hundred yards ahead a figure was scurrying over the rocks away from the cabin. Walter

drew in his breath and his hand suddenly grew steady as his keen gray eyes peered through the sights. Carnes and the doctor held their breath in sympathy.

Suddenly the rifle spoke, and the fleeing man threw up his arms and fell forward on his face.

“Got him,” said Walter laconically.

“Go bring the body in, Carnes,” exclaimed the doctor. “I’ll take care of the chap inside.”

“Did you get him?” asked the voice eagerly, as the doctor stepped inside.

“He’s dead all right,” replied the doctor grimly. “Who the devil are you, and what are you doing here?”

“There is a light switch on the left of the door as you come in,” was the reply.

Dr. Bird found the switch and snapped on a light. He turned toward the corner from whence the voice had come and recoiled in horror. Propped in the corner

was the body of a middle-aged man, daubed and splashed with blood which ran from a wound in the side of his head.

“Good Lord!” he ejaculated. “Let me help you.”

“There’s not much use,” replied the man rather faintly. “I am about done in. This face wound doesn’t amount to much, but I am shot through the body and am bleeding internally. If you try to move me, it may easily kill me. Leave me alone until your partners come.”

The doctor drew a flask of brandy from his pocket and advanced toward the corner.

“Take a few drops of this,” he advised.

With an effort the man lifted the flask to his lips and gulped down a little of the fiery spirit. A sound of tramping feet came from the outside and then a thud as though a body had been dropped. Carnes and Walter entered the cabin.

“He’s dead as a mackerel,” said Carnes in answer to the doctor’s look. “Walter got him through the neck and broke his spinal cord. He never knew what hit him.”

“The plans?” came in a gasping voice from the man in the corner.

“We got them, too,” replied Carnes. “He had both packets inside his coat. They have been opened, but I guess they are all here. Who the devil are you?”

“Since Koskoff is dead, and I am dying, there is no reason why I shouldn’t tell you,” was the answer.

“Leave that brandy handy to keep up my strength. I have only a short time and I can’t repeat.

“As to who I am or what I was, it doesn’t really matter. Koskoff knew me as John Smith, and it will pass as well as any other name. Let my past stay buried. I am, or was, a scientist of some ability; but fortune frowned on me, and I was driven out of the world. Money would rehabilitate me--money will do anything nowadays--so I set out to get it. In the

course of my experimental work, I had discovered that cold was negative heat and reacted to the laws which governed heat.”

“I knew that,” cried Dr. Bird; “but I never could prove it.”

“Who are you?” demanded John Smith.

“Dr. Bird, of the Bureau of Standards.”

“Oh, Bird. I’ve heard of you. You can understand me when I say that as heat, positive heat is a concomitant of ordinary light. I have found that cold, negative heat, is a concomitant of cold light. Is my apparatus in good shape outside?”

“The reflector is smashed.”

“I’m sorry. You would have enjoyed studying it. I presume that you saw that it was a catenary curve?”

“I rather thought so.”

“It was, and it was also adjustable. I could vary the focal point from a few feet to several miles. With that apparatus I could throw a beam of negative heat with a focal point which I could adjust at will. Close to the apparatus, I could obtain a temperature almost down to absolute zero, but at the longer ranges it wasn’t so cold, due to leakage into the atmosphere. Even at two miles I could produce a local temperature of three hundred degrees below zero.”

“What was the source of your cold?”

“Liquid helium. Those cylinders contain, or rather did contain, for I expect that Koskoff has emptied them, helium in a liquid state.”

“Where is your compressor?”

“I didn’t have to use one. I developed a cold light under whose rays helium would liquefy and remain in a state of equilibrium until exposed to light rays. Those cylinders had merely enough pressure to force the liquid out to where the sun could hit it, and then it turned to a gas, dropping the temperature at the first

focal point of the reflector to absolute zero. When I had this much done, Koskoff and I packed the whole apparatus here and were ready for work.

“We were on the path of the transcontinental air mail, and I bided my time until an especially valuable shipment was to be made. My plans, which worked perfectly, were to freeze the plane in midair and then rob the wreck. I heard of the jewel shipment the T.A.C. was to carry and I planned to get it. When the plane came over, Koskoff and I brought it down. The unsuspected presence of another plane upset us a little, and I started to bring it down. But we had been all over this country and knew there was no place that a plane could land. I let it go on in safety.”

“Thank you,” replied Carnes with a grimace.

“We robbed the wreck and we found two packets, one the jewels I was after, 305 and the other a sealed packet, which proved to contain certain War Department plans. That was when I learned who Koskoff was. I had hired him in San Francisco as a good mechanic who had no principles. He was to get

one-fourth of the loot. When we found these plans, he told me who he was. He was really a Russian secret agent and he wanted to deliver the plans to Russia. I may be a thief and a murderer, but I am not yet ready to betray my country, and I told him so. He offered me almost any price for the plans; but I wouldn't listen. We had a serious quarrel, and he overpowered me and bound me.

"We had a radio set here and he called San Francisco and sent some code message. I think he was waiting here for someone to come. Had we followed our original plans, we would have been miles from here before you arrived.

"He had me bound and helpless, as he thought, but I worked my bonds a little loose. I didn't let him know it, for I knew that the plane I had let get away would guide a party here and I thought I might be able to help out. When you came and attacked the house, I worked at my bonds until they were loose enough to throw off. I saw Koskoff start my cold apparatus to working and then he quit, because he ran out of helium. When he started shooting again, I worked out

of my bonds and tackled him.

“He was a better man than I gave him credit for, or else he suspected me, for about the time I grabbed him he whirled and struck me over the head with his gun barrel and tore my face open. The blow stunned me, and when I came to, I was thrown into this corner. I meant to have another try at it, but I guess you rushed him too fast. He turned and ran for the tunnel, but as he did so, he shot me through the body. I guess I didn’t look dead enough to suit him. You gentlemen broke open the door and came in. That’s all.”

“Not by a long shot, it isn’t,” exclaimed Dr. Bird.
“Where is that cold light apparatus of yours?”

“In the tunnel.”

“How do you get into it?”

“If you will open that cupboard on the wall, you’ll find an open knife switch on the wall. Close it.”

Dr. Bird found the switch and closed it. As he did so the cabin rocked on its foundations and both Carnes and Walter were thrown to the ground. The thud of a detonation deep in the earth came to their ears.

“What was that?” cried the doctor.

“That,” replied Smith with a wan smile, “was the detonation of two hundred pounds of T.N.T. When you dig down into the underground cave where we used the cold light apparatus, you will find it in fragments. It was my only child, and I’ll take it with me.”

As he finished his head slumped forward on his chest. With an exclamation of dismay Dr. Bird sprang forward and tried to lift the prostrate form.

In an agony of desire the Doctor tightened his grip on the dying man’s shoulder. But Smith collapsed into a heap. Dr. Bird bent forward and tore open his shirt and listened at his chest. Presently he straightened up.

“He is gone,” he said sadly, “and I guess the results of

his genius have died with him. He doesn't strike me as a man who left overmuch to chance. Carnes, is your case completed?"

"Very satisfactorily, Doctor. I have both of the lost packets."

"All right, then, come back to the wreck and help me pack my burros. I can make my way back to Fallon without a guide."

"Where are you going, Doctor?"

"That, Carnes, old dear, is none of your blankety blanked business. Permit me to remind you that I am on my vacation. I haven't decided yet just where I am going, but I can tell you one thing. It's going to be some place where you can't call me on the telephone."

#16 Brigands of the Moon, by Ray Cummings:

Black mutiny and brigandage stalk the space-ship Planetara as she speeds to the moon to pick up a fabulously rich cache of radium-ore.

Aproximate word count: 77,300

Bigotry:

Warnings:

Foreword by Ray Cummings:

I have been thinking that if, during one of those long winter evenings at Valley Forge, someone had placed in George Washington's hands one of our present day best sellers, the illustrious Father of our Country would have read it with considerable emotion. I do not mean what we call a story of science, or fantasy--just a novel of action, adventure and romance. The sort of thing you and I like to read, but do not find amazing in any way at all.

Black mutiny and brigandage stalk the Space-ship Planetara as she speeds to the Moon to pick up a fabulously rich cache of radium-ore.

But I fancy that George Washington would have found it amazing. Don't you? It might picture, for instance, a factory girl at a sewing machine. George Washington would be amazed at a sewing machine. And the girl, journeying in the subway to and from her work! Stealing an opportunity to telephone her lover at the noon hour; going to the movies in the evening, or

listening to a radio. And there might be a climax, perhaps, with the girl and the villain in a transcontinental railway Pullman, and the hero sending frantic telegrams, or telephoning the train, and then chasing it in his airplane.

George Washington would have found it amazing!

And I am wondering how you and I would feel if someone were to give us now a book of ordinary adventure of the sort which will be published a hundred and fifty years hence. I have been trying to imagine such a book and the nature of its contents.



IMAGEDescription

Let us imagine it together. Suppose we walk down Fifth Avenue, a pleasant spring morning of May, 2080. Fifth Avenue, no doubt, will be there. I don't know whether the New York Public Library will be there or

not. We'll assume that it is, and that it has some sort of books, printed, or in whatever fashion you care to imagine.

The young man library attendant is surprised at our curiously antiquated aspect. We look as though we were dressed for some historical costume ball. We talk old-fashioned English, like actors in an historical play of the 1930 period.

But we get the book. The attendant assures us it is a good average story of action and adventure. Nothing remarkable, but he read it himself, and found it interesting.

We thank him and take the book. But we find that the language in which it is written is too strange for comfortable reading. And it names so many extraordinary things so casually! As though we knew all about them, which we certainly do not!

So we take it to the kind-hearted librarian in the language division. He modifies it to old-fashioned English of 1930, and he puts occasional footnotes to

help explain some of the things we might not understand. Why he should bother to do this for us I don't know; but let us assume that he does.

And now we take the book home--in the pneumatic tube, or aerial moving sidewalk, or airship, or whatever it is we take to get home.

And now that we are home, let's read the book. It ought to be interesting.

Chapter 1 Tells of the Grantline Moon Expedition and of the Mysterious Martian Who Followed Us in the City Corridor

One may write about oneself and still not be an egoist. Or so, at least, they tell me. My narrative went broadcast with a fair success. It was pantomimed and the public flashed me a reasonable approval. And so my disc publishers have suggested that I record it in more permanent form.

I introduce myself, begging grace that I intrude upon your busy minutes, with my only excuse that perhaps I may amuse you. For what the commercial sellers of my pictured version were pleased to blare as my handsome face, I ask your indulgence. My feminine audience of the pantomimes was undoubtedly graciously pleased at my personality and physical aspect. That I am “tall as a Viking of old”—and “handsome as a young Norse God”—is very pretty talk in the selling of my product. But I deplore its intrusion into the personality of this, my recorded narrative. And so now, for preface, to all my audience

I do give earnest assurance that Gregg Haljan is no conceited zebra, handsomely striped by nature, and proud of it. Not so. I am, I do beg you to believe, a very humble fellow, striving for your approval, hoping only to entertain you.

My introduction: My name, Gregg Haljan. My age, twenty-five years. I was, at the time my narrative begins, Third Officer on the Space-Ship Planetara. Our line was newly established; in 2070, to be exact, following the modern improvements of the Martel Magnetic Levitation. [As early as 1910 it was discovered that an object magnetized under certain conditions was subject to a loss of weight, its gravity partially nullified. The Martel discovery undoubtedly followed that method.]

Our ship, whose home port was Great-New York, carried mail and passenger traffic to and from both Venus and Mars. Of astronomical necessity, our flights were irregular. This spring, with the two other planets both close to the earth, we were making two complete round trips. We had just arrived in Great-New York, this May evening, from Grebhar, Venus Free State.

With only five hours in port here, we were departing the same night at the zero hour for Ferrok-Shahn, capital of the Martian Union.

We were no sooner at the landing stage than I found a code-flash summoning Dan Dean and me to Divisional Detective Headquarters. Dan “Snap” Dean was one of my closest friends. He was radio-helio operator of the Planetara. A small, wiry, red-headed chap, with a quick, ready laugh and a wit that made everyone like him.

The summons to Detective-Colonel Halsey’s office surprised us. Snap eyed me.

“You haven’t been opening any treasury vaults, have you, Gregg?”

“He wants you, also,” I retorted.

He laughed. “Well, he can roar at me like a traffic switchman and my private life will remain my own.”

We could not think why we should be wanted. It was

the darkness of mid-evening when we left the Planetara for Halsey's office. It was not a long trip. We went direct in the upper monorail, descending into the subterranean city at Park-Circle 30.

We had never been to Halsey's office before. We found it to be a gloomy, vaultlike place in one of the deepest corridors. The door lifted.

"Gregg Haljan and Daniel Dean."

The guard stood aside. "Come in."

I own that my heart was unduly thumping as we entered. The door dropped behind us. It was a small blue-lit apartment--a steel-lined room like a vault.

Colonel Halsey sat at his desk. And the big, heavy-set, florid Captain Carter--our commander of the Planetara--was here. That surprised us: we had not seen him leave the ship.

Halsey smiled at us gravely. Captain Carter said, "Sit down, lads."

We took the seats. There was an alarming solemnity about this. If I had been guilty of anything that I could think of, it would have been frightening. But Halsey's first words reassured me.

"It's about the Grantline Moon Expedition. In spite of our secrecy, the news has gotten out. We want to know how. Can you tell us?"

Captain Carter's huge bulk--he was about as tall as I am--towered over us as we sat before Halsey's desk. "If you lads have told anyone--said anything--let slip the slightest hint about it--"

Snap smiled with relief; but he turned solemn at once. "I haven't. Not a word!"

"Nor have I," I declared.

The Grantline Moon Expedition! We had not thought of that as a reason for this summons. Johnny Grantline was a close friend to us both. He had organized an exploring expedition to the Moon. Uninhabited, with its bleak, forbidding, airless,

waterless surface, the Moon--even though so close to the Earth--was seldom visited. No regular ship ever stopped there. A few exploring parties of recent years had come to grief.

But there was a persistent rumor that upon the Moon, mineral riches of fabulous wealth were awaiting discovery. The thing had already caused some interplanetary complications. The aggressive Martians would be only too glad to explore the Moon. But the U.S.W. ["United States of the World," which came into being in 2057 upon the centenary of the Yellow War.] definitely warned them away. The Moon was World Territory, we announced, and we would protect it as such.

The threatened conflict between the Earth and Mars had come to nothing. There was, this year of 2079, a thorough amity between all three of the inhabited planets. It still holds, and I pray that it may always hold.

There was, nevertheless, a realization by our government, that whatever riches might be upon the

Moon should be seized at once and held by some reputable Earth Company. And when Johnny Grantline applied, with his father's wealth and his own scientific record of attainment, the government was only too glad to grant him its writ.

The Grantline Expedition had started six months ago. The Martian government had acquiesced in our ultimatum, yet brigands have been known to be financed under cover of a governmental disavowal. And so the expedition was kept secret.

My words need give no offense to any Martian who comes upon them. I refer to the history of our earth only. The Grantline Expedition was on the Moon now. No word had come from it. One could not flash helios even in code without letting all the universe know that explorers were on the Moon. And why they were there, anyone could easily guess.

And now Colonel Halsey was telling us that the news was abroad! Captain Carter eyed us closely; his flashing eyes under the white bushy brows would pry a secret from anyone.

“You’re sure? A girl of Venus, perhaps, with her cursed, seductive lure! A chance word, with you lads befuddled by alcolite?”

We assured him we had been careful. By the heavens, I know that I had been. Not a whisper, even to Snap, of the name Grantline in six months or more.

Captain Carter added abruptly, “We’re insulated here, Halsey?”

“Yes, talk as freely as you like. An eavesdropping ray will never get into these walls.”

They questioned us. They were satisfied at last that, though the secret had escaped, we had not done it. Hearing it discussed, it occurred to me to wonder why Carter was concerned. I was not aware that he knew of Grantline’s venture. I learned now the reason why the Planetara, upon each of her voyages, had managed to pass fairly close to the Moon. It had been arranged with Grantline that if he wanted help or had any important message, he was to flash it locally to our passing ship. And this Snap knew, and had never

mentioned it, even to me.

Halsey was saying, "Well, we can't blame you, but the secret is out."

Snap and I regarded each other. What could anyone do? What would anyone dare do?

Captain Carter said abruptly, "Look here, lads, this is my chance now to talk plainly to you. Outside, anywhere outside these walls, an eavesdropping ray may be upon us. You know that? One may never even dare whisper since that accursed ray was developed."

Snap opened his mouth to speak but decided against it. My heart was pounding.

Captain Carter went on, "I know I can trust you two more than anyone else under me on the Planetara--"

"What do you mean by that?" I demanded. "What--"

He interrupted me. "Nothing at all but what I say."

Halsey smiled grimly. "What he means, Haljan, is that things are not always what they seem these days. One cannot always tell a friend from an enemy. The Planetara is a public vessel. You have--how many is it, Carter?--thirty or forty passengers this trip to-night?"

"Thirty-eight," said Carter.

"There are thirty-eight people listed for the flight to Ferrok-Shahn to-night," Halsey said slowly. "And some may not be what they seem." He raised his thin dark hand. "We have information--" He paused. "I confess, we know almost nothing--hardly more than enough to alarm us."

Captain Carter interjected, "I want you and Dean to be on your guard. Once on the Planetara it is difficult for us to talk openly, but be watchful. I will arrange for us to be doubly armed."

Vague, perturbing words! Halsey said, "They tell me George Prince is listed for the voyage. I am suggesting, Haljan, that you keep your eye especially upon him. Your duties on the Planetara leave you

comparatively free, don't they?"

"Yes," I agreed. With the first and second officers on duty, and the captain aboard, my routine was more or less that of an understudy.

I said, "George Prince! Who is he?"

"A mechanical engineer," said Halsey. "An under-official of the Earth Federated Radium Corporation. But he associates with bad companions--particularly Martians."

I had never heard of this George Prince, though I was familiar with the Federated Radium Corporation, of course. A semi-government trust, which controlled virtually the entire Earth supply of radium.

"He was in the Automotive Department," Carter put in. "You've heard of the Federated Radium Motor?"

We had, of course. A recent Earth invention which promised to revolutionize the automotive industry. An engine of a new type, using radium as its fuel.

Snap demanded, "What in the stars has this got to do with Johnny Grantline?"

"Much," said Halsey quietly, "or perhaps nothing. But George Prince some years ago mixed in rather unethical transactions. We had him in custody once. He is known now as unusually friendly with several Martians in New York of bad reputation."

"Well--" began Snap.

"What you don't know," Halsey went on quietly, "is that Grantline expects to find radium on the Moon."

We gasped.

"Exactly," said Halsey. "The ill-fated Ballon Expedition thought they had found it on the Moon some years ago. A new type of ore, as rich in radium as our gold-bearing sands are rich in gold. Ballon's first samples gave uranium atoms with a fair representation of ionium and thorium. A richly radio-active ore. A lode of the pure radium is there somewhere, without doubt."

He added vehemently, "Do you understand now why we should be suspicious of this George Prince? He has a criminal record. He has a thorough technical knowledge of radium ores. He associates with Martians of bad reputation. A large Martian Company has recently developed a radium engine to compete with our Earth motor. You know that? You know that there is very little radium available on Mars, and our government will not allow our own radium supply to be exported. That Martian Company needs radium. It will do anything to get radium. What do you suppose it would pay for a few tons of really rich radio-active ore--such as Grantline may have found on the Moon?"

"But," I objected, "that is a reputable Martian company. It's backed by the government of the Martian Union. The government of Mars would not dare--"

"Of course not!" Captain Carter exclaimed sardonically. "Not openly! But if Martian brigands had a supply of radium--I don't imagine where it came from would make much difference. That Martian Company would buy it."

Halsey added, "And George Prince, my agents inform me, seems to know that Grantline is on the Moon. Put it all together, lads. Little sparks show the hidden current.

"More than that: George Prince knows that we have arranged to have the Planetara stop at the Moon and bring back Grantline's radium-ore. This is your last voyage this year. You'll hear from Grantline this time, we're convinced. He'll probably give you the signal as you pass the Moon on your way out. Coming back, you'll stop at the Moon and transport whatever radium-ore Grantline has ready. The Grantline Flyer is too small for ore transportation."

Halsey's voice turned grimly sarcastic. "Doesn't it seem queer that George Prince and a few of his Martian friends happen to be listed as passengers for this voyage?"

In the silence that followed, Snap and I regarded each other. Halsey added abruptly,

"We had George Prince typed that time we arrested

him four years ago. I'll show him to you."

He snapped open an alcove, and said to his waiting attendant, "Get me the type of George Prince."

The disc in a moment came through the pneumatic. Halsey, smiling wryly, adjusted it.

"A nice looking fellow. Nicely spoken. Though at the time we made this he was somewhat annoyed, naturally. He is older now. Twenty-nine, to be exact. Here he is."

The image glowed on the grids before us. His name, George Prince, in letters illumined upon his forehead, showed for a moment and then faded. He stood smiling sourly before us as he repeated the official formula:

"My name is George Prince. I was born in Great-New York City twenty-five years ago."

I gazed at this life-size, moving image of George Prince. He stood somber in the black detention

uniform. A dark, almost a girlishly handsome fellow, well below medium height--the rod beside him showed five feet four inches. Slim and slight. Long, wavy black hair, falling about his ears. A pale, clean-cut, really handsome face, almost beardless. I regarded it closely. A face that would have been femininely beautiful without its masculine touch of heavy black brows and firmly set jaw. His voice as he spoke was low and soft; but at the end, with the concluding words, "I am innocent!" it flashed into strong masculinity. His eyes, shaded with long, girlish black lashes, by chance met mine. "I am innocent." His curving sensuous lips drew down into a grim sneer....

The type faded at its end. Halsey replaced the disc in its box and waved the attendant away. "Thank you."

He turned back to Snap and me. "Well, there he is. We have nothing tangible against him now. But I'll say this: he's a clever fellow, one to be afraid of. I would not blare it from the newscasters' microphone, but if he is hatching any plot, he has been too clever for my agents."

We talked for another half-hour, and then Captain Carter dismissed us. We left Halsey's office with Carter's final words ringing in our ears. "Whatever comes, lads, remember I trust you...."

Snap and I decided to walk a portion of the way back to the ship. It was barely more than a mile through this subterranean corridor to where we could get the vertical lift direct to the landing stage.

We started off on the lower level. Once outside the insulation of Halsey's office we did not dare talk of this thing. Not only electrical ears, but every possible eavesdropping device might be upon us. The corridor was two hundred feet or more below the ground level. At this hour of the night this business section was comparatively deserted. The through tube sounded over our heads with the passing of its occasional trains. The ventilators buzzed and whirred. At the cross intersections, the traffic directors dozed at their posts. It was hot and sticky down here, and gloomy with the daylight globes extinguished, and only the night lights to give a dim illumination. The stores and office arcades were all closed and deserted; only an

occasional night-light burning behind their windows.

Our footfalls echoed on the metal grids as we hurried along.

“Nice evening,” said Snap awkwardly.

“Yes,” I said, “isn’t it?”

I felt oppressed. As though prying eyes and ears were here. We walked for a time in silence, each of us busy with memory of what had transpired in Halsey’s office.

Suddenly Snap gripped me. “What’s that?”

“Where?” I whispered.

We stopped at a corner. An entryway was here. Snap pulled me into it. I could feel him quivering with excitement.

“What is it?” I demanded in a whisper.

“We’re being followed. Did you hear anything?”

“No!” Yet I thought now I could hear something. Vague footfalls. A rustling. And a microscopic electrical whine, as though some device were near us.

Snap was fumbling in his pocket. “Wait, I’ve got a pair of low-scale phones.”

He put the little grids against his ears. I could hear the sharp intake of his breath. Then he seized me, pulled me down to the metal floor of the entryway.

“Back, Gregg! Get back!” I could barely hear his whisper. We crouched as far back into the doorway as we could get. I was armed. My official permit for the carrying of the pencil heat-ray allowed me to have it always with me. I drew it now. But there was nothing to shoot at. I felt Snap clamping the grids on my ears. And now I heard something! An intensification of the vague footsteps I had thought I heard before.

There was something following us! Something out in the corridor there now! A street light was nearby. The corridor was dim, but plainly visible; and to my sight it was empty. But there was something there.

Something invisible! I could hear it moving. Creeping towards us. I pulled the grids off my ears.

Snap murmured, "You've got a local phone."

"Yes! I'll get them to give us the street glare!"

I pressed the danger signal, giving our location to the nearest operator. In a second or two we got the light. The street in all this neighborhood burst into a brilliant actinic glare. The thing menacing us was revealed! A figure in a black cloak, crouching thirty feet away across the corridor.

Snap was on his feet. His voice rang shrilly, "There it is! Give it a shot, Gregg!"

Snap was unarmed, but he flung his hands out menacingly. The figure, which may perhaps not have been aware of our city safeguard, was taken wholly by surprise. A human figure. Seven feet tall, at the least, and therefore, I judged, doubtless a Martian man. The black cloak covered his head. He took a step toward us, hesitated, and then turned in confusion.

Snap's shrill voice was bringing help. The whine of a street guard's alarm whistle nearby sounded. The figure was making off! My pencil-ray was in my hand and I pressed its switch. The tiny heat-ray stabbed through the glare, but I missed. The figure stumbled, but did not fall. I saw a bare gray arm come from the cloak, flung up to maintain its balance. Or perhaps my pencil-ray of heat had seared the arm. The gray-skinned arm of a Martian.

Snap was shouting, "Give him another!" But the figure passed beyond the actinic glare and vanished.

We were detained in the turmoil of the corridor for ten minutes or more with official explanations. Then a message from Halsey released us. The Martian who had been following us in his invisible cloak was never caught.

We escaped from the crowd at last and made our way back to the Planetara, where the passengers were already assembling for the outward Martian voyage.

Chapter 2 “A Fleeting Glance--”

I stood on the turret-balcony of the Planetara with Captain Carter and Dr. Frank, the ship surgeon, watching the arriving passengers. It was close to the zero hour: the level of the stage was a turmoil of confusion. The escalators, with the last of the freight aboard, were folded back. But the stage was jammed with the incoming passenger baggage: the interplanetary customs and tax officials with their X-ray and Zed-ray paraphernalia and the passengers themselves, lined up for the export inspection.

At this height, the city lights lay spread in a glare of blue and yellow beneath us. The individual local planes came dropping like birds to our stage. Thirty-eight passengers for this flight to Mars, but that accursed desire of every friend and relative to speed the departing voyager brought a hundred or more extra people to crowd our girders and bring added difficulty to everybody.

Carter was too absorbed in his duties to stay with us

long. But here in the turret Dr. Frank and I found ourselves at the moment with nothing much to do but watch.

“Think we’ll get away on time, Gregg?”

“No,” I said. “And this of all voyages--”

I checked myself, with thumping heart. My thoughts were so full of what Halsey and Carter had told us that it was difficult to rein my tongue. Yet here in the turret, unguarded by insulation, I could say nothing. Nor would I have dared mention the Grantline Moon Expedition to Dr. Frank. I wondered what he knew of this affair. Perhaps as much as I--perhaps nothing.

He was a thin, dark, rather smallish man of fifty, this ship’s surgeon, trim in his blue and white uniform. I knew him well: we had made several flights together. An American--I fancy of Jewish ancestry. A likable man, and a skillful doctor and surgeon. He and I had always been good friends.

“Crowded,” he said. “Johnson says thirty-eight. I hope

they're experienced travelers. This pressure sickness is a rotten nuisance--keeps me dashing around all night assuring frightened women they're not going to die. Last voyage, coming out of the Venus atmosphere--"

He plunged into a lugubrious account of his troubles with space-sick voyagers. But I was in no mood to listen. My gaze was down on the spider incline, up which, over the bend of the ship's sleek, silvery body, the passengers and their friends were coming in little groups. The upper deck was already jammed with them.

The Planetara, as flyers go, was not a large vessel. Cylindrical of body, forty feet maximum beam, and two hundred and seventy-five feet in overall length. The passenger superstructure--no more than a hundred feet long--was set amidships. A narrow deck, metallic-enclosed, and with large bulls-eye windows, encircled the superstructure. Some of the cabins opened directly onto the deck. Others had doors to the interior corridors. There were half a dozen small but luxurious public rooms.

The rest of the vessel was given to freight storage and the mechanism and control compartments. Forward of the passenger structure the deck level continued under the cylindrical dome-roof to the bow. The forward watch-tower observatory was here; officers' cabins; Captain Carter's navigating rooms and Dr. Frank's office. Similarly, under the stern-dome, was the stern watch-tower and a series of power compartments.

Above the superstructure a confusion of spider bridges, ladders and balconies were laced like a metal network. The turret in which Dr. Frank and I now stood was perched here. Fifty feet away, like a bird's nest, Snap's instrument room stood clinging to the metal bridge. The dome-roof, with the glassite windows rolled back now, rose in a mound-peak to cover this highest middle portion of the vessel.

Below, in the main hull, blue-lit metal corridors ran the entire length of the ship. Freight storage compartments; gravity control rooms; the air renewal systems; heater and ventilators and pressure mechanisms--all were located there. And the

kitchens, stewards' compartments, and the living quarters of the crew. We carried a crew of sixteen, this voyage, exclusive of the navigating officers, and the purser, Snap Dean, and Dr. Frank.

The passengers coming aboard seemed a fair representation of what we usually had for the outward voyage to Ferrok-Shahn. Most were Earth people--and returning Martians. Dr. Frank pointed out one. A huge Martian in a gray cloak. A seven-foot fellow.

"His name is Set Miko," Dr. Frank remarked. "Ever heard of him?"

"No," I said. "Should I?"

"Well--" The doctor suddenly checked himself, as though he were sorry he had spoken.

"I never heard of him," I repeated slowly.

An awkward silence fell suddenly between us.

There were a few Venus passengers. I saw one of them presently coming up the incline, and recognized her. A girl traveling alone. We had brought her from Grebhar, last voyage but one. I remembered her. An alluring sort of girl, as most of them are. Her name was Venza. She spoke English well. A singer and dancer who had been imported to Great-New York to fill some theatrical engagement. She'd made quite a hit on the Great White Way.

She came up the incline, with the carrier ahead of her. Gazing up, she saw Dr. Frank and me at the turret window and waved her white arm in greeting. And flashed us a smile.

Dr. Frank laughed. "By the gods of the airways, there's Alta Venza! You saw that look, Gregg? That was for me, not you."

"Reasonable enough," I retorted. "But I doubt it--the Venza was nothing if not impartial."

I wondered what could be taking Venza now to Mars. I was glad to see her. She was diverting. Educated.

Well-traveled. Spoke English with a colloquial, theatrical manner more characteristic of Great-New York than of Venus. And for all her light banter, I would rather put my trust in her than any Venus girl I had ever met.

The hum of the departing siren was sounding. Friends and relatives of the passengers were crowding the exit incline. The deck was clearing. I had not seen George Prince come aboard. And then I thought I saw him down on the landing stage, just arrived from a private tube-car. A small, slight figure. The customs men were around him: I could only see his head and shoulders. Pale, girlishly handsome face; long, black hair to the base of his neck. He was bareheaded, with the hood of his traveling-cloak pushed back.

I stared, and I saw that Dr. Frank was also gazing down. But neither of us spoke.

Then I said upon impulse, "Suppose we go down to the deck, Doctor?"

He acquiesced. We descended to the lower room of

the turret and clambered down the spider ladder to the upper deck-level. The head of the arriving incline was near us. Preceded by two carriers who were littered with hand-baggage, George Prince was coming up the incline. He was closer now. I recognized him from the type we had seen in Halsey's office.

And then, with a shock, I saw it was not so. This was a girl coming aboard. An arch-light over the incline showed her clearly when she was half way up. A girl with her hood pushed back; her face framed in thick black hair. I saw now it was not a man's cut of hair; but long braids coiled up under the dangling hood.

Dr. Frank must have remarked my amazed expression.

"Little beauty, isn't she?"

"Who is she?"

We were standing back against the wall of the superstructure. A passenger was near us--the

Martian whom Dr. Frank had called Miko. He was loitering here, quite evidently watching this girl come aboard. But as I glanced at him he looked away and casually sauntered off.

The girl came up and reached the deck. "I am in A22," she told the carrier. "My brother came aboard two hours ago."

Dr. Frank answered my whisper. "That's Anita Prince."

She was passing quite close to us on the deck, following the carrier, when she stumbled and very nearly fell. I was nearest to her. I leaped forward and caught her as she went down.

"Oh!" she cried.

With my arm about her, I raised her up and set her upon her feet again. She had twisted her ankle. She balanced herself upon it. The pain of it eased up in a moment.

“I’m--all right--thank you!”

In the dimness of the blue-lit deck, I met her eyes. I was holding her with my encircling arm. She was small and soft against me. Her face, framed in the thick, black hair, smiled up at me. Small, oval face--beautiful--yet firm of chin, and stamped with the mark of its own individuality. No empty-headed beauty, this.

“I’m all right, thank you very much--”

I became conscious that I had not released her. I felt her hands pushing at me. And then it seemed that for an instant she yielded and was clinging. And I met her startled, upflung gaze. Eyes like a purple night with the sheen of misty starlight in them.

I heard myself murmuring, “I beg your pardon. Yes, of course!” I released her.

She thanked me again and followed the carrier along the deck. She was limping slightly from the twisted ankle.

An instant, while she had clung to me--and I had held her. A brief flash of something, from her eyes to mine--from mine back to hers. The poets write that love can be born of such a glance. The first meeting, across all the barriers of which love springs unsought, unbidden--defiant, sometimes. And the troubadours of old would sing: "A fleeting glance; a touch; two wildly beating hearts--and love was born."

I think, with Anita and me, it must have been like that....

I stood gazing after her, unconscious of Dr. Frank, who was watching me with his humorous smile. And presently, no more than a quarter beyond the zero hour, the Planetara got away. With the dome-windows battened tightly, we lifted from the landing stage and soared over the glowing city. The phosphorescence of the electronic tubes was like a comet's tail behind us as we slid upward.

At the trineight hour the heat of our atmospheric passage was over. The passengers had all retired. The ship was quiet, with empty decks and dim, silent

corridors. Vibrationless, with the electronic engines cut off and only the hum of the Martel magnetizers to break the unnatural stillness. We were well beyond the earth's atmosphere, heading out in the cone-path of the earth's shadow, in the direction of the moon.

Chapter 3 In the Helio-room

At six A.M., earth Eastern time, which we were still carrying, Snap Dean and I were alone in his instrument room, perched in the network over the Planetara's deck. The bulge of the dome enclosed us; it rounded like a great observatory window some twenty feet above the ceiling of this little metal cubby-hole.

The Planetara was still in the earth's shadow. The firmament--black interstellar space with its blazing white, red and yellow stars--lay spread around us. The moon, with nearly all its disc illumined, hung, a great silver ball, over our bow quarter. Behind it, to one side, Mars floated like the red tip of a smoldering cigarillo in the blackness. The earth, behind our stern, was dimly, redly visible--a giant sphere, etched with

the configurations of its oceans and continents. Upon one limb a touch of the sunlight hung on the mountain-tops with a crescent red-yellow sheen.

And then we plunged from the cone-shadow. The sun, with the leaping Corona, burst through the blackness behind us. The earth lighted into a huge, thin crescent with hooked cusps.

To Snap and me, the glories of the heavens were too familiar to be remarked. And upon this voyage particularly we were in no mood to consider them. I had been in the helio-room several hours. When the Planetara started, and my few routine duties were over, I could think of nothing save Halsey's and Carter's admonition: "Be on your guard. And particularly--watch George Prince."

I had not seen George Prince. But I had seen his sister, whom Carter and Halsey had not bothered to mention. My heart was still pounding with the memory....

When the passengers had retired and the ship

quieted, I prowled through the passenger corridors. This was about the trinight hour.[Trinight Hour, i.e., 3 A. M.] Hot as the corridors of hell, with our hull and the glassite dome seething with the friction of our atmospheric flight. But the refrigerators mitigated that; the ventilators blasted cold air from the renewers into every corner of the vessel. Within an hour or two, with the cold of space striking us, it was hot air that was needed.

Dr. Frank evidently was having little trouble with pressure-sick passengers [Pressure sickness. Caused by the difficulty of maintaining a constantly normal air pressure within the vessel owing to the sudden, extreme changes from heat to cold.]--the Planetara's equalizers were fairly efficient. I did not encounter Dr. Frank. I prowled through the silent metal lounges and passages. I went to the door of A22. It was on the deck-level, in a tiny transverse passage just off the main lounging room. Its name-grid glowed with the letters: "*Anita Prince*." I stood in my short white trousers and white silk shirt, like a cabin steward gawping. Anita Prince! I had never heard the name

until this night. But there was magic music in it now, as I murmured it to myself. Anita Prince....

She was here, doubtless asleep, behind this small metal door. It seemed as though that little oval grid were the gateway to a fairyland of my dreams.

I turned away. And thought of the Grantline Moon Expedition stabbed at me. George Prince--Anita's brother--he whom I had been told to watch. This renegade--associate of dubious Martians, plotting God knows what.

I saw, upon the adjoining door, "A20, *George Prince*." I listened. In the humming stillness of the ship's interior there was no sound from these cabins. A20 was without windows, I knew. But Anita's room had a window and a door which gave upon the deck. I went through the lounge, out its arch, and walked the deck length. The deck door and window of A22 were closed and dark.

The ten-foot-wide deck was dim with white starlight from the side ports. Chairs were here, but they were

all empty. From the bow windows of the arching dome a flood of moonlight threw long, slanting shadows down the deck. At the corner where the superstructure ended, I thought I saw a figure lurking as though watching me. I went that way, but it vanished.

I turned the corner, went the width of the ship to the other side. There was no one in sight save the observer on his spider bridge, high in the bow network, and the second officer, on duty on the turret balcony almost directly over me.

As I stood and listened, I suddenly heard footsteps. From the direction of the bow a figure came. Purser Johnson.

He greeted me. "Cooling off, Gregg?"

"Yes," I said.

He went past me and turned into the smoking room door nearby.

I stood a moment at one of the deck windows, gazing at the stars; and for no reason at all I realized I was tense. Johnson was a great one for his regular sleep--it was wholly unlike him to be roaming about the ship at such an hour. Had he been watching me? I told myself it was nonsense. I was suspicious of everyone, everything, this voyage.

I heard another step. Captain Carter appeared from his chart-room which stood in the center of the narrowing open deck space near the bow. I joined him at once.

"Who was that?" he half-whispered.

"Johnson."

"Oh, yes." He fumbled in his uniform; his gaze swept the moonlit deck. "Gregg--take this." He handed me a small metal box. I stuffed it at once into my shirt.

"An insulator," he added, swiftly. "Snap is in his office. Take it to him, Gregg. Stay with him--you'll have a measure of security--and you can help him to make

the photographs.” He was barely whispering. “I won’t be with you--no use making it look as though we were doing anything unusual. If your graphs show anything--or if Snap picks up any message--bring it to me.” He added aloud, “Well, it will be cool enough presently, Gregg.”

He sauntered away toward his chart-room.

“By heavens, what a relief!” Snap murmured as the current went on. We had wired his cubby with the insulator; within its barrage we could at last talk with a degree of freedom.

“You’ve seen George Prince, Gregg?”

“No. He’s assigned A20. But I saw his sister. Snap, no one ever mentioned--”

Snap had heard of her, but he hadn’t known that she was listed for this voyage. “A real beauty, so I’ve heard. Accursed shame for a decent girl to have a brother like that.”

I could agree with him there, but I made no comment.

It was now 6 A.M. Snap had been busy all night with routine cosmo-radios from the earth, following our departure. He had a pile of them beside him. Many were for the passengers; but anything that savored of a code was barred.

“Nothing queer looking?” I suggested.

“No. Not a thing.”

We were at this time no more than some sixty-five thousand miles from the moon’s surface. The Planetara presently would swing upon her direct course for Mars. There was nothing which could cause passenger comment in this close passing of the moon; normally we used the satellite’s attraction to give us additional starting speed.

It was now or never that a message would come from Grantline. He was supposed to be upon this earthward side of the moon. While Snap had rushed through with his routine, I had searched the moon

surface with our glass, as I knew Carter was searching it--and also the observer in his tower, very possibly.

But there was nothing. Copernicus and Kepler lay in full sunlight. The heights of the lunar mountains, the depths of the barren, empty seas were etched black and white, clear and clean. Grim, forbidding desolation, this unchanging moon! In romance, moonlight may shimmer and sparkle to light a lover's smile; but the reality of the moon is cold and bleak. There was nothing to show my prying eyes where the intrepid Grantline might be.

"Nothing at all, Snap."

And Snap's helio mirrors, attuned for an hour now to pick up the faintest signal, were motionless.

"If he has concentrated any appreciable amount of radio-active ore," said Snap, "we should get an impulse from its Gamma rays."

But our receiving shield was dark, untouched. We

tried taking hydrogen photographic impressions of the visible moon surface. A sequence of them, with stereoscopic lenses, forty-eight to the second. Our mirror-grid gave the magnified images; the spectro-heliograph, with its wave-length selection, pictured the mountain-levels, and slowly descended into the deepest seas.

There was nothing.

Yet in those moon caverns--a million million recesses amid the crags of that tumbled, barren surface--the pin-point of movement which might have been Grantline's expedition could so easily be hiding! Could he have the ore insulated, fearing its Gamma rays would betray its presence to hostile watchers?

Or might disaster have come to him? Or he might not be upon this hemisphere of the moon at all....

My imagination, sharpened by fancy of a lurking menace which seemed everywhere about the Planetara this voyage, ran rife with fears for Johnny Grantline. He had promised to communicate this

voyage. It was now, or perhaps never.

Six-thirty came and passed. We were well beyond the earth's shadow now. The firmament blazed with its vivid glories; the sun behind us was a ball of yellow-red leaping flames. The earth hung, opened to a huge, dull-red half-sphere.

We were within some forty thousand miles of the moon. Giant white ball--all of its disc visible to the naked eye. It poised over the bow, and presently, as the Planetara swung upon her course for Mars, it shifted sidewise. The light of it glared white and dazzling in our tiny side windows.

Snap, with his habitual red celluloid eyeshade shoved high on his forehead, worked over our instruments.

"Gregg!"

The receiving shield was glowing a trifle! Gamma rays were bombarding it! It glowed, gleamed phosphorescent, and the audible recorder began sounding its tiny tinkling murmurs.

Gamma rays! Snap sprang to the dials. The direction and strength were soon obvious. A richly radio-active ore body, of considerable size, was concentrated upon this hemisphere of the moon! It was unmistakable.

“He’s got it, Gregg! He’s--”

The tiny helio mirrors began quivering. Snap exclaimed triumphantly, “Here he comes! By God, the message at last! Bar off that light!”

I flung on the absorbers. The moonlight bathing the little room went into them and darkness sprang around us. Snap fumbled at his instrument board. Actinic light showed dimly in the quivering, thumbnail mirrors. Two of them. They hung poised on their cobweb wires, infinitely sensitive to the infra-red light-rays Grantline was sending from the moon. The mirrors in a moment began swinging. On the scale across the room the actinic beams from them were magnified into sweeps of light.

The message!

Snap spelled it out, decoded it.

“Success! Stop for ore on your return voyage. Will give you our location later. Success beyond wildest hopes--”

The mirrors hung motionless. The shield, where the Gamma rays were bombarding, went suddenly dark.

Snap murmured, “That’s all. He’s got the ore! ‘Success beyond wildest hopes.’ That must mean an enormous quantity of it available!”

We were sitting in darkness, and abruptly I became aware that across our open window, where the insulation barrage was flung, the air was faintly hissing. An interference there! I saw a tiny swirl of purple sparks. Someone--some hostile ray from the deck beneath us, or from the spider bridge that led to our little room--someone out there trying to pry in!

Snap impulsively reached for the absorbers to let in the outside light--it was all darkness to us outside. But I checked him.

“Wait!” I cut off our barrage, opened our door and stepped to the narrow metal bridge.

“Wait, Snap! You stay there.” I added aloud, “Well, Snap, I’m going to bed. Glad you’ve cleaned up that batch of work.”

I banged the door upon him. The lacework of metal bridges and ladders seemed empty. I gazed up to the dome, and forward and aft. Twenty feet beneath me was the metal roof of the cabin superstructure. Below it, both sides of the deck showed. All patched with moonlight.

No one visible down there. I descended a ladder. The deck was empty. But in the silence something was moving! Footsteps moving away from me down the deck! I followed; and suddenly I was running. Chasing something I could hear, but could not see. It turned into the smoking room.

I burst in. And a real sound smothered the phantom. Johnson the purser was sitting here alone in the dimness. He was smoking. I noticed that his cigar

held a long, frail ash. It could not have been him I was chasing. He was sitting there quite calmly. A thick-necked, heavy fellow, easily out of breath. But he was breathing calmly now.

He sat up with amazement at my wild-eyed appearance, and the ash jarred from his cigar.

“Gregg! What in the devil--”

I tried to grin. “I’m on my way to bed--worked all night helping Snap with those damn Earth messages.”

I went past him, out the door into the main interior corridor. It was the only way the invisible prowler could have gone. But I was too late now--I could hear nothing. I dashed forward into the main lounge. It was empty, dim and silent, a silence broken presently by a faint click--a stateroom door hastily closing. I swung and found myself in a tiny transverse passage. The twin doors of A22 and A20 were before me.

The invisible eavesdropper had gone into one of these rooms! I listened at each of the panels, but there was

only silence within.

The interior of the ship was suddenly singing with the steward's siren--the call to awaken the passengers. It startled me. I moved swiftly away. But as the siren shut off, in the silence I heard a soft, musical voice:

"Wake up, Anita--I think that's the breakfast call."

And her answer: "All right, George. I hear it."

Chapter 4 A Burn on a Martian Arm

I did not appear at that morning meal. I was exhausted and drugged with lack of sleep. I had a moment with Snap, to tell him what had occurred. Then I sought out Carter. He had his little chart-room insulated. And we were cautious. I told him what Snap and I had learned: the Gamma rays from the moon, proving that Grantline had concentrated a considerable ore-body. I also told him the message from Grantline.

"We'll stop on the way back, as he directs, Gregg." He

bent closer to me. "At Ferrok-Shahn I'm going to bring back a cordon of Interplanetary Police. The secret will be out, of course, when once we stop at the moon. We have no right, even now, to be flying this vessel as unguarded as it is."

He was very solemn. And he was grim when I told him of the invisible eavesdropper.

"You think he overheard Grantline's message?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Who was it? You seem to feel it was George Prince?"

"Yes."

I was convinced that the prowler had gone into A20. When I mentioned the purser, who seemed to have been watching me earlier in the night, and again was sitting in the smoking room when the eavesdropper fled past, Carter looked startled.

"Johnson is all right, Gregg."

“Is he? Does he know anything about this Grantline affair?”

“No--no,” said the captain hastily. “You haven’t mentioned it, have you?”

“Of course I haven’t. I’ve been wondering why Johnson didn’t hear that eavesdropper. I could hear him when I was chasing him. But Johnson sat perfectly unmoved and let him go by. What was he sitting there for, anyway, at that hour of the morning?”

“You’re too suspicious, Gregg. Overwrought. But you’re right--we can’t be too careful. I’m going to have that Prince suite searched when I catch it unoccupied. Passengers don’t ordinarily travel with invisible cloaks. Go to bed, Gregg--you need a rest.”

I went to my cabin. It was located aft, on the stern deck-space, near the stern watch-tower. A small metal room, with a desk, a chair and bunk. I made sure no one was in it. I sealed the lattice grill and the door, set the alarm trigger against any opening of them,

and went to bed.

The siren for the mid-day meal awakened me. I had slept heavily. I felt refreshed. And hungry.

I found the passengers already assembled at my table when I arrived in the dining salon. It was a low-vaulted metal room of blue and yellow tube-lights. At the sides its oval windows showed the deck, with its ports of the dome-side, through which a vista of the starry firmament was visible. We were well on our course to Mars. The moon had dwindled to a pin-point of light beside the crescent earth. And behind them our sun blazed, visually the largest orb in the heavens. It was some sixty-eight million miles from the earth to Mars, this voyage. A flight, under ordinary circumstances, of some ten days.

There were five tables in the dining salon, each with eight seats. Snap and I had one of the tables. We sat at the ends, with three passengers on each of the sides.

Snap was in his seat when I arrived. He eyed me

down the length of the table.

“Good morning, Gregg. We missed you at breakfast. Not pressure-sick, I hope?”

There were three passengers already seated at our table--all men. Snap, in a gay mood, introduced me.

“This is our third officer, Gregg Haljan. Big, handsome fellow, isn’t he? And as pleasant as he is good-looking. Gregg, this is Sero Ob Hahn.”

I met the keen, dark-eyed somber gaze of a Venus man of middle age. A small, slim, graceful man, with sleek black hair. His pointed face, accentuated by the pointed beard, was pallid. He wore a white and purple robe; upon his breast was a huge platinum ornament, a device like a star and cross entwined.

“I am happy to meet you, sir.” His voice was soft and sleek.

“Ob Hahn,” I repeated. “I should have heard of you, no doubt. But--”

A smile plucked at his thin, gray lips. "That is the error of mine, not yours. My mission is that all the universe shall hear of me."

"He's preaching the religion of the Venus Mystics," Snap explained.

"And this enlightened gentleman," said Ob Hahn ironically, "has just termed it fetishism. The ignorance--"

"Oh, I say!" protested the man at Ob Hahn's side. "I mean, you seem to think I intended something opprobrious. As a matter of fact--"

"We've an argument, Gregg," laughed Snap. "This is Sir Arthur Coniston, an English gentleman, lecturer and sky-trotter--that is, he will be a sky-trotter; he tells us he plans a number of voyages."

The tall Englishman in his white linen suit bowed acknowledgment. "My compliments, Mr. Haljan. I hope you have no strong religious convictions, else we will make your table here very miserable!"

The third passenger had evidently kept out of the argument. Snap introduced him as Rance Rankin. An American--a quiet, blond fellow of thirty-five or forty.

I ordered my breakfast and let the argument go on.

"Won't make me miserable," said Snap. "I love an argument. You said, Sir Arthur?..."

"I mean to say, I think I said too much. Mr. Rankin, you are more diplomatic."

Rankin laughed. "I am a magician," he said to me. "A theatrical entertainer. I deal in tricks--how to fool an audience--" His keen, amused gaze was on Ob Hahn. "This gentleman from Venus and I have too much in common to argue."

"A nasty one!" the Englishman exclaimed. "By Jove! Really, Mr. Rankin, you're a bit too cruel!"

I could see we were doomed to have turbulent meals this voyage. I like to eat in quiet; arguing passengers always annoy me. There were still three seats vacant

at our table; I wondered who would occupy them. I soon learned the answer--for one seat at least.

Rankin said calmly:

"Where is the little Venus girl this meal?" His glance went to the empty seat at my right hand. "The Venza--wasn't that her name? She and I are destined for the same theater in Ferrok-Shahn."

So Venza was to sit beside me. It was good news. Ten days of a religious argument three times a day would be intolerable. But the cheerful Venza would help.

"She never eats the mid-day meal," said Snap. "She's on the deck, having orange juice. I guess it's the old gag about diet, eh?"

My attention wandered about the salon. Most of the seats were occupied. At the captain's table I saw the objects of my search. George Prince and his sister sat one on each side of the captain. I saw George Prince in the life now as a man who looked hardly twenty-five. He was at this moment evidently in a gay mood. His clean-cut, handsome profile, with its poetic dark

curls, was turned toward me. There seemed little of the villain about him.

And I saw Anita Prince now as a dark-haired, black eyed little beauty, in feature resembling her brother very strongly. She presently finished her meal. She rose, with him after her. She was dressed in Earth fashion--white blouse and dark jacket, wide, knee-length trousers of gray, with a red sash her only touch of color. She went past me, flashed me her smile and nod.

My heart was pounding. I answered her greeting, and met George Prince's casual gaze. He, too, smiled, as though to signify that his sister had told him of the service I had done her. Or was his smile an ironical memory of how he had eluded me this morning when I chased him?

I gazed after his small, white-suited figure as he followed Anita from the salon. And thinking of her, I prayed that Carter and Halsey might be wrong. Whatever plotting against the Grantline Expedition might be going on, I hoped that George Prince was

innocent of it. Yet I knew in my heart it was a futile hope. Prince had been that eavesdropper outside the helio-room. I could not really doubt it. But that his sister must be ignorant of what he was doing, I was sure.

My attention was brought suddenly back to the reality of our table. I heard Ob Hahn's silky voice:

"We passed quite close to the moon last night, Mr. Dean."

"Yes," said Snap. "We did, didn't we? Always do--it's a technical problem of the exigencies of interstellar navigation. Explain it to them, Gregg--you're an expert."

I waved it away with a laugh. There was a brief silence. I could not help noticing Sir Arthur Coniston's queer look, and I think I have never seen so keen a glance as Rance Rankin shot at me. Were all these people aware of Grantline's treasure on the moon? It suddenly seemed so. I wished fervently at that instant that the ten days of this voyage were over

and we were safely at Ferrok-Shahn. Captain Carter was absolutely right. Coming back we would have a cordon of interplanetary police aboard.

Sir Arthur broke the awkward silence. "Magnificent sight, the moon, from so close a viewpoint--though I was too much afraid of pressure-sickness to be up to see it."

I had nearly finished my hasty meal when another incident shocked me. The two other passengers at our table came in and took their seats. A Martian girl and man. The girl had the seat at my left, with the man beside her. All Martians are tall. This girl was about my own height--that is, six feet, two inches. The man was seven feet or more. Both wore the Martian outer robe. The girl flung hers back. Her limbs were encased in pseudo-mail. She looked, as all Martians like to look, a very warlike Amazon. But she was a pretty girl. She smiled at me with a keen-eyed, direct gaze.

"Mr. Dean said at breakfast that you were big and handsome. You are."

They were brother and sister, these Martians. Snap introduced them as Set Miko and Setta Moa. ["Set and Setta," the Martian equivalent of Mr. and Miss.]

This Miko was, from our Earth standards, a tremendous, brawny giant. Not spindly, like most Martians, this fellow, for all his seven feet of height, was almost heavy-set. He wore a plaited leather jerkin beneath his robe, and knee pants of leather out of which his lower legs showed as gray, hairy pillars of strength. He had come into the salon with a swagger, his sword-ornament clanking.

"A pleasant voyage so far," he said to me as he started his meal. His voice had the heavy, throaty rasp characteristic of the Martian. He spoke perfect English--both Martians and Venus people are by heritage extraordinary linguists. Miko and his sister Moa had a touch of Martian accent, worn almost away by living for some years in Great-New York.

The shock to me came within a few minutes. Miko, absorbed in attacking his meal, inadvertently pushed back his robe to bare his forearm. An instant only,

then it dropped again to his wrist. But in that instant I had seen, upon the gray flesh, a thin sear turned red. A very recent burn--as though a pencil-ray of heat had caught his arm.

My mind flung back. Only last night in the City Corridor, Snap and I had been followed by a Martian. I had shot at him with the heat-ray; I thought I had hit him on the arm. Was this the mysterious Martian who had followed us from Halsey's office?

Chapter 5 Venza the Venus Girl

It was shortly after that mid-day meal when I encountered Venza sitting on the starlit deck. I had been in the bow observatory; taken my routine castings of our position and worked them out. I was, I think, of the Planetara's officers the most expert handler of the mathematical mechanical calculators. The locating of our position and charting the trajectory of our course was, under ordinary circumstances, about all I had to do. And it took only a few minutes each twelve hours.

I had a moment with Carter in the isolation of his chart-room.

“This voyage! Gregg, I’m getting like you--too fanciful. We’ve a normal group of passengers, apparently; but I don’t like the look of any of them. That Ob Hahn, at your table--”

“Snaky-looking fellow,” I commented. “He and the Englishman are great on arguments. Did you have Prince’s cabin searched?”

My breath hung on his answer.

“Yes. Nothing unusual among his things. We searched both his room and his sister’s.”

I did not follow that up. Instead I told him about the burn on Miko’s thick gray arm.

He stared. “I wish to the Almighty we were at Ferrok-Shahn. Gregg, to-night when the passengers are asleep, come here to me. Snap will be here, and Dr. Frank. We can trust him.”

“He knows about--about the Grantline treasure?”

“Yes. And so do Balch and Blackstone.”

Balch and Blackstone were our first and second officers.

“We’ll all meet here, Gregg--say about the zero hour. We must take some precautions.”

He suddenly felt he should say no more now. He dismissed me.

I found Venza seated alone in a secluded corner of the starlit deck. A porthole, with the black heavens and the blazing stars, was before her. There was an empty seat nearby.

“Hola-lo, [A Venus form of jocular, intimate greeting.] Gregg! Sit here with me. I have been wondering when you would come after me.”

I sat down beside her. “What are you doing--going to Mars, Venza? I’m glad to see you.”

“Many thanks. But I am glad to see you, Gregg. So handsome a man.... Do you know, from Venus to the earth and I have no doubt on all of Mars, no man will please me more.”

“Glib tongue,” I laughed. “Born to flatter the male-- every girl of your world.” And I added seriously, “You don’t answer my question? What takes you to Mars?”

“Contract. By the stars, what else? Of course, a chance to make a voyage with you--”

“Don’t be silly, Venza.”

I enjoyed her. I gazed at her small, slim figure gracefully reclining in the deck chair. Her long, gray robe parted--by design, I have no doubt--to display her shapely, satin-sheathed legs. Her black hair was coiled in a heavy knot at the back of her neck; her carmined lips were parted with a mocking, alluring smile. The exotic perfume of her enveloped me.

She glanced at me sidewise from beneath her sweeping black lashes.

“Be serious,” I added.

“I am serious. Sober. Intoxicated by you, but sober.”

I said, “What sort of a contract?”

“A theater in Ferrok-Shahn. Good money, Gregg. I’m to be there a year.” She sat up to face me. “There’s a fellow here on the Planetara, Rance Rankin, he calls himself. At our table--a big, good-looking blond American. He says he is a magician. Ever hear of him?”

“That’s what he told me. No, I never heard of him.”

“Nor did I. And I thought I had heard of everyone of any importance. He is listed for the same theater where I’m going. Nice sort of fellow.” She paused, and added suddenly, “If he’s a professional entertainer, I’m a motor-oiler.”

It startled me. “Why do you say that?”

Instinctively my gaze swept the deck. An Earth

woman and child and a small Venus man were in sight, but not within earshot.

“Why do you look so furtive?” she retorted. “Gregg, there’s something strange about this voyage. I’m no fool, nor you, and you know it as well as I do.”

“Rance Rankin--” I prompted.

She leaned closer toward me. “He could fool you. But not me--I’ve known too many real magicians.” She grinned. “I challenged him to trick me. You should have seen him trying to evade!”

“Do you know Ob Hahn?” I interrupted.

She shook her head. “Never heard of him. But he told me plenty at breakfast. By Satan, what a flow of words that devil-driver can muster! He and the Englishman don’t mesh very well, do they?”

She stared at me. I had not answered her grin; my mind was too busy with queer fancies. Halsey’s words: “Things are not always what they seem--”

Were these passengers masqueraders? Put here by George Prince? And then I thought of Miko the Martian, and the burn upon his arm.

“Come back, Gregg! Don’t go wandering off like that!” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “I’ll be serious. I want to know what in the hell is going on aboard this ship. I’m a woman, and I’m curious. You tell me.”

“What do you mean?” I parried.

“I mean a lot of things. What we’ve just been talking about. And what was the excitement you were in just before breakfast this morning?”

“Excitement?”

“Gregg, you may trust me.” For the first time she was wholly serious. Her gaze made sure no one was within hearing. She put her hand on my arm. I could barely hear her whisper: “I know they might have a ray upon us--I’ll be careful.”

“They?”

“Anyone. Something’s going on. You know it--you are in it. I saw you this morning, Gregg. Wild-eyed, chasing a phantom--”

“You?”

“And I heard the phantom! A man’s footsteps. A magnetic reflecting invisible cloak. You couldn’t fool an audience with that--it’s too commonplace. If Rance Rankin tried--”

I gripped her. “Don’t ramble, Venza! You saw me?”

“Yes. My stateroom door was open. I was sitting with a cigarillo. I saw the purser in the smoking room. He was visible from--”

“Wait! Venza, that prowler went through the smoking room!”

“I know he did. I could hear him.”

“Did the purser hear him?”

“Of course. The purser looked up, followed the sound with his gaze. I thought that was queer. He never made a move. And then you came along and he acted innocent. Why? What’s going on, that’s what I want to know!”

I held my breath. “Venza, where did the prowler run to? Can you--”

She whispered calmly, “Into A20. I saw the door open and close--I even think I could see the blurred outline of him. Those magnetic cloaks!” She added, “Why should George Prince be sneaking around with you after him? And the purser acting innocent? And who is this George Prince, anyway?”

The huge Martian, Miko, with his sister Moa came strolling along the deck. They nodded as they passed us.

I whispered, “I can’t explain anything now. But you’re right, Venza: there is something going on. Listen!

Whatever you learn--anything you encounter which looks unusual--will you tell me? I--well, I do trust you--really I do!--but the thing isn't mine to tell."

The somber pools of her eyes were shining. "You are very lovable, Gregg. I won't question you." She was trembling with excitement. "Whatever it is, I want to be in it. Here's something I can tell you now. We've two high-class gold-leaf gamblers aboard. Did you know that?"

"No. Who are--"

"Shac and Dud Ardley. Let me state every detective in Great-New York knows them. They had a wonderful game with that Englishman, Sir Arthur Coniston, this morning. Stripped him of half a pound of eight-inch leaves--a neat little stack. A crooked game, of course. Those fellows are more nimble-fingered than Rance Rankin ever dared to be!"

I sat staring at her. She was a mine of information, this girl.

“And Gregg, I tried my charms on Shac and Dud. Nice men, but dumb. Whatever’s going on, they’re not in it. They wanted to know what kind of a ship this was. Why? Because Shac has a cute little eavesdropping microphone of his own. He had it working in the night last night. He overheard George Prince and that big giant Miko arguing about the moon!”

I gasped. “Venza, softer!”

Against all propriety of this public deck she pretended to drape herself upon me. Her hair smothered my face as her lips almost touched my ear.

“Something about treasure on the moon--Shac couldn’t understand what. And they mentioned you. He didn’t hear what they said because the purser joined them.” Her whispered words tumbled over one another. “A hundred pounds of gold leaf--that’s the purser’s price. He’s with them, whatever it is. He promised to do something for them.”

She stopped. “Well?” I prompted.

“That’s all. Shac’s current was interrupted.”

“Tell him to try it again, Venza! I’ll talk with him. No! I’d better let him alone. Can you get him to keep his mouth shut?”

“I think he might do anything I told him. He’s a man.”

“Find out what you can.”

She sat away from me suddenly. “There’s Anita and George Prince.”

They came to the corner of the deck, but turned back. Venza caught my look. And understood it.

“So you love Anita Prince so much as that, Gregg?” Venza was smiling. “I wish you--I wish some man handsome as you would gaze after me like that.”

She turned solemn. “You may be interested to know that she loves you. I could see it. I knew it when I mentioned you to her this morning.”

“Me? Why, we’ve hardly spoken!”

“Is it necessary? I never heard that it was.”

I could not see Venza’s face; she stood up suddenly. And when I rose beside her, she whispered,

“We should not be seen talking so long. I’ll find out what I can.”

I stared after her slight robed figure as she turned into the lounge archway and vanished.

Chapter 7 A Traitor, and a Passing Asteroid

Captain Carter was grim. “So they’ve bought him off, have they? Go bring him in here, Gregg. We’ll have it out with him now.”

Snap, Dr. Frank, Balch, our first officer, and I were in the captain’s chart-room. It was 4 P.M.--our Earth starting time. We were sixteen hours upon our voyage.

I found Johnson in his office in the lounge. "Captain wants to see you. Close up."

He closed his window upon an American woman passenger who was demanding details of Martian currency, and followed me forward. "What is it, Gregg?"

"I don't know."

Captain Carter banged the slide upon us. The chart-room was insulated. The hum of the current was obvious. Johnson noticed it. He started at the hostile faces of the surgeon and Balch. And he tried to bluster.

"What is this? Something wrong?"

Carter wasted no words. "We have information, Johnson--there's some under cover plot here aboard. I want to know what it is. Suppose you tell us frankly."

The purser looked blank. "What do you mean? We've gamblers aboard, if that's--"

“To hell with that,” growled Balch. “You had a secret interview with that Martian, Set Miko, and with George Prince!”

Johnson scowled from under his heavy brows, and then raised them in surprise.

“Did I? You mean changing their money? I don’t like your tone, Balch. I’m not your under-officer!”

“But you’re under me,” roared the captain. “By God, I’m master here!”

“Well, I’m not disputing that,” said the purser mildly. “This fellow Balch--”

“We’re in no mood for argument,” Dr. Frank cut in. “Clouding the issue.”

“I won’t let it be clouded,” the captain exclaimed. I had never seen Carter so choleric. He was evidently under a tremendous strain. He added,

“Johnson, you’ve been acting suspiciously. I don’t give

a damn whether I've proof of it or not--I say it. Did you, or did you not meet George Prince and that Martian last night?"

"No, I did not. And I don't mind telling you, Captain Carter, that your tone also is offensive!"

"Is it?" Carter suddenly seized him. They were both big men. Johnson's heavy face went purplish red.

"Take your hands!--" They were struggling. Carter's hands were fumbling at the purser's pockets. I leaped, flung an arm around Johnson's neck, pinning him.

"Easy there! We've got you, Johnson!"

Snap tried to help me. "Go on, bang him on the head, Gregg. Now's your chance!"

We searched him. A heat-ray cylinder--that was legitimate. But we found a small battery and eavesdropping microphone similar to the one Venza had mentioned that Shac the gambler was carrying.

“What are you doing with that?” the captain demanded.

“None of your business! Is it criminal? Carter, I’ll have the Line officials dismiss you for this! Take your hands off me, all of you!”

“Look at this!” exclaimed Dr. Frank.

From Johnson’s breast pocket the surgeon drew a folded document. It was the scale drawing of the Planetara’s interior corridors, the lower control rooms and mechanisms. It was always kept in Johnson’s safe. And with it, another document: the ship’s clearance papers--the secret code pass-words for this voyage, to be used if we should be challenged by any interplanetary police ship.

Snap gasped. “My God, that was in my helio-room strong box! I’m the only one on this vessel except the captain who’s entitled to know those pass-words!”

Out of the silence, Balch demanded, “Well, what about it, Johnson?”

The purser was still defiant. "I won't answer your questions, Balch. At the proper time, I'll explain-- Gregg Haljan, you're choking me!"

I eased up. But I shook him. "You'd better talk."

He was exasperatingly silent.

"Enough!" exploded Carter. "He can explain when we get to port. Meanwhile I'll put him where he'll do no more damage. Gregg, lock him in the cage."

We ignored his violent protestations. The cage--in the old days of sea-vessels on Earth, they called it the brig--was the ship's jail. A steel-lined, windowless room located under the deck in the peak of the bow. I dragged the struggling Johnson there, with the amazed watcher looking down from the observatory window at our lunging, starlit forms.

"Shut up, Johnson! If you know what's good for you--"

He was making a fearful commotion. Behind us, where the deck narrowed at the superstructure, half a

dozen passengers were gazing in surprise.

“I’ll have you thrown out of the Service, Gregg Haljan!”

I shut him up finally. And flung him down the ladder into the cage and sealed the deck trap-door upon him. I was headed back for the chart-room when from the observatory came the lookout’s voice.

“An asteroid, Haljan! Officer Blackstone wants you.”

I hurried to the turret bridge. An asteroid was in sight. We had attained nearly our maximum speed now. An asteroid was approaching, so dangerously close that our trajectory would have to be altered. I heard Blackstone’s signals ringing in the control rooms; and met Carter as he ran to the bridge with me.

“That scoundrel! We’ll get more out of him, Gregg. By God, I’ll put the chemicals on him--torture him, illegal or not!”

We had no time for further discussion. The asteroid was rapidly approaching. Already, under the glass, it was a magnificent sight. I had never seen this tiny world before--asteroids are not numerous between the Earth and Mars, or in toward Venus. I never expected to see this one again. How little of the future can we humans fathom, for all our science! If I could only have looked into the future, even for a few short hours! How different then would have been the outcome of this tragic voyage!

The asteroid came rushing at us. Its orbital velocity, I later computed, was some twenty-two miles a second. Our own, at the present maximum, was a fraction over seventy-seven. The asteroid had for some time been under observation by the lookout. He gave his warning only when it seemed that our trajectory should be altered to avoid a dangerously close passing.

At the combined speeds of nearly a hundred miles a second the asteroid swept into view. With the naked eye, at first it was a tiny speck of star-dust, unnoticed in the gem-strewn black velvet of Space. A speck.

Then a gleaming dot, silver white, with the light of our Sun upon it.

Five minutes. The dot grew to a disc. Expanding. A full moon, silver-white. Brightest world in the firmament--the light from it bathed the Planetara, illumined the deck, painting everything with silver.

I stood with Carter and Blackstone on the turret bridge. It was obvious that unless we altered our course, the asteroid would pass too close for safety. Already we were feeling its attraction; from the control rooms came the report that our trajectory was disturbed by this new mass so near.

“Better make your calculations now, Gregg,” Blackstone suggested.

I cast up the rough elements from the observational instruments in the turret. It took me some ten or fifteen minutes. When I had us upon our new course, with the attractive and repulsive plates in the Planetara's hull set in their altered combinations, I went out to the bridge again.

The asteroid hung over our bow quarter. No more than twenty or thirty thousand miles away. A giant ball now, filling all that quadrant of the heavens. The configurations of its mountains--its land and water areas--were plainly visible. Its axial rotation was apparent.

"Perfectly habitable," Blackstone said. "But I've searched all over this hemisphere with the glass. No sign of human life--certainly nothing civilized--nothing in the fashion of cities."

A fair little world, by the look of it. A tiny globe: Blackstone had figured it at some eight hundred miles in diameter. There seemed a normal atmosphere. We could see areas where the surface was obscured by clouds. And oceans, and land masses. Polar icecaps. Lush vegetation at its equator.

Blackstone had roughly cast its orbital elements. A narrow ellipse. No wonder we had never encountered this fair little world before. It had come from the outer region beyond Neptune. At perihelion it would reach inside Mercury, round the Sun, and head

outward again.

We swept past the asteroid at a distance of some six thousand miles. Close enough, in very truth--a minute of flight at our combined speeds totaling a hundred miles a second. I had descended to the passenger deck, where I stood alone at a window, gazing.

The passengers were all gathered to view the passing little world. I saw, not far from me, Anita, standing with her brother; and the giant figure of Miko with them.

Half an hour since, first with the naked eye, this wandering little world had shown itself; it swam slowly past, began to dwindle behind us. A huge half moon. A thinner, smaller quadrant. A tiny crescent, like a silver bar-pin to adorn some lady's breast. And then it was a dot, a point of light indistinguishable among the myriad others hovering in this great black void.

The incident of the passing of the asteroid was over. I turned from the deck window. My heart leaped. The

moment for which all day I had been subconsciously longing was at hand. Anita was sitting in a deck chair, momentarily alone. Her gaze was on me as I looked her way, and she smiled an invitation for me to join her.

Chapter 8 Unspoken Love

Unspoken love! I think if I had yielded to the impulse of my heart, I would have poured out all those protestations of a lover's ecstasy, incongruous here upon this starlit public deck, to a girl I hardly knew. I think, too, she might have received them with a tender acquiescence. The starlight was mirrored in her dark eyes. Misty eyes, with great reaches of unfathomable space in their depths. Yet I felt their tenderness.

Unfathomable strangeness of love! Who am I to write of it, with all the poets of all the ages striving to express the unexpressible? A bond, strangely fashioned by nature, between me and this little dark-haired Earth beauty. As though marked by the stars we were destined to be lovers....

Thus ran the romance of my unspoken thoughts. But I was sitting quietly in the deck chair, striving to regard her gentle beauty impersonally. And saying:

“But Miss Prince, why are you and your brother going to Ferrok-Shahn? His business--”

Even as I voiced it, I hated myself for such a question. So nimble is the human mind that mingled with my rhapsodies of love was my need for information of George Prince....

“Oh,” she said, “this is pleasure, not business, for George.” It seemed to me that a shadow crossed her expressive face. But it was gone in an instant, and she smiled. “We have always wanted to travel. We are alone in the world, you know--our parents died when we were children.”

I filled in her pause. “You will like Mars--so many interesting things to see.”

She nodded. “Yes, I understand so. Our Earth is so much the same all over, cast all in one mould.”

“But a hundred or two hundred years ago it was not, Miss Prince. I have read how the picturesque Orient, differing from--well, Great-New York, or London, for

instance--”

“Transportation did that,” she interrupted eagerly.

“Made everything the same--the people all look alike--dress alike.”

We discussed it. She had an alert, eager mind, childlike with its curiosity, yet strangely matured. And her manner was naïvely earnest. Yet this was no clinging vine, this little Anita Prince. There was a firmness, a hint of masculine strength in her chin, and in her manner.

“If I were a man, what wonders I could achieve in this marvelous age!” Her sense of humor made her laugh at herself. “Easy for a girl to say that,” she added.

“You have greater wonders to achieve, Miss Prince,” I said impulsively.

“Yes? What are they?” She had a very frank and level gaze, devoid of coquetry.

My heart was pounding. “The wonders of the next

generation. A little son, cast in your own gentle image--”

What madness, this clumsy brash talk! I choked it off.

But she took no offense. The dark rose-petals of her cheeks were mantled deeper red, but she laughed.

“That is true.” She turned abruptly serious. “I should not laugh. The wonders of the next generation--conquering humans marching on....” Her voice trailed away. My hand went to her arm. Strange tingling something which poets call love! It burned and surged from my trembling fingers into the flesh of her forearm.

The starlight glowed in her eyes. She seemed to be gazing, not at the silver-lit deck, but away into distant reaches of the future. And she murmured:

“A little son, cast in my own gentle image. But with the strength of his father....”

Our moment. Just a breathless moment given us as

we sat there with my hand burning her arm, as though we both might be seeing ourselves joined in a new individual--a little son, cast in his mother's gentle image and with the strength of his father. Our moment, and then it was over. A step sounded. I sat back. The giant gray figure of Miko came past, his great cloak swaying, with his clanking sword-ornament beneath it. His bullet head, with its close-clipped hair, was hatless. He gazed at us, swaggered past, and turned the deck corner.

Our moment was gone. Anita said conventionally, "It has been pleasant to talk with you, Mr. Haljan."

"But we'll have many more," I said. "Ten days--"

"You think we'll reach Ferrok-Shahn on schedule?"

"Yes. I think so.... As I was saying, Miss Prince, you'll enjoy Mars. A strange, aggressively forward-looking people."

An oppression seemed on her. She stirred in her chair.

“Yes, they are,” she said vaguely. “My brother and I know many Martians in Great-New York.” She checked herself abruptly. Was she sorry she had said that? It seemed so.

Miko was coming back. He stopped this time before us.

“Your brother would see you, Anita. He sent me to bring you to his room.”

The glance he shot me had a touch of insolence. I stood up, and he towered a head over me.

Anita said, “Oh yes. I’ll come.”

I bowed. “I will see you again, Miss Prince. I thank you for a pleasant half-hour.”

The Martian led her away. Her little figure was like a child with a giant. It seemed, as they passed the length of the deck with me staring after them, that he took her arm roughly. And that she shrank from him in fear.

And they did not go inside. As though to show me that he had merely taken her from me, he stopped at a distant deck window and stood talking to her. Once he picked her up as one would pick up a child to show it some distant object through the window.

“A little son with the strength of his father...” Her words echoed in my mind. Was Anita afraid of this Martian’s wooing? Yet held to him by some power he might have over her brother? The vagrant thought struck me.

Was it that?

Chapter 8 A Scream in the Night

We kept, on the Planetara, always the time and routine of our port of departure. The rest of that afternoon and evening were a blank of confusion to me. Anita’s words; the touch of my hand upon her arm; that vast realm of what might be for us, like a glimpse of a magic land of happiness which I had seen in her eyes, and perhaps she had seen in mine--all this surged within me.

I wandered about the vessel. I was not hungry. I did not go to the dining salon for dinner. I carried Johnson food and water to his cage; and sat, with my heat-cylinder upon him, listening to his threats of what would happen when he could complain to the Line's higher officials.

But what was Johnson doing carrying a plan of the ship's control rooms in his pockets? And worse: How had he dared open Snap's box in the helio-room and abstract the code pass-words for this voyage? Without them we would be an outlawed vessel, subject to arrest if any patrol hailed us. Had Johnson been planning to sell those pass-words to Miko? I thought so. I tried to get the confession out of him, but could not.

I had a brief consultation with Captain Carter. He was genuinely apprehensive now. The Planetara carried no long-range guns, and very few side-arms. A half-dozen of the heat-ray hand projectors; a few old-fashioned weapons of explosion-rifles and automatic revolvers. And hand projectors with the new Benson curve-light. We had models of this for curved vision, so that one

might see around a corner, so to speak. And with them, we could project the heat-ray in a curve as well.

The weapons were all in Carter's chart-room, save the few we officers always carried. Carter was apprehensive, but of what he could not say. He had not thought that our plan to stop at the Moon for treasure could affect this outward voyage. Any danger would be upon the way back, when the Planetara would be adequately guarded with long-range electronic guns, and manned with police-soldiers.

But now we were practically defenseless....

I had a moment with Venza, but she had nothing new to communicate to me.

And for half an hour I chatted with George Prince. He seemed a gay, pleasant young man. I could almost have fancied I liked him. Or was it because he was Anita's brother? He told me how he looked forward to traveling with her on Mars. No, he had never been there before, he said.

He had a measure of Anita's earnest naïve personality. Or was he a very clever scoundrel, with irony lurking in his soft voice, and a chuckle that he could so befool me?

"We'll talk again, Haljan. You interest me--I've enjoyed it."

He sauntered away from me, joining the saturnine Ob Hahn, with whom presently I heard him discussing religion.

The arrest of Johnson had caused considerable comment among the passengers. A few had seen me drag him forward to the cage. The incident had been the subject of passenger discussion all afternoon. Captain Carter had posted a notice to the effect that Johnson's accounts had been found in serious error, and that Dr. Frank for this voyage would act in his stead.

It was near midnight when Snap and I closed and sealed the helio-room and started for the chart-room, where we were to meet with Captain Carter and the

other officers. The passengers had nearly all retired. A game was in progress in the smoking room, but the deck was almost deserted.

Snap and I were passing along one of the interior corridors. The stateroom doors, with the illumined names of the passengers, were all closed. The metal grid of the floor echoed our footsteps. Snap was in advance of me. His body suddenly rose in the air. He went like a balloon to the ceiling, struck it gently, and all in a heap came floating down and landed on the floor!

“What in the infernal!--”

He was laughing as he picked himself up. But it was a brief laugh. We knew what had happened: the artificial gravity-controls in the base of the ship, which by magnetic force gave us normality aboard, were being tampered with! For just this instant, this particular small section of this corridor had been cut off. The slight bulk of the Planetara, floating in space, had no appreciable gravity pull on Snap’s body, and the impulse of his step as he came to the

unmagnetized area of the corridor had thrown him to the ceiling. The area was normal now. Snap and I tested it gingerly.

He gripped me. "That never went wrong by accident, Gregg! Someone down there--"

We rushed to the nearest descending ladder. In the deserted lower room the bank of dials stood neglected. A score of dials and switches were here, governing the magnetism of different areas of the ship. There should have been a night operator, but he was gone.

Then we saw him lying nearby, sprawled face down on the floor! In the silence and dim lurid glow of the fluorescent tubes, we stood holding our breaths, peering and listening. No one here.

The guard was not dead. He lay unconscious from a blow on the head. A brawny fellow. We had him revived in a few moments. A broadcast flash of the call-buzz brought Dr. Frank in haste from the chart-room.

“What’s the matter?”

We pointed at the unconscious man. “Someone was here,” I said hastily. “Experimenting with the magnetic switches. Evidently unfamiliar with them--pulling one or another to test their workings and so see the reactions on the dials.”

We told him what had happened to Snap in the upper corridor.

Dr. Frank revived the guard in a moment. He was no worse off for the episode, save a lump on his head, and a nasty headache.

But he had little to tell us. He had heard a step. Saw nothing--and then had been struck on the head, by some invisible assailant.

We left him nursing his head, sitting belligerent at his post. Armed now with my heat-ray cylinder which I loaned him.

“Strange doings this voyage,” he told us. “All the crew

knows it--all been talkin' about it. I stick it out now, but when we get back home I'm done with this star travelin'. I belong on the sea anyway. A good old freighter is all right for me."

We hurried back to the upper level. We would indeed have to plan something at this chart-room conference. This was the first tangible attack our adversaries had made.

We were on the passenger deck headed for the chart-room when all three of us stopped short, frozen with horror. Through the silent passenger quarters a scream rang out! A girl's shuddering, gasping scream. Terror in it. Horror. Or a scream of agony. In the silence of the dully vibrating ship it was utterly horrible. It lasted an instant--a single long scream; then was abruptly stilled.

And with blood pounding my temples and rushing like ice through my veins, I recognized it.

Anita!

Chapter 9 The Murder in A 22

“Good God, what was that?” Dr. Frank’s face had gone white in the starlight. Snap stood like a statue of horror.

The deck here was patched as always, silver radiance from the deck ports. The empty deck chairs stood about. The scream was stilled, but now we heard a commotion inside--the rasp of opening cabin doors; questions from frightened passengers; the scurry of feet.

I found my voice. “Anita! Anita Prince!”

“Come on!” shouted Snap. “Was it the Prince girl? I thought so too! In her stateroom, A22!” He was dashing for the lounge archway.

Dr. Frank and I followed. I realized that we passed the deck door and window of A22. But they were dark, and evidently sealed on the inside. The dim lounge was in a turmoil; passengers standing at their cabin doors. I heard Sir Arthur Coniston:

“I say, what was that?”

“Over there,” said another man. “Come back inside, Martha.” He shoved his wife back. “Mr. Haljan!” He plucked at me as I went past.

I shouted, “Go back to your rooms! We want order here--keep back!”

We came to the twin doors of A22 and A20. Both were closed. Dr. Frank was in advance of Snap and me. He paused at the sound of Captain Carter’s voice behind us.

“Was it from in there? Wait a moment!”

Carter dashed up; he had a large heat-ray projector in his hand. He shoved us aside. “Let me in first. Is the door sealed? Gregg, keep those passengers back!”

The door was not sealed. Carter burst into the room. I heard him gasp, “Good God!”

Snap and I shoved back three or four crowding

passengers, and in that instant Dr. Frank had been in the room and out again.

“There’s been an accident! Get back, Gregg! Snap, help him keep the crowd away.” He shoved me forcibly.

From within, Carter was shouting, “Keep them out! Where are you, Frank? Come back here! Send a flash for Balch--I want Balch!”

Dr. Frank went back into the room and banged the cabin door upon Snap and me. I was unarmed--I had loaned my cylinder to the guard in the lower corridor. Weapon in hand, Snap forced the panic-stricken passengers back to their rooms.

“It’s all right! An accident! Miss Prince is hurt.”

Snap reassured them glibly; but he knew no more about it than I. Moa, with a night-robe drawn tight around her thin, tall figure, edged up to me.

“What has happened, Set Haljan?”

I gazed around for her brother Miko, but did not see him.

“An accident,” I said shortly. “Go back to your room. Captain’s orders.”

She eyed me and then retreated. Snap was threatening everybody with his cylinder. Balch dashed up. “What in the hell? Where’s Carter?”

“In there.” I pounded on A22. It opened cautiously. I could see only Carter, but I heard the murmuring voice of Dr. Frank through the interior connecting door to A20.

The captain rasped, “Get out, Haljan! Oh, is that you, Balch? Come in.” He admitted the older officer and slammed the door again upon me. And immediately reopened it.

“Gregg, keep the passengers quiet. Tell them everything’s all right. Miss Prince got frightened, that’s all. Then go up to the turret. Tell Blackstone what’s happened.”

“But I don’t know what’s happened,” I protested miserably.

Carter was grim and white. He whispered, “I think it may turn out to be murder, Gregg! No, not dead yet--Dr. Frank is trying--Don’t stand there like an ass, man! Get to the turret! Verify our trajectory--no--wait--”

The captain was almost incoherent. “Wait a minute, I don’t mean that! Tell Snap to watch his helio-room. Gregg, you and Blackstone stay in the chart-room. Arm yourselves and guard our weapons. By God, this murderer, whoever he is--”

I stammered, “If--if she dies--will you flash us word?”

He stared at me strangely. “I’ll be there presently, Gregg.”

He slammed the door upon me.

I followed his orders, but it was like a dream of horror. The turmoil of the ship gradually quieted.

Snap went to the helio-room; Blackstone and I sat in the tiny steel chart-room. How much time passed, I do not know. I was confused. Anita hurt! She might die.... Murdered.... But why? By whom? Had George Prince been in his own room when the attack came? I thought now I recalled hearing the low murmur of his voice in there with Dr. Frank and Carter.

Where was Miko? It stabbed at me. I had not seen him among the passengers in the lounge.

Carter came into the chart-room. "Gregg, you get to bed--you look like a ghost!"

"But--"

"She's not dead--she may live. Dr. Frank and her brother are with her. They're doing all they can." He told us what had happened. Anita and George Prince had both been asleep, each in their respective rooms. Someone unknown had opened Anita's corridor door.

"Wasn't it sealed?" I demanded.

“Yes. But the intruder opened it.”

“Burst it? I didn’t think it was broken.”

“It wasn’t broken. The assailant opened it somehow, and assaulted Miss Prince--shot her in the chest with a heat-ray. Her left lung.”

“She is conscious?” Balch demanded.

“Yes. But she did not see who did it. Nor did Prince. Her scream awakened him, but the intruder evidently fled out the corridor door of A22, the way he entered.”

I stood weak and shaken at the chart-room entrance. “A little son, cast in the gentle image of his mother. But with the strength of his father...” But Anita--dying, perhaps; and all my dreams were fading into a memory of what might have been.

“You go to bed, Gregg--we don’t need you.”

I was glad enough to get away. I would lie down for an

hour, and then go to Anita's stateroom. I'd demand that Dr. Frank let me see her, if only for a moment.

I went to the stern deck-space where my cubby was located. My mind was confused, but some instinct within me made me verify the seals of my door and window. They were intact. I entered cautiously, switched on the dimmer of the tube-lights, and searched the room. It had only a bunk, my tiny desk, a chair and clothes robe.

There was no evidence of any intruder here. I set my door and window alarm. Then I audiphoned to the helio-room.

"Snap?"

"Yes."

I told him about Anita. Carter cut in on us from the chart-room. "Stop that, you fools!"

We cut off. Fully dressed, I flung myself on my bed. Anita might die....

I must have fallen into a tortured sleep. I was awakened by the sound of my alarm buzzer. Someone was tampering with my door! Then the buzzer ceased; the marauder outside must have found a way of silencing it. But it had done its work--awakened me.

I had switched off the light; my cubby was Stygian dark. A heat-cylinder was in the bunk-bracket over my head; I searched for it, pried it loose softly.

I was fully awake. Alert. I could hear a faint sizzling--someone outside trying to unseal the door. In the darkness, cylinder in hand, I crept from the bunk. Crouched at the door. This time I would capture or kill this night prowler.

The sizzling was faintly audible. My door-seal was breaking. Upon impulse I reached for the door, jerked it open.

No one there! The starlit segment of deck was empty. But I had leaped, and I struck a solid body, crouching in the doorway. A giant man. Miko!

His electronized metallic robe burned my hands. I lunged against him--I was almost as surprised as he. I shot, but the stab of heat evidently missed him.

The shock of my encounter close-circuited his robe; he materialized in the starlight. A brief, savage encounter. He struck the weapon from my hand. He had dropped his hydrogen torch, and tried to grip me. But I twisted away from his hold.

“So it’s you!”

“Be quiet, Gregg Haljan! I only want to talk.”

Without warning, a stab of radiance shot from a weapon in his hand. It caught me. Ran like ice through my veins. Seized and numbed my limbs.

I fell helpless to the deck. Nerves and muscles paralyzed. My tongue was thick and inert. I could not speak, nor move. But I could see Miko bending over me. And hear him:

“I don’t want to kill you, Haljan. We need you.”

He gathered me up like a bundle in his huge arms; carried me swiftly across the deserted deck.

Snap's helio-room in the network under the dome was diagonally overhead. A white actinic light shot from it--caught us, bathed us. Snap had been awake; had heard the slight commotion of our encounter.

His voice rang shrilly: "Stop! I'll shoot!" His warning siren rang out to arouse the ship. His spotlight clung to us.

Miko ran with me a few steps. Then he cursed and dropped me, fled away. I fell like a sack of carbide to the deck. My senses faded into blackness....

"He's all right now."

I was in the chart-room, with Captain Carter, Snap and Dr. Frank bending over me. The surgeon said,

"Can you speak now, Gregg?"

I tried it. My tongue was thick, but it would move.

“Yes.”

I was soon revived. I sat up, with Dr. Frank vigorously rubbing me.

“I’m all right.” I told them what had happened.

Captain Carter said abruptly, “Yes, we know that. And it was Miko also who killed Anita Prince. She told us before she died.”

“Died!...” I leaped to my feet. “She ... died....”

“Yes, Gregg. An hour ago, Miko got into her stateroom and tried to force his love on her. She repulsed him--he killed her.”

It struck me blank. And then with a rush came the thought, “He says Miko killed her....”

I heard myself stammering, “Why--why we must get him!” I gathered my wits; a surge of hate swept me; a wild desire for vengeance.

“Why, by God, where is he? Why don’t you go get him? I’ll get him--I’ll kill him, I tell you!”

“Easy, Gregg!” Dr. Frank gripped me.

The captain said gently, “We know how you feel, Gregg. She told us before she died.”

“I’ll bring him in here to you! But I’ll kill him, I tell you!”

“No you won’t, lad. You’re hysterical now. We don’t want him killed, not attacked even. Not yet. We’ll explain later.”

They sat me down, calming me.

Anita dead. The door of the shining garden was closed. A brief glimpse, given to me and to her of what might have been. And now she was dead....

Chapter 10 A Speck of Human Earth-dust, Falling Free....

I had not been able at first to understand why Captain Carter wanted Miko left at liberty. Within me there was that cry of vengeance, as though to strike Miko down would somehow lessen my own grief at Anita's loss. Whatever Carter's purpose, Snap had not known it. But Balch and Dr. Frank were in the captain's confidence--all three of them working on some plan of action. Snap and I argued it, and thought we could fathom it; and in spite of my desire to kill Miko, the thing looked reasonable.

It was obvious that at least two of our passengers were plotting with Miko and George Prince; trying during this voyage to learn what they could about Grantline's activities on the Moon; scheming doubtless to seize the treasure when the Planetara stopped at the Moon on the return voyage. I thought I could name those masquerading passengers. Ob Hahn, supposedly a Venus Mystic. And Rance Rankin, who called himself an American magician. Those two, Snap and I agreed, seemed most suspicious. And

there was the purser.

With my hysteria still on me, I sat for a time on the deck outside the chart-room with Snap. Then Carter summoned us back, and we sat listening while he, Balch and Dr. Frank went on with their conference. Listening to them I could not but agree that our best plan was to secure evidence which would incriminate all who were concerned in the plot. Miko, we were convinced, had been the Martian who followed Snap and me from Halsey's office in Great-New York. George Prince had doubtless been the invisible eavesdropper outside the helio-room. He knew, and had told the others, that Grantline had found radium-ore on the Moon--that the Planetara would stop there on the way home.

But we could not incarcerate George Prince for being an eavesdropper. Nor had we the faintest tangible evidence against Ob Hahn or Rance Rankin. And even the purser would probably be released by the Interplanetary Court of Ferrok-Shahn when it heard our evidence.

There was only Miko. We could arrest him for the murder of Anita. But the others would be put on their guard. It was Carter's idea to let Miko remain at liberty for a time and see if we could not identify and incriminate his fellows. The murder of Anita obviously had nothing to do with any plot against the Grantline Moon treasure.

"Why," exclaimed Balch, "there might be--probably are--huge Martian interests concerned in this thing. These men here aboard are only emissaries, making this voyage to learn what they can. When they get to Ferrok-Shahn they'll make their report, and then we'll have a real danger on our hands. Why, an outlaw ship could be launched from Ferrok-Shahn that would beat us back to the Moon--and Grantline is entirely without warning of any danger!"

It seemed obvious. Unscrupulous, moneyed criminals in Ferrok-Shahn would be dangerous indeed, once these details of Grantline were given them. And so now it was decided that in the remaining nine days of our outward voyage, we would attempt to secure enough evidence to arrest all these plotters.

“I’ll have them all in the cage when we land,” Carter declared grimly. “They’ll make no report to their principals. The thing will end, be stamped out!”

Ah, the futile plans of men!

Yet we thought it practical. We were all doubly armed now. Explosive bullet-projectors and the heat-ray cylinders. And we had several eavesdropping microphones which we planned to use whenever occasion offered.

It was now, Earth Eastern Time, A.M. Twenty-eight hours only of this eventful voyage were passed. The Planetara was some six million miles from the Earth; it blazed behind us, a tremendous giant.

The body of Anita was being made ready for burial. George Prince was still in his stateroom. Glutz, effeminate little hairdresser, who waxed rich acting as beauty doctor for the women passengers, and who in his youth had been an undertaker, had gone with Dr. Frank to prepare the body.

Gruesome details. I tried not to think of them. I sat, numbed, in the chart-room.

An astronomical burial--there was little precedent for it. I dragged myself to the stern deck-space where, at five A.M., the ceremony took place. Most of the passengers were asleep, unaware of all this--which was why Carter hastened it.

We were a solemn little group, gathered there in the checkered starlight with the great vault of the heavens around us. A dismantled electronic projector--necessary when a long-range gun was mounted--had been rigged up in one of the deck ports.

They brought out the body. I stood apart, gazing reluctantly at the small bundle, wrapped like a mummy in a dark metallic screen-cloth. A patch of black silk rested over her face.

Four cabin stewards carried her. And beside her walked George Prince. A long black robe covered him, but his head was bare. And suddenly he reminded me

of the ancient play-character of Hamlet. His black, wavy hair; his finely chiseled, pallid face, set now in a stern, patrician cast. And staring, I realized that however much of a villain this man not yet thirty might be, at this instant, walking beside the body of his dead sister, he was stricken with grief. He loved that sister with whom he had lived since childhood; and to see him now, with his set white face, no one could doubt it.

The little procession stopped in a patch of starlight by the port. They rested the body on a bank of chairs. The black-robed Chaplain, roused from his bed and still trembling from excitement of this sudden, inexplicable death on board, said a brief, solemn little prayer. An appeal: That the Almighty Ruler of all these blazing worlds might guard the soul of this gentle girl whose mortal remains were now to be returned to Him.

Ah, if ever God seemed hovering close, it was now at this instant, on this starlit deck floating in the black void of space.

Then Carter for just a moment removed the black shroud from her face. I saw her brother gaze silently; saw him stoop and implant a kiss--and turn away. I did not want to look, but I found myself moving slowly forward.

She lay, so beautiful. Her face, white and calm and peaceful in death. My sight blurred. Words seemed to echo: "A little son, cast in the gentle image of his mother...."

"Easy, Gregg!" Snap was whispering to me. He had his arm around me. "Come on away!"

They tied the shroud over her face. I did not see them as they put her body in the tube, sent it through the exhaust-chamber, and dropped it.

But a moment later I saw it--a small black oblong bundle--hovering beside us. It was perhaps a hundred feet away, circling us. Held by the Planetara's bulk, it had momentarily become our satellite. It swung around us like a moon. Gruesome satellite, by nature's laws forever to follow us.

Then from another tube at the bow, Blackstone operated a small Zed-co-ray projector. Its dull light caught the floating bundle, neutralizing its metallic wrappings.

It swung off at a tangent. Speeding. Falling free in the dome of the heavens. A rotating black oblong. But in a moment distance dwindled it to a speck. A dull silver dot with the sunlight on it. A speck of human Earth-dust, falling free....

It vanished. Anita--gone. In my heart was an echo of the prayer that the Almighty might watch over her and guard her always....

Chapter 11 The Electrical Eavesdropper

I turned from the deck. Miko was near me! So he had dared to show himself here among us! But I realized that he could not be aware we knew he was the murderer. George Prince had been asleep, had not seen Miko with Anita. Miko, with impulsive rage, had shot the girl and escaped. No doubt now he was cursing himself for having done it. And he could very

well assume that Anita had died without regaining consciousness to tell who had killed her.

He gazed at me now, here on the deck. I thought for an instant he was coming over to talk to me. Though he probably considered he was not suspected of the murder of Anita, he realized, of course, that his attack on me was known; he must have wondered what action Captain Carter would take.

But he did not approach me; he moved away, and went inside. Moa had been near him; and as though by pre-arrangement with him she now accosted me.

“I want to speak to you, Set Haljan.”

“Go ahead.”

I felt an instinctive aversion for this Martian girl. Yet she was not unattractive. Over six feet tall, straight and slim. Sleek blond hair. Rather a handsome face. Not gray, like the burly Miko, but pink and white. Stern-lipped, yet feminine, too. She was smiling gravely now. Her blue eyes regarded me keenly. She

said gently:

“A sad occurrence, Gregg Haljan. And mysterious. I would not question you--”

“Is that all you have to say?” I demanded, when she paused.

“No. You are a handsome man, Gregg--attractive to women--to any Martian woman.”

She said it impulsively. Admiration for me was on her face, in her eyes--a man cannot miss it.

“Thank you.”

“I mean, I would be your friend. My brother Miko is so sorry about what happened between you and him this morning. He only wanted to talk to you, and he came to your cubby door--”

“With a torch to break its seal,” I interjected.

She waved that away. “He was afraid you would not

admit him. He told you he would not hurt you.”

“And so he struck me with one of your cursed Martian paralyzing rays!”

“He is sorry....”

She seemed gauging me, trying, no doubt, to find out what reprisal would be taken against her brother. I felt sure that Moa was as active as a man in any plan that was under way to capture the Grantline treasure. Miko, with his ungovernable temper, was doing things that put their plans in jeopardy.

I demanded abruptly, “What did your brother want to talk to me about?”

“Me,” she said surprisingly. “I sent him. A Martian girl goes after what she wants. Did you know that?”

She swung on her heel and left me. I puzzled over it. Was that why Miko had struck me down, and was carrying me off? Was my accursed masculine beauty so attractive to this Martian girl? I did not think so. I

could not believe that all these incidents were so unrelated to what I knew was the main undercurrent. They wanted me, had tried to capture me. For something else than because Moa liked my looks....

Dr. Frank found me mooning alone.

“Go to bed, Gregg! You look awful.”

“I don’t want to go to bed.”

“Where’s Snap?”

“I don’t know. He was here a while ago.” I had not seen him since the burial of Anita.

“The captain wants him.” The surgeon left me.

Within an hour the morning siren would arouse the passengers. I was seated in a secluded corner of the deck, when George Prince came along. He went past me, a slight, somber, dark-robed figure. He had on high, thick boots. A hood was over his head, but as he saw me he pushed it back and dropped down beside

me.

But for a moment he did not speak. His face showed pallid in the pallid star-gleams.

“She said you loved her.” His soft voice was throaty with emotion.

“Yes.” I said it almost against my will. There seemed a bond springing between this bereaved brother and me. He added, so softly I could barely hear him, “That makes you, I think, almost my friend. And you thought you were my enemy.”

I held my answer. An incautious tongue running under emotion is a dangerous thing. And I was sure of nothing.

He went on, “Almost my friend. Because--we both loved her, and she loved us both.” He was hardly more than whispering. “And there is aboard--one whom we both hate.”

“Miko!” It burst from me.

“Yes. But do not say it.”

Another silence fell between us. He brushed back the black curls from his forehead. And his dark eyes searched mine.

“Have you an eavesdropping microphone, Haljan?”

I hesitated. “Yes.”

“I was thinking....” He leaned closer toward me. “If, in half an hour, you could use it upon Miko’s cabin—I would rather tell you than the captain or anyone else. The cabin will be insulated, but I shall find a way of cutting off that insulation so that you may hear.”

So George Prince had turned with us! The shock of his sister’s death--himself allied to her murderer!--had been too much for him. He was with us!

Yet his help must be given secretly. Miko would kill him in an instant if it became known.

He had been watchful of the deck. He stood up now.

“I think that is all.”

As he turned away, I murmured, “But I do thank you....”

The name Set Miko glowed upon the small metal door. It was in a transverse corridor similar to A22. The corridor was forward of the lounge: it opened off the small circular library.

The library was unoccupied and unlighted, dim with only the reflected lights from the nearby passages. I crouched behind a cylinder-case. The door of Miko’s room was in sight, being some thirty feet away from me.

I waited perhaps five minutes. No one entered. Then I realized that doubtless the conspirators were already there. I set my tiny eavesdropper on the library floor beside me; connected its little battery; focused its projector. Was Miko’s room insulated? I could not tell. There was a small ventilating grid above the door. Across its opening, if the room were insulated, a blue sheen of radiance would be showing. And there would

be a faint hum. But from this distance I could not see or hear such details, and I was afraid to approach closer. Once in the transverse corridor, I would have no place to hide, no way of escape; if anyone approached Miko's door, I would be discovered.

I threw the current into my little apparatus. I prayed, if it met interference, that the slight sound would pass unnoticed. George Prince had said he would make opportunity to disconnect the room's insulation. He had evidently done so. I picked up the interior sounds at once; my headphone vibrated with them. And with trembling fingers on the little dial between my knees as I crouched in the darkness behind the cylinder-case, I synchronized.

"Johnson is a fool." It was Miko's voice. "We must have the pass-words."

"He got them from the helio-room." A man's voice; I puzzled over it at first, then recognized it. Rance Rankin.

Miko said, "He is a fool. Walking around this ship as

though with letters blazoned on his forehead--‘Watch me--I need watching--’ Hah! No wonder they apprehended him!”

Was George Prince in there? Rankin’s voice said: “He would have turned the papers over to us. I would not blame him too much. What harm--”

“Oh, I’ll release him,” Miko declared. “What harm? That braying ass did us plenty of harm. He has lost the pass-words. Better he had left them in the helio-room.”

Moa was in the room. Her voice said: “We’ve got to have them. The Planetara, upon such an important voyage as this, may be watched. How do we know--”

“It is, no doubt,” Rankin said quietly. “We ought to have the pass-words. When we are in control of this ship....”

It sent a shiver through me. Were they planning to try and seize the Planetara? Now? It seemed so.

“Johnson undoubtedly memorized them,” Moa was saying. “When we get him out--”

“Hahn is to do that, at the signal.” Miko added, “George could do it better, perhaps.”

And then I heard George Prince for the first time. He murmured, “I will try.”

“No need,” said Miko. “I praise where praise is deserved. And I have little praise for you now, George!”

I could not see what happened. A look, perhaps, which Prince could not avoid giving this man he had come to hate. Miko doubtless saw it, and the Martian’s hot anger leaped.

Rankin said hurriedly, “Stop that!”

And Moa: “Let him alone! Sit down, you fool!”

I could hear the sound of a scuffle. A blow--a cry, half suppressed, from George Prince.

Then Miko: "I will not hurt him. Craven coward! Look at him! Hating me--frightened!"

I could fancy George Prince sitting there with murder in his heart, and Miko taunting him:

"Hates me now, because I shot his sister!"

Moa: "Hush!"

"I will not! Why should I not say it? I will tell you something else, George Prince. It was not Anita I shot at, but you! I meant nothing for her, but love. If you had not interfered--"

This was different from what we had figured. George Prince had come in from his own room, had tried to rescue his sister, and in the scuffle, Anita had taken the shot intended for George.

"I did not even know I had hit her," Miko was saying. "Not until I heard she was dead." He added sardonically, "I hoped it was you I had hit, George. And I will tell you this: You hate me no more than I

hate you. If it were not for your knowledge of radium ores--"

"Is this to be a personal wrangle?" Rankin interrupted. "I thought we were here to plan--"

"It is planned," Miko said shortly. "I give orders, I do not plan. I am waiting now for the moment--"

He checked himself. Moa said, "Does Rankin understand that no harm is to come to Gregg Haljan?"

"Yes," said Rankin. "And Dean. We need them, of course. But you cannot make Dean send messages if he refuses, nor make Haljan navigate."

"I know enough to check on them," Miko said grimly. "They will not fool me. And they will obey me, have no fear. A little touch of sulphuric--" His laugh was gruesome. "It makes the most stubborn very willing."

"I wish," said Moa, "we had Haljan safely hidden. If he is hurt--killed--"

So that was why Miko had tried to capture me? To keep me safe so that I might navigate the ship.

It occurred to me that I should get Carter at once. A plot to seize the Planetara? But when?

I froze with startled horror.

The diaphragms at my ears rang with Miko's words: "I have set the time for now! In two minutes--"

It seemed to startle both Rankin and George Prince almost as much as I. Both exclaimed:

"No!"

"No? Why not? Everyone is at his post!"

Prince repeated: "No!"

And Rankin: "But can we trust them? The stewards-- the crew?"

"Eight of them are our own men! You didn't know that, Rankin? They've been aboard the Planetara for

several voyages. Oh, this is no quickly-planned affair, even though we let you in on it so recently. You and Johnson. By God!”

I crouched tense. There was a commotion in the stateroom. Miko had discovered that his insulation was cut off! He had evidently leaped to his feet; I heard a chair overturn. And the Martian’s roar: “It’s off! Did you do that, Prince? By God, if I thought--”

My apparatus went suddenly dead as Miko flung on his insulation. I lost my wits in the confusion; I should have instantly taken off my vibrations. There was interference; it showed in the dark space of the ventilator grid over Miko’s doorway; a snapping in the air there, a swirl of sparks.

I heard with my unaided ears Miko’s roar over his insulation: “By God, they’re listening!”

The scream of a hand-siren sounded from his stateroom. It rang over the ship. His signal! I heard it answered from some distant point. And then a shot; a commotion in the lower corridors....

The attack upon the Planetara had started!

I was on my feet. The shouts of startled passengers sounded, a turmoil beginning everywhere.

I stood momentarily transfixed. The door of Miko's stateroom burst open. He stood there, with Moa, Rankin and George Prince crowding behind him.

He saw me. "You, Gregg Haljan!"

He came leaping at me.

Chapter 12 The Weightless Combat

I was taken wholly by surprise. There was an instant when I stood numbed, fumbling for a weapon at my belt, undecided whether to run or stand my ground. Miko was no more than twenty feet from me. He checked his forward rush. The light from an overhead tube was on him; I saw in his hand the cylinder projector of his paralyzing ray.

I plucked my heat-cylinder from my belt, and fired

without taking aim. My tiny heat-beam flashed. I must have grazed Miko's hand. His roar of anger and pain rang out over the turmoil. He dropped his weapon; then stooped to pick it up. But Moa forestalled him. She leaped and seized it.

"Careful! Fool--you promised not to hurt him!"

A confusion of swift action. Rankin had turned and darted away. I saw George Prince stumbling half in front of the struggling Miko and Moa. And I heard footsteps beside me; a hand gripped me, jerked at me.

Over the turmoil Prince's voice sounded: "Gregg--Haljan!"

I recall I had the impression that Prince was frightened; he had half fallen in front of Miko. And there was Miko's voice:

"Let go of me!"

And Moa: "Come!"

It was Balch gripping me. “Gregg! This way--run! Get out of here! He’ll kill you with that ray--”

Miko’s ray flashed, but George Prince had knocked at his arm. I did not dare fire again. Prince was in the way. Balch, who was unarmed, shoved me violently back.

“Gregg--the chart-room!”

I turned and ran, with Balch after me. Prince had fallen, or been felled by Miko. A flash followed me. Miko’s weapon, but again it missed. He did not pursue me; he ran the other way, through the port-side door of the library.

Balch and I found ourselves in the lounge. Shouting, frightened passengers were everywhere. The place was in wild confusion, the whole ship ringing now with shouts.

“To the chart-room, Gregg!”

I called to the passengers: “Get back to your rooms!”

I followed Balch. We ran through the archway to the deck. In the starlight I saw figures scurrying aft, but none were near us. The deck forward was dim with heavy shadows. The oval window and door of the chart-room were blue-yellow from the tube-lights inside. No one seemed on the deck there; and then, as we approached, I saw, further forward in the bow, the trap-door to the cage standing open. Johnson had been released.

From one of the chart-room windows a heat-ray sizzled. It barely missed us. Balch shouted, "Carter--don't!"

The captain called, "Oh--you, Balch--and Haljan--"

He came out on the deck as we rushed up. His left arm was dangling limp.

"God--this--" He got no further. From the turret overhead a tiny search-beam came down and disclosed us. Blackstone was supposed to be on duty up there, with a course-master at the controls. But, glancing up, I saw, illumined by the turret lights, the

figures of Ob Hahn in his purple-white robe, and Johnson the purser. And on the turret balcony, two fallen men--Blackstone and the course-master.

Johnson was training the spotlight on us. And Hahn fired a Martian ray. It struck Balch beside me. He dropped.

Carter was shouting, "Inside! Gregg, get inside!"

I stopped to raise up Balch. Another beam came down. A heat-ray this time. It caught the fallen Balch full in the chest, piercing him through. The smell of his burning flesh rose to sicken me. He was dead. I dropped his body. Carter shoved me into the chart-room.

In the small, steel-lined room, Carter and I slid the door closed. We were alone here. The thing had come so quickly it had taken Captain Carter, like us all, wholly unawares. We had anticipated spying eavesdroppers, but not this open brigandage. No more than a minute or two had passed since Miko's siren in his stateroom had given the signal for the

attack. Carter had been in the chart-room. Blackstone was in the turret. At the outbreak of confusion, Carter dashed out to see Hahn releasing Johnson from the cage. From the forward chart-room window now I could see where Hahn with a torch had broken the cage-seal. The torch lay on the deck. There had been an exchange of shots; Carter's arm was paralyzed; Johnson and Hahn had escaped.

Carter was as confused as I. There had simultaneously been an encounter up in the turret. Blackstone and the course-master were killed. The lookout had been shot from his post in the forward observatory. His body dangled now, twisted half in and half out of his window.

We could see several of Miko's men--erstwhile members of our crew and steward-corps--scurrying from the turret along the upper bridges toward the dark and silent helio-room. Snap was up there. But was he? The helio-room glowed suddenly with dim light, but there was no evidence of a fight there. The fighting seemed mostly below the deck, down in the hull-corridors. A blended horror of sounds came up to

us. Screams, shouts, and the hissing and snapping of ray weapons. Our crew--such of them as were loyal--were making a stand down below. But it was brief. Within a minute it died away. The passengers, amidships in the superstructure, were still shouting. Then above them Miko's roar sounded.

"Be quiet! Go in your rooms--you will not be harmed."

The brigands in these few minutes were in control of the ship. All but this little chart-room, where, with most of the ship's weapons, Carter and I were intrenched.

"God, Gregg, that this should come upon us!"

Carter was fumbling with the chart-room weapons.

"Here, Gregg, help me. What have you got? Heat-ray? That's all I had ready."

It struck me then as I helped him make the connections that Carter in this crisis was at best an inefficient commander. His red face had gone splotchy

purple; his hands were trembling. Skilled as captain of a peaceful liner, he was at a loss now. Nor could I blame him. It is easy to say we might have taken warning, done this or that, and come triumphant through this attack. But only the fool looks backward and says, "I would have done better."

I tried to summon my wits. The ship was lost to us, unless Carter and I could do something. Our futile weapons! They were all here--four or five heat-ray hand projectors that could send a pencil-ray a hundred feet or so. I shot one diagonally up at the turret where Johnson was leering down at our rear window, but he saw my gesture and dropped back out of sight. The heat-beam flashed harmlessly up and struck the turret roof. Then across the turret window came a sheen of radiance--an electro-barrage. And behind it, Hahn's suave, evil face appeared. He shouted down:

"We have orders to spare you, Gregg Haljan--or you would have been killed long ago!"

My answering shot hit his barrage with a shower of

sparks, behind which he stood unmoved.

Carter handed me another weapon. "Gregg, try this."

I levelled the old explosive bullet projector; Carter crouched beside me. But before I could press the trigger, from somewhere down the starlit deck an electro-beam hit me. The little rifle exploded, burst its breech. I sank back to the floor, tingling from the shock of the hostile current. My hands were blackened from the exploding powder.

Carter seized me. "No use! Hurt?"

"No."

The stars through the dome-windows were swinging. A long swing--the shadows and starlit patches on the deck were all shifting. The Planetara was turning. The heavens revolved in a great round sweep of movement, then settled as we took our new course. Hahn at the turret controls had swung us. The earth and the sun showed over our bow quarter. The sunlight mingled red-yellow with the brilliant

starlight. Hahn's signals were sounding; I heard them answered from the mechanism rooms down below. Brigands there--in full control. The gravity plates were being set to the new positions; we were on our new course. Headed a point or two off the Earth-line. Not headed for the moon? I wondered.

Carter and I were planning nothing. What was there to plan? We were under observation. A Martian paralyzing ray--or electronic beam, far more deadly than our own puny police weapons--would have struck us the instant we tried to leave the chart-room.

My swift-running thoughts were interrupted by a shout from down the deck. At a corner of the cabin superstructure some fifty feet from our windows the figure of Miko appeared. A barrage-radiance hung around him like a shimmering mantle. His voice sounded:

"Gregg Haljan, do you yield?"

Carter leaped up from where he and I were crouching. Against all reason of safety he leaned from

the low window, waving his hamlike fist.

“Yield? No! I am in command here, you pirate! Brigand--murderer!”

I pushed him back. “Careful!”

He was spluttering, and over it Miko’s sardonic laugh sounded. “Very well--but you will talk? Shall we argue about it?”

I stood up. “What do you want to say, Miko?”

Behind him the tall, thin figure of his sister showed. She was plucking at him. He turned violently.

“I won’t hurt him! Gregg Haljan--is this a truce? You will not shoot?” He was shielding Moa.

“No,” I called. “For a moment, no. A truce. What is it you want to say?”

I could hear the babble of passengers who were herded in the cabin with brigands guarding them.

George Prince, bareheaded, but shrouded in his cloak, showed in a patch of light behind Moa. He looked my way and then retreated into the lounge archway.

Miko called, "You must yield. We want you, Haljan."

"No doubt," I jeered.

"Alive. It is easy to kill you."

I could not doubt that. Carter and I were little more than rats in a trap, here in the chart-room. But Miko wanted to take me alive: that was not so simple. He added persuasively:

"We want you to help us navigate. Will you?"

"No."

"Will you help us, Captain Carter? Tell your cub, this Haljan, to yield. You are fools. We understand that Haljan has been handling the ship's mathematics. Him we need most."

Carter roared: "Get back from there! This is no truce!"

I shoved aside his levelled bullet-projector. "Wait a minute!" I called to Miko. "Navigate--where?"

"Oh," he retorted, "that is our business, not yours. When you lay down your weapons and come out of there, I will give you the course."

"Back to the earth?" I suggested.

I could fancy him grinning behind the sheen of his barrage at my question.

"The earth? Yes--shall we go there? Give me your orders, Gregg Haljan. Of course I will obey them."

His sardonic words were interrupted. And I realized that all this parley was a ruse of Miko's to take me alive. He had made a gesture. Hahn, watching from the turret window, doubtless flashed a signal down to the hull-corridors. The magnetizer control under the chart-room was altered, our artificial gravity cut off. I

felt the sudden lightness; I gripped the window casement and clung. Carter was startled into incautious movement. It flung him out into the center of the chart-room, his arms and legs grotesquely flailing.

And across the chart-room, in the opposite window, I felt rather than saw the shape of something. A figure--almost invisible, but not quite--was trying to climb in! I flung the empty rifle I was holding. It hit something solid in the window; in a flare of sparks a black-hooded figure materialized. A man climbing in! His weapon spat. There was a tiny electronic flash, deadly silent. The intruder had shot at Carter; struck him. Carter gave one queer scream. He had floated to the floor; his convulsive movement when he was hit hurled him to the ceiling. His body struck, twitched; bounced back and sank inert on the floor-grid almost at my feet.

I clung to the casement. Across the space of the weightless room the hooded intruder was also clinging. His hood fell back. It was Johnson. He leered at me.

“Killed him, the bully! Well, he deserved it. Now for you, Mr. Third Officer Haljan!”

But he did not dare fire at me--Miko had forbidden it. I saw him reach under his robe, doubtless for a low-powered paralyzing ray such as Miko already had used on me. But he never got it out. I had no weapon within reach. I leaned into the room, still holding the casement, and doubled my legs under me. I kicked out from the window.

The force catapulted me across the space of the room like a volplane. I struck the purser. We gripped. Our locked, struggling bodies bounced out into the room. We struck the floor, surged up like balloons to the ceiling, struck it with a flailing arm or a leg and floated back.

Grotesque, abnormal combat! Like fighting in weightless water. Johnson clutched his weapon, but I twisted his wrist, held his arm outstretched so that he could not aim it. I was aware of Miko's voice shouting on the deck outside.

Johnson's left hand was gouging at my face, his fingers plucking at my eyes. We lunged down to the floor, then up again, close to the ceiling.

I twisted his wrists. He dropped the weapon and it sank away. I tried to reach it, but could not. Then I had him by the throat. I was stronger than he, and more agile. I tried choking him, his thick bull-neck within my fingers. He kicked, scrambled, tore and gouged at me. Tried to shout, but it ended in a gurgle. And then, as he felt his breath stopped, his hands came up in an effort to tear mine loose.

We sank again to the floor. We were momentarily upright. I felt my feet touch. I bent my knees. We sank further.

And then I kicked violently upward. Our locked bodies shot to the ceiling. Johnson's head was above me. It struck the steel roof of the chart-room. A violent blow. I felt him go suddenly limp. I cast him off, and, doubling my body, I kicked at the ceiling. It sent me diagonally downward to the window, where I clung and regained stability.

And I saw Miko standing on the deck with a weapon levelled at me!

Chapter 13 The Torture

“Haljan! Yield or I’ll fire! Moa, give me the smaller one. This cursed--”

He had in his hand too large a projector. Its ray would kill me. If he wanted to take me alive, he would not fire. I chanced it.

“No!”

I tried to draw myself beneath the window. An automatic bullet projector was on the floor where Carter had dropped it. I pulled myself down. Miko did not fire. I reached the revolver. The dead bodies of the captain and purser had drifted together on the floor in the center of the room.

I hitched myself back to the window. With upraised weapon I gazed cautiously out. Miko had disappeared. The deck within my line of vision was empty.

But was it? Something told me to beware. I clung to the casement, ready upon the instant to shove myself down. There was a movement in a shadow along the deck. Then a figure rose up.

“Don’t fire, Haljan!”

The sharp command, half appeal, stopped the pressure of my finger on the trigger of the automatic. It was the tall lanky Englishman, Sir Arthur Coniston, as he called himself. So he too was one of Miko’s band! The light through a dome-window fell full on him.

“If you fire, Haljan, and kill me--Miko will kill you then, surely.”

From where he had been crouching he could not command my window. But now, upon the heels of his placating words, he abruptly shot. The low-powered ray, had it struck, would have felled me without killing. But it went over my head as I dropped. Its aura made my senses reel.

Coniston shouted, "Haljan!"

I did not answer. I wondered if he would dare approach to see if I had been hit. A minute passed. Then another. I thought I heard Miko's voice on the deck outside. But it was an aerial, microscopic whisper close beside me.

"We see you, Haljan! You must yield!"

Their eavesdropping vibrations, with audible projection, were upon me. I retorted aloud.

"Come and get me! You cannot take me alive."

I do protest if this action of mine in the chart-room may seem bravado. I had no wish to die. There was within me a very healthy desire for life. But I felt, by holding out, that some chance might come wherewith I might turn events against these brigands. Yet reason told me it was hopeless. Our loyal members of the crew were killed, no doubt. Captain Carter and Balch were killed. The lookouts and Course-masters also. And Blackstone.

There remained only Dr. Frank and Snap. Their fate I did not yet know. And there was George Prince. He, perhaps, would help me if he could. But, at best, he was a dubious ally.

“You are very foolish, Haljan,” murmured the projection of Miko’s voice. And then I heard Coniston:

“See here, why would not a hundred pounds of gold-leaf tempt you? The code-words which were taken from Johnson--I mean to say, why not tell us where they are?”

So that was one of the brigands new difficulties! Snap had taken the code-word sheet, that time we sealed the purser in the cage.

I said, “You’ll never find them. And when a police ship sights us, what will you do then?”

The chances of a police ship were slim indeed, but the brigands evidently did not know that. I wondered again what had become of Snap. Was he captured--or still holding them off?

I was watching my windows; for at any moment, under cover of this talk, I might be assailed.

Gravity came suddenly to the room. Miko's voice said. "We mean well by you, Haljan. There is your normality. Join us. We need you to chart our course."

"And a hundred pounds of gold-leaf," urged Coniston. "Or more. Why, this treasure--"

I could hear an oath from Miko. And then his ironic voice: "We will not bother you, Haljan. There is no hurry. You will be hungry in good time. And sleepy. Then we will come and get you. And a little acid will make you think differently about helping us...."

His vibrations died away. The pull of gravity in the room was normal. I was alone in the dim silence, with the bodies of Carter and Johnson lying huddled on the grid. I bent to examine them. Both were dead.

My isolation was no ruse this time. The outlaws made no further attack. Half an hour passed. The deck outside, what I could see of it, was vacant. Balch lay

dead close outside the chart-room door. The bodies of Blackstone and the Course-master had been removed from the turret window. A forward lookout--one of Miko's men--was on duty in the nearby tower. Hahn was at the turret controls. The ship was under orderly handling, heading back upon a new course. For the Earth? Or the Moon? It did not seem so.

I found, in the chart-room, a Benson curve-light projector which poor Captain Carter had very nearly assembled. I worked on it, trained it through my rear window, along the empty deck; bent it into the lounge archway. Upon my grid the image of the lounge interior presently focused. The passengers in the lounge were huddled in a group. Disheveled, frightened, with Moa standing watching them. Stewards were serving them with a meal.

Upon a bench, bodies were lying. Some were dead. I saw Rance Rankin. Others were evidently only injured. Dr. Frank was moving among them, attending them. Venza was there, unharmed. And I saw the gamblers, Shac and Dud, sitting white-faced, whispering together. And Glutz's little be-ribboned,

be-curved figure on a stool.

George Prince was there, standing against the walls shrouded in his mourning cloak, watching the scene with alert, roving eyes. And by the opposite doorway, the huge towering figure of Miko stood on guard. But Snap was missing.

A brief glimpse. Miko saw my Benson-light. I could have equipped a heat-ray, and fired along the curved Benson-light into that lounge. But Miko gave me no time.

He slid the lounge door closed, and Moa leaped to close the one on my side. My light was cut off; my grid showed only the blank deck and door.

Another interval. I had made plans. Futile plans! I could get into the turret perhaps, and kill Hahn. I had the invisible cloak which Johnson was wearing. I took it from his body. Its mechanism could be repaired. Why, with it I could creep about the ship, kill these brigands one by one perhaps. George Prince would be with me. The brigands who had been posing as the

stewards and crew-members were unable to navigate; they would obey my orders. There were only Miko, Coniston and Hahn to kill.

Futile plans! From my window I could gaze up to the helio-room. And now abruptly I heard Snap's voice:

"No! I tell you--no!"

And Miko: "Very well. We will try this."

So Snap was captured, but not killed. Relief swept me. He was in the helio-room, and Miko was with him. But my relief was short-lived.

After a brief interval there came a moan from Snap. It floated down from the silence overhead. It made me shudder.

My Benson-beam shot into the helio window. It showed me Snap lying there on the floor. He was bound with wire. His torso had been stripped. His livid face was ghastly plain in my light.

Miko was bending over him. Miko with a heat-cylinder no longer than a finger. Its needle-beam played upon Snap's naked chest. I could see the gruesome little trail of smoke rising; and as Snap twisted and jerked, there on his flesh was the red and blistered trail of the violet-hot ray.

"Now will you tell?"

"No!"

Miko laughed. "No? Then I shall write my name a little deeper...."

A black scar now--a trail etched in the quivering flesh.

"Oh!--" Snap's face went white as chalk as he pressed his lips together.

"Or a little acid? This fire-writing does not really hurt? Tell me what you did with those code-words!"

"No!"

In his absorption Miko did not notice my light. Nor did I have the wit to try and fire along it. I was trembling. Snap under torture!

As the beam went deeper, Snap suddenly screamed. But he ended, “No! I will send--no message for you--”

It had been only a moment. In the chart-room window beside me again a figure appeared! No image. A solid, living person, undisguised by any cloak of invisibility. George Prince had chanced my fire and had crept up upon me.

“Haljan! Don’t attack me.”

I dropped my light connections. As impulsively I stood up, I saw through the window the figure of Coniston on the deck watching the result of Prince’s venture.

“Haljan--yield.”

Prince no more than whispered it. He stood outside on the deck; the low window casement touched his

waist. He leaned over it.

“He’s torturing Snap! Call out that you will yield.”

The thought had already been in my mind. Another scream from Snap chilled me with horror. I shouted,

“Miko! Stop!”

I rushed to the window and Prince gripped me.

“Louder!”

I called louder. “*Miko!* Stop!” My upflung voice mingled with Snap’s agony of protest. Then Miko heard me. His head and shoulders showed up there at the helio-room oval.

“You, Haljan?”

Prince shouted, “I have made him yield. He will obey you if you stop that torture.”

I think that poor Snap must have fainted. He was silent. I called, “Stop! I will do what you command.”

Miko jeered, "That is good. A bargain, if you and Dean obey me. Disarm him, Prince, and bring him out."

Miko moved back into the helio-room. On the deck Coniston was advancing, but cautiously, mistrustful of me.

"Gregg."

George Prince flung a leg over the casement and leaped lightly into the dim chart-room. His small slender figure stood beside me, clung to me.

"Gregg."

A moment, while we stood there together. No ray was upon us. Coniston could not see us, nor could he hear our whispers.

"Gregg."

A different voice; its throaty, husky quality gone. A soft pleading. "Gregg--

“Gregg, don’t you know me? Gregg, dear....”

Why, what was this? Not George Prince? A masquerader, yet so like George Prince.

“Gregg, don’t you know me?”

Clinging to me. A soft touch upon my arm. Fingers, clinging. A surge of warm, tingling current was flowing between us.

My sweep of instant thoughts. A speck of human Earth-dust, falling free. That was George Prince, who had been killed. George Prince’s body, disguised by the scheming Carter and Dr. Frank, buried in the guise of his sister. And this black-robed figure who was trying to help us--

“Anita! Dear God! Anita, darling! Anita!”

“Gregg, dear one!”

“Anita! Dear God!”

My arms went around her, my lips pressed hers, and felt her tremulous, eager answer.

“Gregg, dear.”

“Anita, you!”

The form of Coniston showed at our window. She cast me off. She said, with her throaty swagger of assumed masculinity:

“I have him, Sir Arthur. He will obey us.”

I sensed her warning glance. She shoved me toward the window. She said ironically, “Have no fear, Haljan. You will not be tortured, you and Dean, if you obey our commands.”

Coniston gripped me. “You fool! You caused us a lot of trouble, didn’t you? Move along there!”

He jerked me roughly through the window. Marched me the length of the deck. Out to the stern-space; opened the door of my cubby; flung me in and sealed

the door upon me.

“Miko will come presently.”

I stood in the darkness of my tiny room, listening to his retreating footsteps. But my mind was not on him....

All the Universe in that instant had changed for me. Anita was alive!

Part 2

My name, Gregg Haljan. My age, twenty-five years. My occupation, at the time my narrative begins, in 2075, was third officer of the Interplanetary Spaceship *Planetara*.

Thus I introduce myself to you. For this is a continuation of the book of Gregg Haljan, and of necessity I am the chief actor therein. I shall recapitulate very briefly what has happened so far:

Unscrupulous Martian brigands were scheming for

Johnny Grantline's secret radium-ore treasure, dug out of the Moon and waiting there to be picked up by the *Planetara* on her return trip from Mars.

The *Planetara* left, bound for Mars, some ten days away. Suspicious interplanetary passengers were aboard: Miko and Moa, a brother and a sister of Mars; Sir Arthur Coniston, a mysterious Englishman; Ob Hahn, a Venus mystic. And small, effeminate George Prince and his sister, Anita. Love, I think, was born instantly between Anita and me. I found all too soon that Miko, the sinister giant from Mars, also desired her.



As we neared the Moon we received Grantline's secret message: "Stop for ore on your return voyage. Success beyond wildest hopes!" But I soon discovered that an eavesdropper in an invisible cloak had overheard it!

Soon afterwards Miko accidentally murdered a person identified as Anita Prince.

Then, in the confusion that resulted, Miko struck his great blow. The crew of the *Planetara*, secretly in his pay, rose up and killed the captain and all the officers but Snap Dean, the radio-helio operator, and myself.

I was besieged in the chart-room. George Prince leaped in upon me—and put his arms around me. I looked at him closer—only to discover it was Anita, disguised as her brother! It was her brother, George, who had been killed! George had been in the brigands' confidence—thus Anita was able to spy for us.

Quickly we plotted. I would surrender to her, Anita Prince, whom the brigands thought was George Prince. Together we might possibly be able, with Snap's help, to turn the tide, and reclaim the *Planetara*.

I was taken to my stateroom and locked there until Miko the brigand leader should come to dispose of

me. But I cared not what had happened—Anita was alive!

Chapter 14 The Brigand Leader

The giant Miko stood confronting me. He slid my cubby door closed behind him. He stood with his head towering close against my ceiling. His cloak was discarded. In his leather clothes, and with his clanking sword-ornament, his aspect carried the swagger of a brigand of old. He was bareheaded; the light from one of my tubes fell upon his grinning, leering gray face.

"So, Gregg Haljan? You have come to your senses at last. You do not wish me to write my name upon your chest? I would not have done that to Dean; he forced me. Sit back."

I had been on my bunk. I sank back at the gesture of his huge hairy arm. His forearm was bare now; the sear of a burn on it was plain to be seen. He remarked my gaze.

"True. You did that, Haljan, in Great-New York. But I bear you no malice. I want to talk to you now."

He cast about for a seat, and took the little stool which stood by my desk. His hand held a small cylinder of the Martian paralyzing ray; he rested it beside him on the desk.

"Now we can talk."

I remained silent. Alert. Yet my thoughts were whirling. Anita was alive. Masquerading now as her brother. And, with the joy of it, came a shudder. Above everything, Miko must not know.

"A great adventure we are upon, Haljan."

My thoughts came back. Miko was talking with an assumption of friendly comradeship. "All is well—and we need you, as I have said before. I am no fool. I have been aware of everything that went on aboard this ship. You, of all the officers, are most clever at the routine mathematics. Is that so?"

"Perhaps," I said.

"You are modest." He fumbled at a pocket of his

jacket, produced a scroll-sheaf. I recognized it: Blackstone's figures; the calculation Blackstone roughly made of the elements of the asteroid we had passed.

"I am interested in these," Miko went on. "I want you to verify them. And this." He held up another scroll. "This is the calculation of our present position. And our course. Hahn claims he is a navigator. We have set the ship's gravity plates—see, like this—"

He handed me the scrolls; he watched me keenly as I glanced over them.

"Well?" I said.

"You are sparing of words, Haljan. By the devils of the airways, I could make you talk! But I want to be friendly."

I handed him back the scrolls. I stood up; I was almost within reach of his weapon, but with a sweep of his great arm he abruptly knocked me back to my bunk.

"You dare?" Then he smiled. "Let us not come to blows!"

"No," I said. I returned his smile. In truth, physical violence could get me nothing in dealing with this fellow. I would have to try guile. And I saw now that his face was flushed and his eyes unnaturally bright. He had been drinking alcolite; not enough to befuddle him—but enough to make him triumphantly talkative.

"Hahn may not be much of a mathematician," I suggested. "But there is your Sir Arthur Coniston." I managed a sarcastic grin. "Is that his name?"

"Almost. Haljan, will you verify these figures?"

"Yes. But why? Where are we going?"

He laughed. "You are afraid I will not tell you! Why should I not? This great adventure of mine is progressing perfectly. A tremendous stake, Haljan. A hundred millions of dollars in gold-leaf; there will be fabulous riches for us all, when that radium ore is sold for a hundred million in gold-leaf."

"But where are we going?"

"To that asteroid," he said abruptly. "I must get rid of these passengers. I am no murderer."

With half a dozen killings in the recent fight this was hardly convincing. But he was obviously wholly serious. He seemed to read my thoughts.

"I kill only when necessary. We will land upon the asteroid. A perfect place to maroon the passengers. Is it not so? I will give them the necessities of life. They will be able to signal. And in a month or so, when we are safely finished with our adventure, a police ship no doubt will rescue them."

"And then, from the asteroid," I suggested, "we are going—"

"To the Moon, Haljan. What a clever guesser you are! Coniston and Hahn are calculating our course. But I have no great confidence in them. And so I want you."

"You have me."

"Yes. I have you. I would have killed you long ago—I am an impulsive fellow—but my sister restrained me."

He gazed at me slyly. "Moa seems strangely to like you, Haljan."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm flattered."

"She still hopes I may really win you to join us," he went on. "Gold-leaf is a wonderful thing; there would be plenty for you in this affair. And to be rich, and have the love of a woman like Moa...."

He paused. I was trying cautiously to gauge him, to get from him all the information I could. I said, with another smile, "That is premature, to talk of Moa. I will help you chart your course. But this venture, as you call it, is dangerous. A police-ship—"

"There are not many," he declared. "The chances of us encountering one is very slim." He grinned at me. "You know that as well as I do. And we now have those code pass-words—I forced Dean to tell me where he had hidden them. If we should be

challenged, our pass-word answer will relieve suspicion."

"The *Planetara*," I objected, "being overdue at Ferrok-Shahn, will cause alarm. You'll have a covey of patrol-ships after you."

"That will be two weeks from now," he smiled. "I have a ship of my own in Ferrok-Shahn. It lies there waiting now, manned and armed. I am hoping that, with Dean's help, we may be able to flash it a signal. It will join us on the Moon. Fear not for the danger, Haljan. I have great interests allied with me in this thing. Plenty of money. We have planned carefully."

He was idly fingering his cylinder; his gaze roved me as I sat docile on my bunk. "Did you think George Prince was a leader of this? A mere boy. I engaged him a year ago—his knowledge of ores is valuable."

My heart was pounding, but I strove not to show it. He went on calmly.

"I told you I am impulsive. Half a dozen times I have

nearly killed George Prince, and he knows it." He frowned. "I wish I had killed him, instead of his sister. That was an error."

There was a note of real concern in his voice. Did he love Anita Prince? It seemed so.

He added, "That is done—nothing can change it. George Prince is helpful to me. Your friend Dean is another. I had trouble with him, but he is docile now."

I said abruptly, "I don't know whether your promise means anything or not, Miko. But George Prince said you would use no more torture."

"I won't. Not if you and Dean obey me."

"You tell Dean I have agreed to that. You say he gave you the code-words we took from Johnson?"

"Yes. There was a fool! That Johnson! You blame me, Haljan, for the killing of Captain Carter? You need not. Johnson offered to try and capture you. Take you alive. He killed Carter because he was angry at him. A

stupid, vengeful fool! He is dead, and I am glad of it."

My mind was on Miko's plans. I ventured. "This treasure on the Moon—did you say it was on the Moon?"

"Don't be an idiot," he retorted. "I know as much about Grantline as you do."

"That's very little."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps you know more, Miko. The Moon is a big place. Where, for instance, is Grantline located?"

I held my breath. Would he tell me that? A score of questions—vague plans—were in my mind. How skilled at mathematics were these brigands? Miko, Hahn, Coniston—could I fool them? If I could learn Grantline's location on the Moon, and keep the *Planetara* away from it. A pretended error of charting. Time lost—and perhaps Snap could find an opportunity to signal Earth, get help.

Miko answered my question as bluntly as I asked it. "I don't know where Grantline is located. But we will find out. He will not suspect the *Planetara*. When we get close to the Moon, we will signal and ask him. We can trick him into telling us. You think I do not know what is on your mind, Haljan? There is a secret code of signals arranged between Dean and Grantline. I have forced Dean to confess it. Without torture! Prince helped me in that. He persuaded Dean not to defy me. A very persuasive fellow, George Prince. More diplomatic than I am, I give him credit."

I strove to hold my voice calm. "If I should join you, Miko—my word, if I ever gave it, you would find dependable—I would say George Prince is very valuable to us. You should rein your temper. He is half your size—you might some time, without intention do him injury."

He laughed. "Moa says so. But have no fear—"

"I was thinking," I persisted, "I'd like to have a talk with George Prince."

Ah, my pounding, tumultuous heart! But I was smiling calmly. And I tried to put into my voice a shrewd note of cupidity. "I really know very little about this treasure, Miko. If there were a million or two of gold-leaf in it for me—"

"Perhaps there would be."

"I was thinking. Suppose you let me have a talk with Prince? I have some knowledge of radium ores. His skill and mine—a calculation of what Grantline's treasure may really be. You don't know; you are only assuming."

I paused. Whatever may have been in Miko's mind I cannot say. But abruptly he stood up. I had left my bunk, but he waved me back.

"Sit down. I am not like Moa. I would not trust you just because you protested you would be loyal." He picked up his cylinder. "We will talk again." He gestured to the scrolls he had left upon my desk. "Work on those. I will judge you by the results."

He was no fool, this brigand leader.

"Yes," I agreed. "You want a true course now to the asteroid?"

"Yes. I will get rid of these passengers. Then we will plan further. Do your best, Haljan—no error! By the Gods, I warn you I can check up on you!"

I said meekly, "Very well. But you ask Prince if he wants my calculations of Grantline's ore-body."

I shot Miko a foxy look as he stood by my door. I added, "You think you are clever. There is plenty you don't know. Our first night out from the Earth—Grantline's signals—didn't it ever occur to you that I might have some figures on his treasure?"

It startled him. "Where are they?"

I tapped my forehead. "You don't suppose I was foolish enough to record them. You ask Prince if he wants to talk to me. A high thorium content in ore—you ask Prince. A hundred millions, or two hundred. It

would make a big difference, Miko."

"I will think about it." He backed out and sealed the door upon me once again.

But Anita did not come. I verified Hahn's figures, which were very nearly correct. I charted a course for the asteroid; it was almost the one which had been set.

Coniston came for my results. "I say, we are not so bad as navigators, are we? I think we're jolly good, considering our inexperience. Not bad at all, eh?"

"No."

I did not think it wise to ask him about Prince.

"Are you hungry, Haljan?" he demanded.

"Yes."

A steward came with a meal. The saturnine Hahn stood at my door with a weapon upon me while I ate.

They were taking no chances—and they were wise not to.

The day passed. Day and night, all the same of aspect here in the starry vault of Space. But with the ship's routine it was day.

And then another time of sleep. I slept, fitfully, worrying, trying to plan. Within a few hours we would be nearing the asteroid.

The time of sleep was nearly passed. My chronometer marked five A. M. of our original Earth starting time. The seal of my cubby door hissed. The door slowly, opened.

Anita!

She stood there with her cloak around her. A distance away on the shadowed deck-space Coniston was loitering.

"Anita!" I whispered it.

"Gregg, dear!"

She turned and gestured to the watching brigand. "I will not be long, Coniston."

She came in and half closed the door upon us, leaving it open enough so that we could make sure that Coniston did not advance.

I stepped back where he could not see us.

"Anita!"

She flung herself into my opened arms.

Chapter 15 The Masquerader

A moment when beyond all thought of the nearby brigand—or the possibility of an eavesdropping ray trained now upon my little cubby—a moment while Anita and I held each other; and whispered those things which could mean nothing to the world, but which were all the world to us.

Then it was she whose wits brought us back from the shining fairyland of our love, into the sinister reality of the *Planetara*.

"Gregg, if they are listening—"

I pushed her away. This brave little masquerader! Not for my life, or for all the lives on the ship, would I consciously have endangered her.

"But the ore," I said aloud. "There was, in Grantline's message—See here, Prince."

Coniston was too far away on the deck to hear us. Anita went to my door again and waved at him reassuringly. I put my ear to the door opening, and listened at the space across the grid of the ventilator over my bunk. The hum of a vibration would have been audible at those two points. But there was nothing.

"It's all right," I whispered. "Anita—not you who was killed! I can hardly realize it now. Not you whom they buried yesterday morning."

We stood and whispered, and she clung to me—so small beside me. With the black robe thrown aside, it seemed that I could not miss the curves of her woman's figure. A dangerous game she was playing. Her hair had been cut short to the base of her neck, in the fashion of her dead brother. Her eyelashes had been clipped; the line of her brows altered. And now, in the light of my ray tube as it shone upon her earnest face, I could remark other changes. Glutz, the little beauty specialist, was in this secret. With plastic skill he had altered the set of her jaw with his wax—put masculinity there.

She was whispering: "It was—was poor George whom Miko shot."

I had now the true version of what had occurred. Miko had been forcing his wooing upon Anita. George Prince was a weakling whose only good quality was a love for his sister. Some years ago he had fallen into evil ways. Been arrested, and then discharged from his position with the Federated Radium Corporation. He had taken up with evil companions in Great-New York. Mostly Martians. And Miko had met him. His

technical knowledge, his training with the Federated Corporation, made him valuable to Miko's enterprise. And so Prince had joined the brigands.

Of all this, Anita had been unaware. She had never liked Miko. Feared him. And it seemed that the Martian had some hold upon her brother, which puzzled and frightened Anita.

Then Miko had fallen in love with her. George had not liked it. And that night on the *Planetara*, Miko had come and knocked upon Anita's door. Incautiously she opened it; he forced himself in. And when she repulsed him, struggled with him, George had been awakened.

She was whispering to me now. "My room was dark. We were all three struggling. George was holding me—the shot came—and I screamed."

And Miko had fled, not knowing whom his shot had hit in the darkness.

"And when George died, Captain Carter wanted me to

impersonate him. We planned it with Dr. Frank, to try and learn what Miko and the others were doing. Because I never knew that poor George had fallen into such evil things."

I could only hold her thankfully in my arms. The lost what-might-have-been seemed coming back to us.

"And they cut my hair, Gregg, and Glutz altered my face a little, and I did my best. But there was no time—it came upon us so quickly."

And she whispered, "But I love you, Gregg. I want to be the first to say it: I love you—I love you."

But we had the sanity to try and plan.

"Anita, when you go back, tell Miko we discussed radium ores. You'll have to be careful, clever. Don't say too much. Tell him we estimate the treasure at a hundred and thirty millions."

I told her what Miko had vouchsafed me of his plans. She knew all that. And Snap knew it. She had had a

few moments alone with Snap. Gave me now a message from him:

"We'll pull out of this, Gregg."

With Snap she had worked out a plan. There were Snap and I; and Shac and Dud Ardley, upon whom we could doubtless depend. And Dr. Frank. Against us were Miko and his sister; and Coniston and Hahn. Of course there were the members of the crew. But we were numerically the stronger when it came to true leadership. Unarmed and guarded now. But if we could break loose—recapture the ship....

I sat listening to Anita's eager whispers. It seemed feasible. Miko did not altogether trust George Prince; Anita was now unarmed.

"But I can make opportunity! I can get one of their ray cylinders, and an invisible cloak equipment."

That cloak—it had been hidden in Miko's room when Carter searched for it in A20—was now in the chart-room by Johnson's body. It had been repaired now;

Anita thought she could get possession of it.

We worked out the details of the plan. Anita would arm herself, and come and release me. Together, with a paralyzing ray, we could creep aboard the ship, overcome these brigands one by one. There were so few of the leaders. With them felled, and with us in control of the turret and the helio-room we could force the crew to stay at their posts. There were, Anita said, no navigators among Miko's crew. They would not dare oppose us.

"But it should be done at once, Anita. In a few hours we will be at the asteroid."

"Yes. I will go now—try and get the weapons."

"Where is Snap?"

"Still in the helio-room. One of the crew guards him."

Coniston was roaming the ship; he was still loitering on the deck, watching our door. Hahn was in the turret. The morning watch of the crew were at their

posts in the hull-corridors; the stewards were preparing a morning meal. There were nine members of subordinates altogether, Anita had calculated. Six of them were in Miko's pay; the other three—our own men who had not been killed in the fighting—had joined the brigands.

"And Dr. Frank, Anita?"

He was in the lounge. All the passengers were herded there, with Miko and Moa alternating on guard.

"I will arrange it with Venza," Anita whispered swiftly. "She will tell the others. Dr. Frank knows about it now. He thinks it can be done."

The possibility of it swept me anew. The brigands were of necessity scattered singly about the ship. One by one, creeping under cover of an invisible cloak, I could fell them, and replace them without alarming the others. My thoughts leaped to it. We would strike down the guard in the helio-room. Release Snap. At the turret we could assail Hahn, and replace him with Snap.

Coniston's voice outside broke in upon us. "Prince."

He was coming forward. Anita stood in the doorway. "I have the figures, Coniston. By God, this Haljan is with us! And clever! We think it will total a hundred and thirty millions. What a stake!"

She whispered, "Gregg, dear—I'll be back soon. We can do it—be ready."

"Anita—be careful of yourself! If they should suspect you...."

"I'll be careful. In an hour, Gregg, or less, I'll come back. All right, Coniston. Where is Miko? I want to see him. Stay where you are, Haljan! All in good time Miko will trust you with your liberty. You'll be rich like us all, never fear."

She swaggered out upon the deck, waved at the brigand, and banged my cubby door in my face.

I sat upon my bunk. Waiting. Would she come back? Would she be successful?

Chapter 16 In the Blue-lit Corridor

She came. I suppose it was no more than an hour: it seemed an eternity of apprehension. There was the slight hissing of the seal of my door. The panel slid. I had leaped from my bunk where in the darkness I was lying tense.

"Prince?" I did not dare say, "Anita."

"Gregg."

Her voice. My gaze swept the deck as the panel opened. Neither Coniston nor anyone else was in sight, save Anita's dark-robed figure which came into my room.

"You got it?" I asked her in a low whisper.

I held her for an instant, kissed her. But she pushed me away with quick hands.

"Gregg, dear—"

She was breathless. My kisses, and the tenseness of what lay before us were to blame.

"Gregg, see, I have it. Give us a little light—we must hurry!"

In the blue dimness I saw that she was holding one of the Martian cylinders. The smallest size; it would paralyze, but not kill.

"Only one, Anita?"

"Yes. I had it before, but Miko took it from me. It was in his room. And this—"

The invisible cloak. We laid it on my grid, and I adjusted its mechanism. A cloak of the reflecting-absorbing variety.*

*[The principle of this invisible cloak involves the use of an electronized fabric. All color is absorbed. The light rays reflected to the eye of the observer thus show an image of empty blackness. There is also created about the cloak a magnetic field which by

natural laws bends the rays of light from objects behind it. This principle of the natural bending of light when passing through a magnetic field was first recognized by Albert Einstein, a scientist of the Twentieth century. In the case of this invisible cloak, the bending light rays, by making visible what was behind the cloak's blackness, thus destroyed its solid black outline and gave a pseudo-invisibility which was fairly effective under favorable conditions.]

I donned it, and drew its hood, and threw on its current.

"All right, Anita?"

"Yes."

"Can you see me?"

"No." She stepped back a foot or two further. "Not from here. But you must let no one approach too close."

Then she came forward, put out her hand, fumbled

until she found me.

It was our plan to have me follow her out. Anyone observing us would see only the robed figure of the supposed George Prince, and I would escape notice.

The situation about the ship was almost unchanged. Anita had secured the weapon and the cloak and slipped away to my cubby without being observed.

"You're sure of that?"

"I think so, Gregg. I was careful."

Moa was now in the lounge, guarding the passengers. Hahn was asleep in the chart-room; Coniston was in the turret. Coniston would be off duty presently, Anita said, with Hahn taking his place. There were look-outs in the forward and stern watch-towers, and a guard upon Snap in the helio-room.

"Is he inside the room, Anita?"

"Snap? Yes."

"No—the guard."

"No. He was sitting upon the spider bridge at the door."

This was unfortunate. That guard could see all the deck clearly. He might be suspicious of George Prince wandering around; it would be difficult to get near enough to assail him. This cylinder, I knew, had an effective range of only some twenty feet.

Anita and I were swiftly whispering. It was necessary now to decide exactly what we were to do; once under observation outside, there must be no hesitation, no fumbling.

"Coniston is sharpest, Gregg. He will be the hardest to get near."

The languid-spoken Englishman was the one Anita most feared. His alert eyes seemed to miss nothing. Perhaps he was suspicious of this George Prince—Anita thought so.

"But where is Miko?" I whispered.

The brigand leader had gone below a few moments ago, down into the hull-corridor. Anita had seized the opportunity to come to me.

"We can attack Hahn in the chart-room first," I suggested. "And get the other weapons. Are they still there?"

"Yes. But Gregg, the forward deck is very bright."

We were approaching the asteroid. Already its light like a brilliant moon was brightening the forward deck-space. It made me realize how much haste was necessary.

We decided to go down into the hull-corridors. Locate Miko. Fell him, and hide him. His non-appearance back on deck would very soon throw the others into confusion, especially now with our impending landing upon the asteroid. And under cover of this confusion we would try and release Snap.

We had been arguing no more than a minute or two. We were ready. Anita slid my door wide. She stepped through, with me soundlessly scurrying after her. The empty, silent deck was alternately dark with shadow-patches and bright with blobs of starlight. A sheen of the Sun's corona was mingled with it; and from forward came the radiance of the asteroid's mellow silver glow.

Anita turned to seal my door; within my faintly humming cloak I stood beside her. Was I invisible in this light? Almost directly over us, close under the dome, the look-out sat in his little tower. He gazed down at Anita.

Amidships, high over the cabin superstructure, the helio-room hung dark and silent. The guard on its bridge was visible. He, too, looked down.

A tense instant. Then I breathed again. There was no alarm. The two guards answered Anita's gesture.

Anita said aloud into my empty cubby: "Miko will come for you presently, Haljan. He told me to tell you

that he wants you at the turret controls to land us on the asteroid."

She finished sealing my door and turned away; started forward along the deck. I followed. My steps were soundless in my elastic-bottomed shoes. Anita swaggered with a noisy tread. Near the door of the smoking room a small incline passage led downward. We went into it.

The passage was dimly blue-lit. We descended its length, came to the main corridor, which ran the length of the hull. A vaulted metal passage, with doors to the control rooms opening from it. Dim lights showed at intervals.

The humming of the ship was more apparent here. It drowned the slight humming of my cloak. I crept after Anita; my hand under the cloak clutched the ray weapon.

A steward passed us. I shrank aside to avoid him.

Anita spoke to him. "Where is Miko, Ellis?"

"In the ventilator-room, Mr. Prince. There was difficulty with the air renewal."

Anita nodded, and moved on. I could have felled that steward as he passed me. Oh, if I only had, how different things might have been!

But it seemed needless. I let him go, and he turned into a nearby door which led to the galley.

Anita moved forward. If we could come upon Miko alone. Abruptly she turned, and whispered, "Gregg, if other men are with him, I'll draw him away. You watch your chance."

What little things may overthrow one's careful plans! Anita had not realized how close to her I was following. And her turning so unexpectedly caused me to collide with her sharply.

"Oh!" She exclaimed it involuntarily. Her outflung hand had unwittingly gripped my wrist, caught the electrode there. The touch burned her, and close-circuited my robe. There was a hiss. My current

burned out the tiny fuses.

My invisibility was gone! I stood, a tall black-hooded figure, revealed to the gaze of anyone who might be near!

The futile plans of humans! We had planned so carefully! Our calculations, our hopes of what we could do, came clattering now in a sudden wreckage around us.

"Anita, run!"

If I were seen with her, then her own disguise would probably be discovered. That above everything would be disaster!

"Anita, get away from me! I must try it alone!"

I could hide somewhere, repair the cloak perhaps. Or, since now I was armed, why could I not boldly start an assault?

"Gregg, we must get you back to your cubby!" She

was clinging to me in a panic.

"No! You run! Get away from me! Don't you understand? George Prince has no business here with me! They'd kill you!"

Or worse— Miko would discover it was Anita, not George Prince.

"Gregg, let's get back to the deck."

I pushed at her. Both of us in sudden confusion.

From behind me there came a shout. That accursed steward! He had returned, to investigate perhaps what George Prince was doing in this corridor. He heard our voices; his shout in the silence of the ship sounded horribly loud. The white-clothed shape of him was in the nearby doorway. He stood stricken in surprise at seeing me. And then turned to run.

I fired my paralyzing cylinder through my cloak. Got him! He fell. I shoved Anita violently.

"Run! Tell Miko to come—tell him you heard a shout! He won't suspect you!"

"But Gregg—"

"You mustn't be found out! You're our only hope, Anita! I'll hide, fix the cloak, or get back to my cubby. We'll try it again."

It decided her. She scurried down the corridor. I whirled the other way. The steward's shout might not have been heard.

Then realization flashed to me. That steward would be revived. He was one of Miko's men: for two voyages he had been a spy upon the *Planetara*. He would be revived and tell what he had seen and heard. Anita's disguise would be revealed.

A cold-blooded killing I do protest went against me. But it was necessary. I flung myself upon him. I beat his skull with the metal of my cylinder.

I stood up. My hood had fallen back from my head. I

wiped my bloody hands on my useless cloak. I had smashed the cylinder.

"Haljan!"

Anita's voice! A sharp note of horror and warning. I became aware that in the corridor, forty feet down its dim length, Miko had appeared, with Anita behind him. His rifle-bullet-projector was leveled. It spat at me. But Anita had pulled at his arm.

The explosive report was sharply deafening in the confined space of the corridor. With a spurt of flame the leaden pellet struck over my head against the vaulted ceiling.

Miko was struggling with Anita. "Prince, you idiot!"

"Miko, don't! It's Haljan! Don't kill him—"

The turmoil brought members of the crew. From the shadowed oval near me they came running. I flung the useless cylinder at them. But I was trapped in the narrow passage.

I might have fought my way out. Or Miko might have shot me. But there was the danger that, in her horror, Anita would betray herself.

I backed against the wall. "Don't kill me! See, I will not fight!"

I flung up my arms. And the crew, emboldened, and courageous under Miko's gaze, leaped on me and bore me down.

The futile plans of humans! Anita and I had planned so carefully, and in a few brief minutes of action it had come only to this!

Chapter 17 A Woman of Mars

"So, Gregg Haljan, you are not as loyal as you pretend!"

Miko was livid with suppressed anger. They had stripped the cloak from me, and flung me back in my cubby. Miko was now confronting me; at the door Moa stood watching. And Anita was behind her. I sat

outwardly defiant and sullen on my bunk. But I was alert and tense, fearful still of what Anita's emotion might betray her into doing.

"Not so loyal," Miko repeated. "And a fool! Do you think I am such a child you can escape me!"

He swung around. "How did he get out of here? Prince, you came in here!"

My heart was wildly thumping. But Anita retorted with a touch of spirit:

"I came to tell him what you commanded. To check Hahn's latest figures—and to be ready to take the controls when we go into the asteroid's atmosphere."

"Well, how did he get out?"

"How should I know?" she parried. Little actress! Her spirit helped to allay my fear. She held her cloak close around her in the fashion they had come to expect from the George Prince who had just buried his sister. "How should I know, Miko? I sealed his door."

"But did you?"

"Of course he did," Moa put in.

"Ask your look-outs," said Anita. "They saw me—I waved to them just as I sealed the door."

I ventured, "I have been taught to open doors." I managed a sly, lugubrious smile. "I shall not try it again, Miko."

Nothing had been said about my killing of the steward. I thanked my constellations now that he was dead. "I shall not try it again," I repeated.

A glance passed between Miko and his sister. Miko said abruptly, "You seem to realize that it is not my purpose to kill you. And you presume upon it."

"I shall not again." I eyed Moa. She was gazing at me steadily. She said, "Leave me with him, Miko...." She smiled. "Gregg Haljan, we are no more than twenty thousand miles from the asteroid now. The calculations for retarding are now in operation."

It was what had taken Miko below, that and trouble with the ventilating system, which was soon rectified. But the retarding of the ship's velocity when nearing a destination required accurate manipulation. These brigands were fearful of their own skill. That was obvious. It gave me confidence. I was really needed. They would not harm me. Except for Miko's impulsive temper, I was in no danger from them—not now, certainly.

Moa was saying, "I think I may make you understand, Gregg. We have tremendous riches within our grasp."

"I know it," I added with sudden thought. "But there are many with whom to divide this treasure...."

Miko caught my intended implication. "By the infernal, this fellow may have felt he could seize the treasure for himself! Because he is a navigator!"

Moa said vehemently, "Do not be an idiot, Gregg! You could not do it! There will be fighting with Grantline."

My purpose was accomplished. They seemed to see

me a willing outlaw like themselves. As though it were a bond between us. And they could win me.

"Leave me with him," said Moa.

Miko acquiesced. "For a few minutes only." He proffered a heat-ray cylinder, but she refused it.

"I am not afraid of him."

Miko swung on me. "Within an hour we will be nearing the atmosphere. Will you take the controls?"

"Yes."

He set his heavy jaw. His eyes bored into me. "You're a strange fellow, Haljan. I can't make you out. I am not angry now. Do you think, when I am deadly serious, that I mean what I say?"

His calm words set a sudden shiver over me. I checked my smile.

"Yes," I said.

"Well then, I will tell you this: not for all of Prince's well-meaning interference, or Moa's liking for you, or my own need of your skill, will I tolerate more trouble from you. The next time—I will kill you. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"That is all I want to say. You kill my men, and my sister says I must not hurt you. I am not a child to be ruled by a woman!"

He held his huge fist before my face. "With these fingers I will twist your neck! Do you believe it?"

"Yes." I did indeed.

He swung on his heel. "If Moa wants to try and put sense into your head—I hope she does. Bring him to the lounge when you are finished, Moa. Come, Prince—Hahn will need us." He chuckled grimly. "Hahn seems to fear we will plunge into this asteroid like a wild comet gone suddenly tangent!"

Anita moved aside to let him through the door. I caught a glimpse of her set white face as she followed him down the deck.

Then Moa's bulk blocked the doorway. She faced me.

"Sit where you are, Gregg." She turned and closed the door upon us. "I am not afraid of you. Should I be?"

"No," I said.

She came and sat down beside me. "If you should attempt to leave this room, the stern look-out has orders to bore you through."

"I have no intention of leaving the room," I retorted. "I do not want to commit suicide."

"I thought you did. You seem minded in such a fashion. Gregg, why are you so foolish?"

I remained silent.

"Why?" she demanded.

I said carefully, "This treasure—you are many who will divide it. You have all these men on the *Planetara*. And in Ferrok-Shahn, others, no doubt."

I paused. Would she tell me? Could I make her talk of that other brigand ship which Miko had said was waiting on Mars? I wondered if he had been able to signal it. The distance from here to Mars was great; yet upon other voyages Snap's signals had gotten through. My heart sank at the thought. Our situation here was desperate enough. The passengers soon would be cast upon the asteroid: there would be left only Snap, Anita and myself. We might recapture the ship, but I doubted it now. My thoughts were turning to our arrival upon the Moon. We three might, perhaps, be able to thwart the attack upon Grantline, hold the brigands off until help from the Earth might come.

But with another brigand ship, fully manned and armed, coming from Mars, the condition would be immeasurably worse. Grantline had some twenty men, and his camp, I knew, would be reasonably fortified. I knew, too, that Johnny Grantline would

fight to his last man.

Moa was saying, "I would like to tell you our plans, Gregg."

Her gaze was on my face. Keen eyes, but they were luminous now—an emotion in them sweeping her. But outwardly she was calm, stern-lipped.

"Well, why don't you tell me?" I said. "If I am to help you...."

"Gregg, I want you with us. Don't you understand? We are not many. My brother and I are guiding this affair. With your help, I would feel differently."

"The ship at Ferrok-Shahn—"

My fears were realized. She said, "I think our signals reached it. Dean tried, and Coniston was checking him."

"You think the ship is coming?"

"Yes."

"Where will it join us?"

"At the Moon. We will be there in thirty hours. Your figures gave that, did they not, Gregg?"

"Yes. And the other ship—how fast is it?"

"Quite fast. In eight days—or nine, perhaps—it will reach the Moon."

She seemed willing enough to talk. There was indeed, no particular reason for reticence; I could not, she naturally felt, turn the knowledge to account.

"Manned—" I prompted.

"About forty men."

"And armed? Long range projectors?"

"You ask very avid questions, Gregg!"

"Why should I not? Don't you suppose I'm interested?"

I touched her. "Moa, did it ever occur to you, if once you and Miko trusted me—which you don't—I might show more interest in joining you?"

The look on her face emboldened me. "Did you ever think of that, Moa? And some arrangement for my share of this treasure? I am not like Johnson, to be hired for a hundred pounds of gold-leaf."

"Gregg, I will see that you get your share. Riches, for you—and me."

"I was thinking, Moa, when we land at the Moon tomorrow—where is our equipment?"

The Moon, with its lack of atmosphere, needed special equipment. I had never heard Carter mention what apparatus the *Planetara* was carrying.

Moa laughed. "We have located air-suits and helmets—a variety of suitable apparatus, Gregg. But we were not foolish enough to leave Great-New York on this voyage without our own arrangements. My brother, and Coniston and Prince—all of us shipped crates of

freight consigned to Ferrok-Shahn—and Rankin had special baggage marked 'theatrical apparatus.'"

I understood it now. These brigands had boarded the *Planetara* with their own Moon equipment, disguised as freight and personal baggage. Shipped in bond, to be inspected by the tax officials of Mars.

"It is on board now. We will open it when we leave the asteroid, Gregg. We are well equipped."

She bent toward me. And suddenly her long lean fingers were gripping my shoulders.

"Gregg, look at me!"

I gazed into her eyes. There was passion there; and her voice was suddenly intense.

"Gregg, I told you once a Martian girl goes after what she wants. It is you I want—"

Not for me to play like a cad upon a woman's emotions! "Moa, you flatter me."

"I love you." She held me off, gazing at me. "Gregg—"

I must have smiled. And abruptly she released me.

"So you think it amusing?"

"No. But on Earth—"

"We are not on the Earth. Nor am I of the Earth!" She was gauging me keenly. No note of pleading was in her voice; a stern authority; and the passion was swinging to anger.

"I am like my brother: I do not understand you, Gregg Haljan. Perhaps you think you are clever? It seems stupidity, the fatuousness of man!"

"Perhaps," I said.

There was a moment of silence. "Gregg, I said I loved you. Have you no answer?"

"No." In truth, I did not know what sort of answer it would be best to make. Whatever she must have read

in my eyes, it stirred her to fury. Her fingers with the strength of a man in them, dug into my shoulders. Her gaze searched me.

"You think you love someone else? Is that it?"

That was horribly startling; but she did not mean it just that way. She amended with caustic venom: "That little Anita Prince! You thought you loved her! Was that it?"

"No!"

But I hardly deceived her. "Sacred to her memory! Her ratlike little face—soft voice like a purring, sniveling cat! Is that what you're remembering, Gregg Haljan?" she sneered.

I tried to laugh. "What nonsense!"

"Is it? Then why are you cold under my touch? Am I—a girl descended from the Martian flame-workers—impotent now to awaken a man?"

A woman scorned! In all the Universe there could be no more dangerous an enemy. An incredible venom shot from her eyes.

"That miserable mouselike creature! Well for her that my brother killed her."

It struck me cold. If Anita was unmasked, beyond all the menace of Miko's wooing, I knew that the venom of Moa's jealousy was a greater danger.

I said sharply, "Don't be simple, Moa!" I shook off her grip. "You imagine too much. You forget that I am a man of the Earth and you a girl of Mars."

"Is that reason why we should not love?"

"No. But our instincts are different. Men of the Earth are born to the chase."

I was smiling. With thought of Anita's danger I could find it readily in my heart to dupe this Amazon.

"Give me time, Moa. You attract me."

"You lie!"

"Do you think so?" I gripped her arm with all the power of my fingers. It must have hurt her, but she gave no sign; her gaze clung to me steadily.

"I don't know what to think, Gregg Haljan...."

I held my grip. "Think what you like. Men of Earth have been known to kill the thing they love."

"You want me to fear you?"

"Perhaps."

She smiled scornfully. "That is absurd."

I released her. I said earnestly, "I want you to realize that if you treat me fairly, I can be of great advantage to this venture. There will be fighting—I am fearless."

Her venomous expression was softening. "I think that is true, Gregg."

"And you need my navigating skill. Even now I should

be in the turret."

I stood up. I half expected she would stop me, but she did not. I added, "Shall we go?"

She stood beside me. Her height brought her face level with mine.

"I think you will cause no more trouble, Gregg?"

"Of course not. I am not wholly witless."

"You have been."

"Well, that is over." I hesitated. Then I added, "A man of Earth does not yield to love when there is work to do. This treasure—"

I think that of everything I said, this last most convinced her.

She interrupted, "That I understand." Her eyes were smoldering. "When it is over—when we are rich—then I will claim you, Gregg."

She turned from me. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. No! I must get that sheet of Hahn's last figures."

"Are they checked?"

"Yes." I picked the sheet up from my desk. "Hahn is fairly accurate, Moa."

"A fool nevertheless. An apprehensive fool."

A comradeship seemed coming between us. It was my purpose to establish it.

"Are we going to maroon Dr. Frank with the passengers?" I asked.

"Yes."

"But he may be of use to us." I wanted Dr. Frank kept aboard. I still felt that there was a chance for us to recapture the ship.

But Moa shook her head decisively. "My brother has decided not. We will be well rid of Dr. Frank. Are you

ready, Gregg?"

"Yes."

She opened the door. Her gesture reassured the lookout, who was alertly watching the stern watch-tower.

"Come, Gregg."

I stepped out, and followed her forward along the deck, which now was bright with the radiance of the nearby asteroid.

Chapter 18 Marooned on an Asteroid

A fair little world. I had thought so before; and I thought so now as I gazed at the asteroid hanging so close before our bow. A huge, thin crescent, with the Sun off to one side behind it. A silver crescent, tinged with red. From this near viewpoint, all of the little globe's disc was visible. The shadowed portion lay dimly red, mysteriously; the sunlit crescent—widening visibly as we approached—was gleaming silver. Inky moonlike shadows in the hollows, brilliant light upon the mountain heights. The seas lay in gray patches. The convexity of the disc was sharply defined. So small a world! Fair and beautiful, shrouded with clouded areas.

"Where is Miko?"

"In the lounge, Gregg."

"Can we stop there?"

Moa turned into the lounge archway. Strange, tense scene. I saw Anita at once. Her robed figure lurked in

an inconspicuous corner; her eyes were upon me as Moa and I entered, but she did not move. The thirty-odd passengers were huddled in a group. Solemn, white-faced men, frightened women. Some of them were sobbing. One Earth-woman—a young widow—sat holding her little girl, and wailing with uncontrolled hysteria. The child knew me. As I appeared now, with my gold-laced white coat over my shoulders, the little child seemed to see in my uniform a mark of authority. She left her mother and ran to me.

"You, please—you will help us? My moms is crying."

I sent her gently back. But there came upon me then a compassion for these innocent passengers, fated to have embarked upon this ill-starred voyage. Herded here in this cabin, with brigands like pirates of old guarding them. Waiting now to be marooned on an uninhabited asteroid roaming in space. A sense of responsibility swept me. I swung upon Miko. He stood with a nonchalant grace, lounging against the wall with a cylinder dangling in his hand. He anticipated me.

"So, Haljan—she put some sense into your head? No more trouble? Then get into the turret. Moa, stay there with him. Send Hahn here. Where is that ass Coniston? We will be in the atmosphere shortly."

I said, "No more trouble from me, Miko. But these passengers—what preparation are you making for them on the asteroid?"

He stared in surprise. Then he laughed. "I am no murderer. The crew is preparing food, all we can spare. And tools. They can build themselves shelter—they will be picked up in a few weeks."

Dr. Frank was here. I caught his gaze, but he did not speak. On the lounge couches there still lay the quarter-score bodies. Rankin, who had been killed by Blackstone in the fight; a man passenger killed; a woman and a man wounded.

Miko added, "Dr. Frank will take his medical supplies—he will care for the wounded. There are other bodies among the crew." His gesture was deprecating. "I have not buried them. We will put

them ashore; easier that way."

The passengers were all eyeing me. I said:

"You have nothing to fear. I will guarantee you the best equipment we can spare. You will give them apparatus with which to signal?" I demanded of Miko.

"Yes. Get to the turret."

I turned away, with Moa after me. Again the little girl ran forward.

"Come—speak to my moms! She is crying."

It was across the cabin from Miko. Coniston had appeared from the deck; it created a slight diversion. He joined Miko.

"Wait," I said to Moa. "She is afraid of you. This is humanity."

I pushed Moa back. I followed the child. I had seen that Venza was sitting with the child's weeping

mother. This was a ruse to get word with me.

I stood before the terrified woman while the little girl clung to my legs.

I said gently, "Don't be so frightened. Dr. Frank will take care of you. There is no danger—you will be safer on the asteroid than here on the ship."

I leaned down and touched her shoulder. "There is no danger."

I was between Venza and the open cabin. Venza whispered swiftly, "When we are landing, Gregg, I want you to make a commotion—anything—just as the women passengers go ashore."

"Why? No, of course you will have food, Mrs. Francis."

"Never mind! An instant. Just confusion. Go, Gregg—don't speak now!"

I raised the child. "You take care of mother." I kissed

her.

From across the cabin Miko's sardonic voice made me turn. "Touching sentimentality, Haljan! Get to your post in the turret!"

His rasping note of annoyance brooked no delay. I set the child down. I said, "I will land us in an hour. Depend on it."

Hahn was at the controls when Moa and I reached the turret.

"You will land us safely, Haljan?" he demanded anxiously.

I pushed him away. "Miko wants you in the lounge."

"You take command here?"

"Of course, Hahn. I am no more anxious for a crash than you."

He sighed with relief. "That is true. I am no expert at

atmospheric entry, Haljan—nor Coniston, nor Miko."

"Have no fear. Sit down, Moa."

I waved to the look-out in the forward watch-tower, and got his routine gesture. I rang the corridor bells, and the normal signals came promptly back.

"It's correct, Hahn. Get away with you." I called after him. "Tell Miko that things are all right here."

Hahn's small dark figure, lithe as a leopard in his tight fitting trousers and jacket with his robe now discarded, went swiftly down the spider incline and across the deck.

"Moa, where is Snap? By the infernal, if he has been injured!—"

Up on the helio-room bridge the brigand guard still sat. Then I saw that Snap was out there sitting with him. I waved from the turret window, and Snap's cheery gesture answered me. His voice carried down through the silver moonlight: "Land us safely, Gregg.

These weird amateur navigators!"

Within the hour I had us dropping into the asteroid's atmosphere. The ship heated steadily. The pressure went up. It kept me busy with the instruments and the calculations. But my signals were always promptly answered from below. The brigand crew did its part efficiently.

At a hundred and fifty thousand feet I shifted the gravity plates to the landing combinations, and started the electronic engines.

"All safe, Gregg?" Moa sat at my elbow; her eyes, with what seemed a glow of admiration in them, followed my busy routine activities.

"Yes. The crew works well."

The electronic streams flowed out like a rocket tail behind us. The *Planetara* caught their impetus. In the rarified air, our bow lifted slightly, like a ship riding a gentle ground swell. At a hundred thousand feet we sailed gently forward, hull down to the asteroid's

surface, cruising to seek a landing space.

A little sea was now beneath us. A shadowed sea, deep purple in the night down there. Occasional green-verdured islands showed, with the lines of white surf marking them. Beyond the sea, a curving coastline was visible. Rocky headlines, behind which mountain foothills rose in serrated, verdured ranks. The sunlight edged the distant mountains; and presently this rapidly turning little world brought the sunlight forward.

It was day beneath us. We slid gently downward. Thirty thousand feet now, above a sparkling blue ocean. The coastline was just ahead: green with a lush, tropical vegetation. Giant trees, huge-leaved. Long dangling vines; air plants, with giant pods and vivid orchidlike blossoms.

I sat at the turret window, staring through my glasses. A fair little world, yet obviously uninhabited. I could fancy that all this was newly-sprung vegetation. This asteroid had whirled in from the cold of the interplanetary space far outside our Solar System. A

few years ago—as time might be measured astronomically, it was no more than yesterday—this fair landscape was congealed white and bleak, with a sweep of glacial ice. But the seeds of life miraculously were here. The miracle of life! Under the warming, germinating sunlight, the verdure sprung.

"Can you find landing space, Gregg?"

Moa's question brought back my wandering fancies. I saw an upland glade, a level spread of ferns with the forest banked around it. A cliff-height nearby, frowning down at the sea.

"Yes. I can land us there." I showed her through the glasses. I rang the sirens, and we spiraled, descending further. The mountain tops were now close beneath us. Clouds were overhead, white masses with blue sky behind them. A day of brilliant sunlight. But soon, with our forward cruising, it was night. The sunlight dropped beneath the sharply convex horizon; the sea and the land went purple.

A night of brilliant stars; the Earth was a blazing blue-

red point of light. The heavens visibly were revolving; in an hour or so it would be daylight again.

On the forward deck now Coniston had appeared, commanding half a dozen of the crew. They were carrying up caskets of food and the equipment which was to be given the marooned passengers. And making ready the disembarking incline, loosening the seals of the side-dome windows.

Sternward on the deck, by the lounge oval, I could see Miko standing. And occasionally the roar of his voice at the passengers sounded.

My vagrant thought flung back into Earth's history. Like this, ancient travelers of the surface of the sea were herded by pirates to walk the plank, or put ashore, marooned upon some fair desert island of the tropic Spanish main.

Hahn came mounting our turret incline. "All is well, Gregg Haljan?"

"Get to your work," Moa told him sharply. "We land in

an hour-quadrant."

He retreated, joining the bustle and confusion which now was beginning on the deck. It struck me—could I turn that confusion to account? Would it be possible, now at the last moment, to attack these brigands? Snap still sat outside the helio-room doorway. But his guard was alert, with upraised projector. And that guard, I saw, in his position high amidships, commanded all the deck.

And I saw too, as the passengers now were herded in a line from the lounge oval, that Miko had roped and bound all of the men. And a clanking chain connected them. They came like a line of convicts, marching forward, and stopped on the open deck-space near the base of the turret. Dr. Frank's grim face gazed up at me.

Miko ordered the women and children in a group beside the chained men. His words to them reached me: "You are in no danger. When we land, be careful. You will find gravity very different—this is a very small world."

I flung on the landing lights; the deck glowed with the blue radiance; the search-beams shot down beside our hull. We hung now a thousand feet above the forest glade. I cut off the electronic streams. We poised, with the gravity-plates set at normal, and only a gentle night-breeze to give us a slight side drift. This I could control with the lateral propeller rudders.

For all my busy landing routine, my mind was on other things. Venza's swift words back there in the lounge. I was to create a commotion while the passengers were landing. Why? Had she and Dr. Frank, perhaps, some last minute desperate purposes?

I determined I would do what she said. Shout, or mis-order the lights. That would be easy. But to what advantage?

I was glad it was night—I had, indeed, calculated our descent so that the landing would be in darkness. But to what purpose? These brigands were very alert. There was nothing I could think of to do which would avail us anything more than a possible swift death

under Miko's anger.

"Well done, Gregg!" said Moa.

I cut off the last of the propellers. With scarcely a perceptible jar, the *Planetara* grounded, rose like a feather and settled to rest in the glade. The deep purple night with stars overhead was around us. I hissed out our interior air through the dome and hull-ports, and admitted the night-air of the asteroid. My calculations—of necessity mere mathematical approximations—proved fairly accurate. In temperature and pressure there was no radical change as the dome-windows slid back.

We had landed. Whatever Venza's purpose, her moment was at hand. I was tense. But I was aware also, that beside me Moa was very alert. I had thought her unarmed. She was not. She sat back from me; in her hand was a small thin knife-blade.

She murmured tensely, "You have done your part, Gregg. Well and skillfully done. Now we will sit here quietly and watch them land."

Snap's guard was standing, keenly watching. The look-outs in the forward and stern towers were also armed; I could see them both gazing keenly down at the confusion of the blue-lit deck.

The incline went over the hull-side and touched the ground.

"Enough!" Miko roared. "The men first. Hahn, move the women back! Coniston, pile those caskets to the side. Get out of the way, Prince."

Anita was down there. I saw her at the edge of the group of women. Venza was near her.

Miko shoved her. "Get out of the way, Prince. You can help Coniston. Have the things ready to throw off."

Five of the steward-crew were at the head of the incline. Miko shouted up at me:

"Haljan, hold our shipboard gravity normal."

"Yes," I responded.

I had done so. Our magnitizers had been adjusted to the shifting calculations of our landing. They were holding now at intensities, so that upon the *Planetara* no change from fairly normal Earth-gravity was apparent. I rang a tentative inquiry signal; the operator in the hull-magnetizer control answered that he was at his post.

The line of men were first to descend. Dr. Frank led them. He flashed a look of farewell up at me and Snap as he went down the incline with the chained men passengers after him.

Motley procession! Twenty odd, dishevelled, half-clothed men of three worlds. The changing, lightening gravity on the incline caught them. Dr. Frank bounded up to the rail under the impetus of his step: caught and held himself, drew himself back. The line swayed. In the dim, blue-lit glare it seemed unreal, crazy. A grotesque dream of men descending a plank.

They reached the forest glade. Stood swaying, afraid at first to move. The purple night crowded them; they stood gazing at this strange world, their new prison.

"Now the women."

Miko was shoving the women to the head of the incline. I could feel Moa's steady gaze upon me. Her knife-blade gleamed in the turret light.

She murmured again, "In a few minutes you can ring us away, Gregg."

I felt like an actor awaiting his cue in the wings of some turgid drama the plot of which he did not know. Venza was near the head of the incline. Some of the women and children were on it. A woman screamed. Her child had slipped from her hand, bounded up over the rail, and fallen. Hardly fallen—floated down to the ground, with flailing arms and legs, landing in the dark ferns, unharmed. Its terrified wail came up.

There was a confusion on the incline. Venza, still on the deck, seemed to send a look of appeal to the turret. My cue?

I slid my hand to the light switchboard. It was near my knees. I pulled a switch. The blue-lit deck beneath

the turret went dark.

I recall an instant of horrible, tense silence, and in the gloom beside me I was aware of Moa moving. I felt a thrill of instinctive fear—would she plunge that knife into me?

The silence of the darkened deck was broken with a confusion of sounds. A babble of voices; a woman passenger's scream; shuffling of feet; and above it all, Miko's roar:

"Stand quiet! Everyone! No movement!"

On the descending incline there was chaos. The disembarking women were clinging to the gang-rail; some of them had evidently surged over it and fallen. Down on the ground in the purple-shadowed starlight I could vaguely see the chained line of men. They too were in confusion, trying to shove themselves toward the fallen women.

Miko roared:

"Light those tubes! Gregg Haljan! By the Almighty, Moa, are you up there? What is wrong? The light-tubes—"

Dark drama of unknown plot! I wonder if I should try and leave the turret. Where was Anita? She had been down there on the deck when I flung out the lights.

I think twenty seconds would have covered it all. I had not moved. I thought, "Is Snap concerned with this?"

Moa's knife could have stabbed me. I felt her lunge against me; and suddenly I was gripping her, twisting her wrist. But she flung the knife away. Her strength was almost the equal of my own. Her hand went for my throat, and with the other hand she was fumbling.

The deck abruptly sprang into light again. Moa had found the switch and threw it back.

"Gregg!"

She fought me as I tried to reach the switch. I saw

down on the deck Miko gazing up at us. Moa panted, "Gregg—stop! If he—sees you doing this, he'll kill you —"

The scene down there was almost unchanged. I had answered my cue. To what purpose? I saw Anita near Miko. The last of the women were on the plank.

I had stopped struggling with Moa. She sat back, panting; and then she called: "Sorry, Miko. It will not happen again."

Miko was in a towering rage. But he was too busy to bother with me; his anger swung on those nearest him. He shoved the last of the women violently at the incline. She bounded over. Her body, with the gravity-pull of only a few Earth-pounds, sailed in an arc and dropped to the sward near the swaying line of men.

Miko swung back. "Get out of my way!" A sweep of his huge arm knocked Anita sidewise. "Prince, damn you, help me with those boxes!"

The frightened stewards were lifting the boxes,

square metal storage-chests each as long as a man, packed with food, tools, and equipment.

"Here, get out of my way, all of you!"

My breath came again; Anita nimbly retreated before Miko's angry rush. He dashed at the stewards. Three of them held a box. He took it from them; raised it at the top of the incline. Poised it over his head an instant, with his massive arms like gray pillars beneath it. And flung it. The box catapulted, dropped; and then, passing the Planetara's gravity area, it sailed in a long flat arc over the forest glade and crashed into the purple underbrush.

"Give me another!"

The stewards pushed another at him. Like an angry Titan, he flung it. And another. One by one the chests sailed out and crashed.

"There is your food—go pick it up! Haljan, make ready to ring us away!"

On the deck lay the dead body of Rance Rankin, which the stewards had carried out. Miko seized it, flung it.

"There! Go to your last resting place!"

And the other bodies. Balch Blackstone, Captain Carter, Johnson—Miko flung them. And the course masters and those of our crew who had been killed; the stewards appeared with them; Miko unceremoniously cast them off.

The passengers were all on the ground now. It was dim down there. I tried to distinguish Venza, but could not. I could see Dr. Frank's figure at the end of the chained line of men. The passengers were gazing in horror at the bodies hurtling over them.

"Ready, Haljan?"

Moa prompted me. "Tell him yes!"

I called, "Yes!" Had Venza failed in her unknown purpose? It seemed so. On the helio-room bridge

Snap and his guard stood like silent statues in the blue-lit gloom.

The disembarkation was over.

"Close the ports," Miko commanded.

The incline came folding up with a clatter. The port and dome-windows slid closed. Moa hissed against my ear:

"If you want life, Gregg Haljan, you will start your duties!"

Venza had failed. Whatever it was, it had come to nothing. Down in the purple forest, disconnected now from the ship, the last of our friends stood marooned. I could distinguish them through the blur of the closed dome—only a swaying, huddled group was visible. But my fancy pictured this last sight of them—Dr. Frank, Venza, Shac and Dud Ardley.

They were gone. There were left only Snap, Anita, and myself.

I was mechanically ringing us away. I heard my sirens sounding down below, with the answering clangs here in the turret. The *Planetara's* respiratory controls started; the pressure equalizers began operating, and the gravity plates shifted into lifting combinations.

The ship was hissing and quivering with it, combined with the grating of the last of the dome ports. And Miko's command:

"Lift, Haljan."

Hahn had been mingled with the confusion of the deck, though I had hardly noticed him; Coniston had remained below, with the crew answering my signals. Hahn stood now with Miko, gazing down through a deck window. Anita was alone at another.

"Lift, Haljan."

I lifted us gently, bow first, with a repulsion of the bow plates. And started the central electronic engine. Its thrust from our stern moved us diagonally over the purple forest trees.

The glade slid downward and away. I caught a last vague glimpse of the huddled group of marooned passengers, staring up at us. Left to their fate, alone on this deserted little world.

With the three engines going we slid smoothly upward. The forest dropped, a purple spread of tree-tops, edged with starlight and Earth-light. The sharply curving horizon seemed following us up. I swung on all the power. We mounted at a forty degree angle, slowly circling, with a bank of clouds over us to the side and the shining little sea beneath.

"Very good, Gregg." In the turret light Moa's eyes blazed at me. "I do not know what you meant by darkening the deck-lights." Her fingers dug at my shoulders. "I will tell my brother it was an error."

I said, "An error—yes."

"An error? I don't know what it was. But you have me to deal with now. You understand? I will tell my brother so. You said, 'On Earth a man may kill the thing he loves.' A woman of Mars may do that!

Beware of me, Gregg Haljan."

Her passion-filled eyes bored into me. Love? Hate?
The venom of a woman scorned—a mingling of turgid emotions....

I twisted away from her grip and ignored her; she sat back, silently watching my busy activities; the calculations of the shifting conditions of gravity, pressures, temperatures; a checking of the score or more of instruments on the board before me.

Mechanical routine. My mind went to Venza, back there on the asteroid. The wandering little world was already shrinking to a convex surface beneath us. Venza, with her last unknown play, gone to failure. Had I failed my cue? Whatever my part, it seemed now that I must have horribly mis-acted it.

The crescent Earth was presently swinging over our bow. We rocketed out of the asteroid's shadow. The glowing, flaming Sun appeared, making a crescent of the Earth. With the glass I could see our tiny Moon, visually seeming to hug the limb of its parent Earth.

We were away upon our course for the Moon. My mind flung ahead. Grantline with his treasure, unsuspecting this brigand ship. And suddenly, beyond all thought of Grantline and his treasure, there came to me a fear for Anita. In God's truth I had been, so far, a very stumbling inept champion—doomed to failure with everything I tried. It swept me, so that I cursed my own incapacity. Why had I not contrived to have Anita desert at the asteroid? Would it not have been far better for her there? Taking her chance for rescue with Dr. Frank, Venza and the others?

But no! I had, like an inept fool, never thought of that! Had left her here on board at the mercy of these outlaws.

And I swore now that, beyond everything, I would protect her.

Futile oath! If I could have seen ahead a few hours! But I sensed the catastrophe. There was a shudder within me as I sat in that turret, docilely guiding us out through the asteroid's atmosphere, heading us upon our course for the Moon.

Chapter 19 In the Zed-light Glow

"Try again. By the infernal, Snap Dean, if you do anything to balk us!"

Miko scanned the apparatus with keen eyes. How much technical knowledge of signaling instruments did this brigand leader have? I was tense and cold with apprehension as I sat in a corner of the helio-room, watching Snap. Could Miko be fooled? Snap, I knew, was trying to fool him.

The Moon spread close beneath us. My log-chart, computed up to thirty minutes past, showed us barely some thirty thousand miles over the Moon's surface. The globe lay in quadrature beneath our bow quarter—a huge quadrant spreading across the black starry vault of the lower heavens. A silver quadrant. The sunset caught the Lunar mountains, flung slanting shadows over the empty Lunar plains. All the disc was plainly visible. The mellow Earth-light glowed serene and pale to illumine the Lunar night.

The *Planetara* was bathed in silver. A brilliant silver

glare swept the forward deck, clean white and splashed with black shadows. We had partly circled the Moon, so as now to approach it from the Earthward side. I had worked with extreme concentration through the last few hours, plotting the trajectory of our curving sweep, setting the gravity plates with constantly shifting combinations. And with it a necessity for the steady retarding of our velocity.

Miko for a time was at my elbow in the turret. I had not seen Coniston and Hahn of recent hours. I had slept, awakened refreshed, and had a meal. Coniston and Hahn remained below, one or the other of them always with the crew to execute my sirened orders. Then Coniston came to take my place in the turret, and I went with Miko to the helio-room.

"You are skilful, Haljan." A measure of grim approval was in Miko's voice. "You evidently have no wish to try and fool me in this navigation."

I had not, indeed. It is delicate work at best, coping with the intricacies of celestial mechanics upon a semicircular trajectory with retarding velocity, and

with a make-shift crew we could easily have come upon real difficulty.

We hung at last, hull-down, facing the Earthward hemisphere of the Lunar disc. The giant ball of the Earth lay behind and above us—the Sun over our stern quarter. With forward velocity almost checked, we poised, and Snap began his signals to the unsuspecting Grantline.

My work momentarily was over. I sat watching the helio-room. Moa was here, close beside me; I felt always her watchful gaze, so that even the play of my expression needed reining.

Miko worked with Snap. Anita too was here. To Miko and Moa it was the somber, taciturn George Prince, shrouded always in his black mourning cloak, disinclined to talk; sitting alone, brooding and cowardly sullen.

Miko repeated, "By the infernal, if you try to fool me, Snap Dean!"

The small metal room, with its grid floor and low-arched ceiling, glared with moonlight through its windows. The moving figures of Snap and Miko were aped by the grotesque, misshapen shadows of them on the walls. Miko gigantic—a great, menacing ogre. Snap small and alert—a trim, pale figure in his tight-fitting white trousers, broad-flowing belt, and white shirt open at the throat. His face was pale and drawn from lack of sleep and the torture to which Miko had subjected him. But he grinned at the brigand's words, and pushed his straggling hair closer under the red eyeshade.

"I'm doing my best, Miko—you can believe it."

The room over long periods was deadly silent, with Miko and Snap bending watchfully at the crowded banks of instruments. A silence in which my own pounding heart seemed to echo. I did not dare look at Anita, nor she at me. Snap was trying to signal Earth, not the Moon! His main helios were set in the reverse. The infra-red waves, flung from the bow window, were of a frequency which Snap and I believed that Grantline could not pick up. And over against the

wall, close beside me and seemingly ignored by Snap, there was a tiny ultra-violet sender. Its faint hum and the quivering of its mirrors had so far passed unnoticed.

Would some Earth-station pick it up? I prayed so. There was a thumb nail mirror here which could bring an answer. I prayed that it might swing.

Would some Earth telescope be able to see us? I doubted it. The pinpoint of the *Planetara's* infinitesimal bulk would be beyond them.

Long silences, broken only by the faint hiss and murmur of Snap's instruments.

"Shall I try the 'graphs, Miko?"

"Yes."

I helped him with the spectroheliograph. At every level the plates showed us nothing save the scarred and pitted Moon-surface. We worked for an hour. There was nothing. Bleak cold night on the Moon here

beneath us. A touch of fading sunlight upon the Apennines. Up near the South Pole, Tycho with its radiating open rills stood like a grim dark maw.

Miko bent over a plate. "Something here? Is there?"

An abnormality upon the frowning ragged cliffs of Tycho? We thought so. But then it seemed not.

Another hour. No signal came from Earth. If Snap's calls were getting through we had no evidence of it. Abruptly Miko strode at me from across the room. I went cold and tense; Moa shifted, alert to my every movement. But Miko was not interested in me. A sweep of his clenched fist knocked the ultra-violet sender and its coils and mirrors in a tinkling crash to the grid at my feet.

"We don't need that, whatever it is!"

He rubbed his knuckles where the violet waves had tinged them, and turned grimly back to Snap.

"Where are your Gamma ray mirrors? If the treasure

is exposed—"

This Martian's knowledge was far greater than we believed. He grinned sardonically at Anita. "If our treasure is on this hemisphere, Prince, we should pick up Gamma rays? Don't you think so? Or is Grantline so cautious it will all be protected?"

Anita spoke in a careful, throaty drawl. "The Gamma rays came plain enough when we passed here on the way out."

"You should know," grinned Miko. "An expert eavesdropper, Prince—I will say that for you. Come Dean, try something else. By God, if Grantline does not signal us, I will be likely to blame you—my patience is shortening. Shall we go closer, Haljan?"

"I don't think it would help," I said.

He nodded. "Perhaps not. Are we checked?"

"Yes." We were poised, very nearly motionless. "If you wish an advance, I can ring it. But we need a surface

destination now."

"True, Haljan." He stood thinking. "Would a zed-ray penetrate those crater-cliffs? Tycho, for instance, at this angle?"*

*[An allusion to the use of the zed-ray light for making spectro-photographs of what might be behind obscuring rock masses, similar to the old-style X-ray.]

"It might," Snap agreed. "You think he may be on the Northern inner side of Tycho?"

"He may be anywhere," said Miko shortly.

"If you think that," Snap persisted, "suppose we swing the *Planetara* over the South Pole. Tycho, viewed from there—"

"And take another quarter-day of time?" Miko sneered. "Flash on your zed-ray; help him hook it up, Haljan."

I moved to the lens-box of the spectroheliograph. It

seemed that Snap was very strangely reluctant: Was it because he knew that the Grantline camp lay concealed on the north inner wall of Tycho's giant ring? I thought so. But Snap flashed a queer look at Anita. She did not see it, but I did. And I could not understand it.

My accursed, witless incapacity! If only I had taken warning!

"Here," commanded Miko. "A score of 'graphs with the zed-ray. I tell you I will comb this surface if we have to stay here until our ship comes from Ferrok-Shahn to join us!"

The Martian brigands were coming. Miko's signals had been answered. In ten days the other brigand ship, adequately manned and armed, would be here.

Snap helped me connect the zed-ray. He did not dare even to whisper to me, with Moa hovering always so close. And for all Miko's sardonic smiling, we knew that he would tolerate nothing from us now. He was fully armed, and so was Moa.

I recall that Snap several times tried to touch me significantly. Oh, if only I had taken warning!

We finished our connecting. The dull gray point of zed-ray gleamed through the prisms, to mingle with the moonlight entering the main lens. I stood with the shutter trip.

"The same interval, Snap?"

"Yes."

Beside me, I was aware of a faint reflection of the zed-light—a gray Cathedral shaft crossing the helio-room and falling upon the opposite wall. An unreality there, as the zed-light faintly strove to penetrate the metal room-side.

I said, "Shall I make the exposure?"

Snap nodded. But that 'graph was never made. An exclamation from Moa made us all turn. The Gamma mirrors were quivering! Grantline had picked our signals! With what undoubtedly was an intensified

receiving equipment which Snap had not thought Grantline able to use, he had caught our faint zed-rays, which Snap was sending only to deceive Miko. And Grantline had recognized the *Planetara*, and had released his occulting screens surrounding the radium ore. The Gamma rays were here, unmistakable!

And upon their heels came Grantline's message. Not in the secret system he had arranged with Snap, but unsuspectingly in open code. I could read the swinging mirror, and so could Miko.

And Miko decoded it triumphantly aloud:

"Surprised but pleased your return. Approach Mid-Northern hemisphere, region of Archimedes, forty thousand toises off nearest Apennine range."*

*[About fifty miles.]

The message broke off. But even its importance was overshadowed. Miko stood in the center of the helio-room, triumphantly reading the light-indicator. Its

beam swung on the scale, which chanced to be almost directly over Anita's head. I saw Miko's expression change. A look of surprise, amazement came to him.

"Why—"

He gasped. He stood staring. Almost stupidly staring for an instant. And as I regarded him with fascinated horror, there came upon his heavy gray face a look of dawning comprehension. And I heard Snap's startled intake of breath. He moved to the spectroheliograph, where the zed-ray connections were still humming.

But with a leap Miko flung him away. "Off with you! Moa, watch him! Haljan, don't move!"

Again Miko stood staring. Oh dear God, I saw now that he was staring at Anita!

"Why George Prince! How strange you look!"

Anita did not move. She was stricken with horror: she shrank back against the wall, huddled in her cloak. Miko's sardonic voice came again:

"How strange you look. Prince!" He took a step forward. He was grim and calm. Horribly calm. Deliberate. Gloating—like a great gray monster in human form toying with a fascinated, imprisoned bird.

"Move just a little Prince. Let the zed-ray light fall more fully."

Anita's head was bare. That pale, Hamletlike face. Dear God, the zed-light reflection lay gray and penetrating upon it!

Miko took another step. Peering. Grinning. "How amazing, George Prince! Why, I can hardly believe it!"

Moa was armed with an electronic cylinder. For all her amazement—what turgid emotions sweeping her I can only guess—she never took her eyes from Snap and me.

"Back! Don't move, either of you!" She hissed it at us.

Then Miko leaped at Anita like giant gray leopard

pouncing.

"Away with that cloak, Prince!"

I stood cold and numbed. And realization came at last. The faint zed-light glow had fallen by chance upon Anita's face. Penetrated the flesh; exposed, faintly glowing, the bone-line of her jaw. Unmasked the waxen art of Glutz.

And Miko had seen it.

"Why George, how surprising! Away with that cloak!"

He seized her wrist, drew her forward, beyond the shaft of zed-light, into the brilliant light of the Moon. And ripped her cloak from her. The gentle curves of her woman's figure were so unmistakable!

And as Miko gazed at them, all his calm triumph swept away.

"Why, Anita!"

I heard Moa mutter: "So that is it?" A venomous flashing look—a shaft from me to Anita and back again. "So that is it?"

"Why, *Anita!*"

Miko's great arms gathered her up as though she were a child. "So I have you back; from the dead delivered back to me!"

"Gregg!" Snap's warning, and his grip over my shoulders brought me a measure of sanity. I had tensed to spring. I stood quivering, and Moa thrust her weapon against my face. The helio mirrors were swaying again with another message from Grantline. But it came ignored by us all.

In the glare of moonlight by the forward window, Miko held Anita, his great hands pawing her with triumphant possessive caresses.

"So, little Anita, you are given back to me."

Against her futile struggles he held her.

Dear God, if only I had had the wit to have prevented this!

Chapter 20 The Grantline Camp

In the mid-northern hemisphere upon the Earthward side of the Moon, the giant crater of Archimedes stood brooding in silent majesty. Grim, lofty walls, broken, pitted and scarred, rising precipitous to the upper circular rim. Night had just fallen. The sunlight clung to the crater-heights; it tinged with flame the jagged peaks of the Apennine Mountains which rose in tiers at the horizon; and it flung great inky shadows over the intervening lowlands.

Northward, the Mare Imbrium stretched mysterious and purple, its million rills and ridges and crater holes flattened by distance and the gathering darkness into a seeming level surface. The night slowly deepened. The dead-black vault of the sky blazed with its brilliant starry gems. The gibbous Earth hung high above the horizon, motionless, save for the invisible pendulum sway over the tiny arc, of its libration: widening to quadrature, casting upon the

bleak naked Lunar landscape its mellow Earth-glow.

Slow, measured process, this coming of the Lunar night! For an Earth-day the sunset slowly faded on the Apennines; the poised Earth widened a little further—an Earth-day of time, with the Earth-disc visibly rotating, the faint tracery of its oceans and continents passing in slow, majestic review.

Another Earth-day interval. Then another. And another. Full night now enveloped Archimedes. Splotches of Earth-light and starlight sheen slowly shifted as the night advanced.

Between the great crater and the nearby mountains, the broken, pseudo-level lowlands lay wan in the Earth-light. A few hundred miles, as distance would be measured upon Earth. A million million rills were here. Valleys and ridges, ravines, sharp-walled canyons, cliffs and crags—tiny craters like pockmarks.

Naked, gray porous rock everywhere. This denuded landscape! Cracked and scarred and tumbled, as

though some inexorable Titan torch had seared and crumbled and broken it, left it now congealed like a wind-lashed sea abruptly frozen into immobility.

Moonlight upon Earth so gently shines to make romantic a lover's smile! But the reality of the Lunar night is cold beyond human rationality. Cold and darkly silent. Grim desolation. Awesome. Majestic. A frowning majesty that even to the most intrepid human beholder is inconceivably forbidding.

And there were humans here now. On this tumbled plain, between Archimedes and the mountains, one small crater amid the million of its fellows was distinguished this night by the presence of humans. The Grantline camp! It huddled in the deepest purple shadows on the side of a bowl-like pit, a crudely circular orifice with a scant two miles across its rippling rim. There was faint light here to mark the presence of the living intruders. The blue-glow radiance of Morrell tube-lights under a spread of glassite.

The Grantline camp stood mid-way up one of the

inner cliff-walls of the little crater. The broken, rock-strewn floor, two miles wide, lay five hundred feet below the camp. Behind it, the jagged precipitous cliff rose another five hundred to the heights of the upper rim. A broad level shelf hung midway up the cliff, and upon it Grantline had built his little group of glassite dome shelters. Viewed from above there was the darkly purple crater floor, the upflung circular rim where the Earth-light tinged the spires and crags with yellow sheen; and on the shelf, like a huddled group of birds nests, Grantline's domes clung and gazed down upon the inner valley.

Intricate task, the building of these glassite shelters! There were three. The main one stood close at the brink of the ledge. A quadrangle of glassite walls, a hundred feet in length by half as wide, and a scant ten feet high to its flat-arched dome roof. Built for this purpose in Great-New York, Grantline had brought his aluminite girders and braces and the glassite panels in sections.

The air here on the Moon surface was negligible—a scant one five-thousandth of the atmospheric

pressure at the sea-level on Earth. But within the glassite shelter, a normal Earth-pressure must be maintained. Rigidly braced double walls to withstand the explosive tendency, with no external pressure to counteract it. A tremendous necessity for mechanical equipment had burdened Grantline's small ship to its capacity. The chemistry of manufactured air, the pressure equalizers, renewers, respirators, the lighting and temperature-maintenance systems—all the mechanics of a space-flyer were here.

And within the glassite double walls, there was necessity for a constant circulation of the Erentz temperature insulating system.*

*[An intricate system of insulation against extremes of temperature, developed by the Erentz Kinetic Energy Corporation in the twenty-first century. Within the hollow double shell of a shelter-wall, or an explorer's helmet-suit, or a space-flyer's hull, an oscillating semi-vacuum current was maintained--an extremely rarified air, magnetically charged, and maintained in rapid oscillating motion. Across this field the outer cold, or heat, as the case might be, could penetrate

only with slow radiation. This Erentz system gave the most perfect temperature insulation known in its day. Without it, interplanetary flight would have been impossible.

And it served a double purpose. Developed at first for temperature insulation only, the Erentz system surprisingly brought to light one of the most important discoveries made in the realm of physics of the century. It was found that any flashing, oscillating current, whether electronic, or the semi-vacuum of rarified air--or even a thin sheet of whirling fluid--gave also a pressure-insulation. The kinetic energy of the rapid movement was found to absorb within itself the latent energy of the unequal pressure.

(The intricate postulates and mathematical formulae necessary to demonstrate the operation of the physical laws involved would be out of place here.)

The *Planetara* was so equipped, against the explosive tendency of its inner air-pressures when flying in the near-vacuum of space. In the case of Grantline's glassite shelters, the latent energy of his room

interior air pressure went largely into a kinetic energy which in practical effect resulted only in the slight acceleration of the vacuum current, and thus never reached the outer wall. The Erentz engineers claimed for their system a pressure absorption of 97.4%, leaving, in Grantline's case, only 2.6% of room pressure to be held by the building's aluminite bracers.

It may be interesting to note in this connection that without the Erentz system as a basis, the great sub-sea developments on Earth and Mars of the twenty-first century would also have been impossible. Equipped with a fluid circulation device of the Erentz principle within its double hull, the first submarine was able to penetrate the great ocean deeps, withstanding the tremendous ocean pressures at depths of four thousand fathoms.]

There was this main Grantline building, stretching low and rectangular along the front edge of the ledge. Within it were living rooms, messroom and kitchen. Fifty feet behind it, connected by a narrow passage of glassite, was a similar, though smaller structure. The

mechanical control rooms, with their humming, vibrating mechanisms were here. And an instrument room with signaling apparatus, senders, receivers, mirror-grids and audiphones of several varieties; and an electro-telescope, small but modern, with dome overhead like a little Earth observatory.

From this instrument building, beside the connecting pedestrian passage, wire cables for light, and air-tubes and strings and bundles of instrument wires ran to the main structure—gray snakes upon the porous, gray Lunar rock.

The third building seemed a lean-to banked against the cliff-wall, a slanting shed-wall of glassite fifty feet high and two hundred in length. Under it, for months Grantline's borers had dug into the cliff. Braced tunnels were here, penetrating back and downward into this vein of radio-active rock.

The work was over now. The borers had been dismantled and packed away. At one end of the cliff the mining equipment lay piled in a litter. There was a heap of discarded ore where Grantline had carted and

dumped it after his first crude refining process had yielded it as waste. The ore-slag lay like gray powder-flakes strewn down the cliff. Tracks and ore-carts along the ledge stood discarded, mute evidence of the weeks and months of work these helmeted miners had undergone, struggling upon this airless, frowning world.

But now all that was finished. The radio-active ore was sufficiently concentrated. It lay—this treasure—in a seventy-foot pile behind the glassite lean-to, with a cage of wires over it and an insulation barrage guarding its Gamma rays from escaping to mark its presence.

The ore-shelter was dark; the other two buildings were lighted. And there were small lights mounted at intervals about the camp and along the edge of the ledge. A spider ladder, with tiny platforms some twenty feet one above the other, hung precariously to the cliff-face. It descended the five hundred feet to the crater floor; and, behind the camp, it mounted the jagged cliff-face to the upper rim-height, where a small observatory platform was placed.

Such was the outer aspect of the Grantline Treasure Camp near the beginning of this Lunar night, when, unbeknown to Grantline and his score of men, the *Planetara* with its brigands was approaching. The night was perhaps a sixth advanced. Full night. No breath of cloud to mar the brilliant starry heavens. The quadrant Earth hung poised like a giant mellow moon over Grantline's crater. A bright Earth, yet no air was here on this Lunar surface to spread its light. Only a glow, mingling with the spots of blue tube-light on the poles along the cliff, and the radiance from the lighted buildings.

The crater floor was dimly purple. Beyond the opposite upper rim, from the camp-height, the towering top of distant Archimedes was visible.

No evidence of movement showed about the silent camp. Then a pressure door in an end of the main building opened its tiny series of locks. A bent figure came out. The lock closed. The figure straightened and gazed about the camp. Grotesque, bloated semblance of a man! Helmeted, with rounded domehood suggestion of an ancient sea diver, yet goggled

and trunked like a gas-masked fighter of the twentieth century war.

He stooped presently and disconnected metal weights which were upon his shoes.*

*[Within the Grantline buildings it was found more convenient to use a gravity normal to Earth. This was maintained by the wearing of metal-weighted shoes and metal-loaded belt. The Moon-gravity is normally approximately one-sixth the gravity of Earth.]

Then he stood erect again, and with giant strides bounded along the cliff. Fantastic figure in the blue-lit gloom! A child's dream of crags and rocks and strange lights with a single monstrous figure in seven-league boots.

He went the length of the ledge with his twenty-foot strides, inspected the lights, and made adjustments. Came back, and climbed with agile, bounding leaps up the spider ladder to the dome on the crater top. A light flashed on up there. Then it was extinguished.

The goggled, bloated figure came leaping down after a moment. Grantline's exterior watchman making his rounds. He came back to the main building. Fastened the weights on his shoes. Signaled within.

The lock opened. The figure went inside.

It was early evening, after the dinner hour and before the time of sleep, according to the camp routine Grantline was maintaining. Nine P. M. of Earth Eastern-American time, recorded now upon his Earth chronometer. In the living room of the main building Johnny Grantline sat with a dozen of his men dispersed about the room, whiling away as best they could the lonesome hours.

"All as usual. This cursed Moon! When I get home—if ever I do get home—"

"Say your say, Wilks. But you'll spend your share of the gold-leaf and thank your constellations that you had your chance!"

"Let him alone! Come on, Wilks, take a hand here.

This game is no good with three."

The man who had been outside flung his hissing helmet recklessly to the floor and unsealed his suit.

"Here, get me out of this. No, I won't play. I can't play your cursed game with nothing at stake!"

"Commissioner's orders."

A laugh went up at the sharp look Johnny Grantline flung from where he sat reading in a corner of the room.

"Commander's orders. No gambling gold-leafers tolerated here."

"Play the game, Wilks." Grantline said quietly. "We all know it's infernal doing nothing."

"He's been struck by Earth-light," another man laughed. "Commander, I told you not to let that guy Wilks out at night."

A rough but good-natured lot of men. Jolly and

raucous by nature in their leisure hours. But there was too much leisure here now. Their mirth had a hollow sound. In older times, explorers of the frozen polar zones had to cope with inactivity, loneliness and despair. But at least they were on their native world. The grimness of the Moon was eating into the courage of Grantline's men. An unreality here. A weirdness. These fantastic crags. The deadly silence. The nights, almost two weeks of Earth-time in length, congealed by the deadly frigidity of Space. The days of black sky, blaring stars and flaming Sun, with no atmosphere to diffuse the daylight. Days of weird blending sheen of illumination with most of the Sun's heat radiating so swiftly from the naked Lunar surface that the outer temperature still was cold. And day and night, always the familiar beloved Earth-disc hanging poised up near the zenith. From thinnest crescent to full Earth, and then steadily back again to crescent.

All so abnormal, irrational, disturbing to human senses. With the mining work over, an irritability grew upon Grantline's men. And perhaps since the

human mind is so wonderful, elusive a thing, there lay upon these men an indefinable sense of impending disaster. Johnny Grantline felt it. He thought about it now as he sat in the room corner watching Wilks being forced into the plaget-game, and he found it strong within him. Unreasonable, ominous depression! Barring the accident which had disabled his little space-ship when they reached this small crater hole, his expedition had gone well. His instruments, and the information he had from the former explorers, had picked up the ore-vein with a scant month of search.

The vein had now been exhausted; but the treasure was here. Nothing was left but to wait for the *Planetara*. The men were talking of that now.

"She ought to be well mid-way from here to Ferrok-Shahn by now. When do you figure she'll be back here, and signal us?"

"Twenty days. Give her another five now to Mars, and five in port. That's ten. We'll pick her signals in three weeks, mark me."

"Three weeks! Just give me three weeks of reasonable sunrise and sunset! This cursed Moon! You mean, Williams, next daylight."

"Hah! He's inventing a Lunar language. You'll be a Moon-man yet, if you live here long enough."

Olaf Swenson, the big blond fellow from the Scandia fiords, came and flung himself down by Grantline.

"Ay tank they bane without not enough to do, Commander. If the ore yust would not give out—"

"Three weeks—it isn't very long, Ollie."

"No. Maybe not."

From across the room somebody was saying, "If the *Comet* hadn't smashed on us, damn me but I'd ask the Commander to let some of us take her back. The discarded equipment could go."

"Shut up, Billy. She is smashed."

The little *Comet*, cruising in search of the ore, had come to grief just as the ore was found. It lay now on the crater floor with its nose bashed into an upflung spire of rock. Wrecked beyond repair. Save for the pre-arrangement with the *Planetara*, the Grantline party would have been helpless here on the Moon. Knowledge of that—although no one ever suspected but that the *Planetara* would come safely—served to add to the men's depression. They were cut off, virtually helpless on a strange world. Their signalling devices were inadequate even to reach Earth. Grantline's power batteries were running low.* He could not attempt wide-flung signals without jeopardizing the power necessary for the routine of his camp in the event of the *Planetara* being delayed. Nor was his electro-telescope adequate to pick small objects at any great distance.**

*[The Gravely storage tanks—the power used by the Grantline expedition—were heavy and bulky affairs. Economy of space on the Comet allowed but few of them.]

**[Electro-telescopes of most modern use and power

were too large and used too much power to be available to Grantline.]

All of Grantline's effort, in truth, had gone into equipment for the finding and gathering of the treasure. The safety of the expedition had to that extent been neglected.

Swenson was mentioning that now.

"You all agreed to it," Johnny said shortly. "Every man here voted that, above everything, what we wanted was to get the radium."

A dynamic little fellow, this Johnny Grantline. Short of temper sometimes, but always just, and a perfect leader of men. In stature he was almost as small as Snap. But he was thick-set, with a smooth shaven, keen-eyed, square-jawed face, and a shock of brown tousled hair. A man of thirty-five, though the decision of his manner, the quiet dominance of his voice, made him seem older. He stood up now, surveying the blue-lit glassite room with its low ceiling close overhead. He was bowlegged; in movement he seemed to roll

with a stiff-legged gait like some sea captain of former days on the deck of his swaying ship. Queer-looking figure! Heavy flannel shirt and trousers, boots heavily weighted, and bulky metal-loaded belt strapped about his waist.

He grinned at Swenson. "When we divide this treasure, everyone will be happy, Ollie."

The treasure was estimated by Grantline to be the equivalent of ninety millions in gold-leaf. A hundred and ten millions in the gross as it now stood, with twenty millions to be deducted by the Federated Refiners for reducing it to the standard purity of commercial radium. Ninety millions, with only a million and a half to come off for expedition expenses, and the *Planetara* Company's share another million. A nice little stake.

Grantline strode across the room with his rolling gait.

"Cheer up, boys. Who's winning there? I say, you fellows—"

An audiphone buzzer interrupted him, a call from the duty man in the instrument room of the nearby building.

Grantline clicked the receiver. The room fell into silence. Any call was unusual—nothing ever happened here in the camp.

The duty man's voice sounded over the room.

"Signals coming! Not clear. Will you come over, Commander?"

Signals!

It was never Grantline's way to enforce needless discipline. He offered no objection when every man in the camp rushed through the connecting passages. They crowded the instrument room where the tense duty man sat bending over his helio receivers. The mirrors were swaying.

The duty man looked up and met Grantline's gaze.

"I ran it up to the highest intensity. Commander. We ought to get it—not let it pass."

"Low scale, Peter?"

"Yes. Weakest infra-red. I'm bringing it up, even though it uses too much of our power." The duty man was apologetic.

"Get it," said Grantline shortly.

"I had a swing a minute ago. I think it's the *Planetara*."

"*Planetara!*" The crowding group of men chorused it. How could it be the *Planetara*?

But it was. The call presently came in clear. Unmistakably the *Planetara*, turned back now from her course to Ferrok-Shahn.

"How far away, Peter?"

The duty man consulted the needles of his dial scale.

"Close! Very weak infra-red. But close. Around thirty thousand miles, maybe. It's Snap Dean calling."

The *Planetara* here within thirty thousand miles! Excitement and pleasure swept the room. The *Planetara's* coming had for so long been awaited so eagerly!

The excitement communicated to Grantline. It was unlike him to be incautious; yet now with no thought save that some unforeseen and pleasing circumstance had brought the *Planetara* ahead of time; incautious Grantline certainly was.

"Raise the ore-barrage."

"I'll go! My suit is here."

A willing volunteer rushed out to the ore-shed. The Gamma rays, which in the helio-room of the *Planetara* came so unwelcome to Snap and me, were loosed.

"Can you send, Peter?" Grantline demanded.

"Yes, with more power."

"Use it."

Johnny dictated the message of his location which we received. In his incautious excitement he ignored the secret code.

An interval passed. The ore was occulted again. No message had come from us—just Snap's routine signal in the weak infra-red, which we hoped Grantline would not get.

The men crowding Grantline's instrument room waited in tense silence. Then Grantline tried the telescope. Its current weakened the lights with the drain upon the distributors, and cooled the room with a sudden deadly chill as the Erentz insulating system slowed down.

The duty man looked suddenly frightened. "You'll bulge out our walls, Commander. The internal pressure—"

"We'll chance it."

They picked up the image of the *Planetara*! It came from the telescope and shone clear on the grid—the segment of star-field with a tiny, cigar-shaped blob. Clear enough to be unmistakable. The *Planetara*! Here now over the Moon, almost directly overhead, poised at what the altimeter scale showed to be a fraction under thirty thousand miles.

The men gazed in awed silence. The *Planetara* coming....

But the altimeter needle was motionless. The *Planetara* was hanging poised.

A sudden gasp went about the room. The men stood with whitening faces, gazing at the *Planetara's* image. And at the altimeter needle. It was moving. The *Planetara* was descending. But not with an orderly swoop.

The image showed the ship clearly. The bow tilted up, then dipped down. But then in a moment it swung up

again. The ship turned partly over. Righted itself. Then swayed again, drunkenly.

The watching men were stricken into horrified silence. The *Planetara's* image momentarily, horribly, grew larger. Swaying. Then turning completely over, rotating slowly end over end.

The *Planetara*, out of control, was falling!

Chapter 21 The Wreck of the Planetara

On the *Planetara*, in the helio-room, Snap and I stood with Moa's weapon upon us. Miko held Anita.

Triumphant. Possessive. Then as she struggled, a gentleness came to this strange Martian giant. Perhaps he really loved her. Looking back on it, I sometimes think so.

"Anita, do not fear me." He held her away from him. "I would not harm you. I want your love." Irony came to him. "And I thought I had killed you! But it was only your brother."

He partly turned. I was aware of how alert was his attention. He grinned. "Hold them, Moa—don't let them do anything foolish. So, Anita, you were masquerading to spy upon me? That was wrong of you." He was again ironic.

Anita had not spoken. She held herself tensely away from Miko; she had flashed me a look—just one. What horrible mischance to have brought this catastrophe!

The completion of Grantline's message had come unnoticed by us all.

"Look! Grantline again!" Snap said abruptly.

But the mirrors were steadying. We had no recording-tape apparatus; the rest of the message was lost. The mirrors pulsed and then steadied.

No further message came. There was an interval while Miko waited. He held Anita in the hollow of his great arm.

"Quiet, little bird. Do not fear me. I have work to do,

Anita—this is our great adventure. We will be rich, you and I. All the luxuries three worlds can offer, all for us when this is over. Careful, Moa! This Haljan has no wit."

Well could he say it! I, who had been so witless to let this come upon us! Moa's weapon prodded me. Her voice hissed at me with all the venom of a reptile enraged. "So that was your game, Gregg Haljan! And I was so graceless to admit love for you!"

Snap murmured in my ear, "Don't move, Gregg! She's reckless."

She heard it. She whirled on him. "We have lost George Prince, it seems. Well, we will survive without his ore knowledge. And you, Dean—and this Haljan—mark me, I will kill you both if you cause trouble!"

Miko was gloating. "Don't kill them yet, Moa. What was it Grantline said? Near the crater of Archimedes? Ring us down, Haljan! We'll land."

He signaled the turret. Gave Coniston the Grantline

message, and audiphoned it below to Hahn. The news spread about the ship. The bandits were jubilant.

"We'll land now, Haljan. Ring us down. Come, Anita and I will go with you to the turret."

I found my voice. "To what destination?"

"Near Archimedes. The Apennine side. Keep well away from the Grantline camp. We will probably sight it as we descend."

There was no trajectory needed. We were almost over Archimedes now. I could drop us with a visible, instrumental course. My mind was whirling with a confusion of thoughts. What could we do? What could we dare attempt to do? I met Snap's gaze.

"Ring us down, Gregg," he said quietly.

I nodded. I pushed Moa's weapon away. "You don't need that. I obey orders."

We went to the turret. Moa watched me and Snap, a

grim, cold Amazon. She avoided looking at Anita, whom Miko helped down the ladders with a strange mixture of courtierlike grace and amused irony. Coniston gazed at Anita with falling jaw.

"I say! Not George Prince? The girl—"

"No time for argument now," Miko commanded. "It's the girl, masquerading as her brother. Get below, Coniston. Haljan takes us down."

The astounded Englishman continued gazing at Anita. "I mean to say, where to on the Moon? Not to encounter Grantline at once, Miko? Our equipment is not ready."

"Of course not. We will land well away. He won't be suspicious—we can signal him again after we land. We will have time to plan, to assemble the equipment. Get below, I told you."

The reluctant Coniston left us. I took the controls. Miko, still holding Anita as though she were a child, sat beside me. "We will watch him, little Anita. A

skilled fellow at this sort of work."

I rang my signals for the shifting of the gravity plates. The answer should have come from below within a second or two. But it did not. Miko regarded me with his great bushy eyebrows upraised.

"Ring again, Haljan."

I duplicated. No answer. The silence was frightening. Ominous.

Miko muttered, "That accursed Hahn. Ring again!"

I sent the imperative emergency demand.

No answer. A second or two. Then all of us in the turret were startled. Transfixed. From below came a sudden hiss. It sounded in the turret: it came from shifting-room call-grid. The hissing of the pneumatic valves of the plate-shifters in the lower control room. The valves were opening; the plates automatically shifting into neutral, and disconnecting!

An instant of startled silence. Miko may have realized the significance of what had happened. Certainly Snap and I did. The hissing ceased. I gripped the emergency plate-shifter switch which hung over my head. Its disc was dead! The plates were dead in neutral. In the positions they were only placed while in port! And their shifting mechanisms were imperative!

I was on my feet. "Snap! Good God, we're in neutral!"

Miko, if he had not realized it before, was aware of it now. The Moon-disc moved visibly as the *Planetara* lurched. The vault of the heavens was slowly swinging.

Miko ripped out a heavy oath. "Haljan! What is this?"

He stood up, still holding Anita. But there was nothing that he could do in this emergency. "Haljan—what—"

The heavens turned with a giant swoop. The Moon was over us. It swung in dizzying arc. Overhead, then

back past our stern; under us, then appearing over our bow.

The *Planetara* had turned over. Upending. Rotating, end over end.

For a moment or two I think all of us in that turret stood and clung. The Moon-disc, the Earth, Sun and all the stars were swinging past our windows. So horribly dizzying. The *Planetara* seemed lurching and tumbling. But it was an optical effect only. I stared with grim determination at my feet. The turret seemed to steady.

Then I looked again. That horrible swoop of all the heavens! And the Moon, as it went past, seemed expanded. We were falling! Out of control, with the Moon-gravity pulling us inexorably down!

"That accursed Hahn—" Miko, stricken with his lack of knowledge of these controls, was wholly confused.

A moment only had passed. My fancy that the Moon-disc was enlarged was merely the horror of my

imagination. We had not fallen far enough yet for that.

But we were falling. Unless I could do something, we would crash upon the Lunar surface.

Anita, killed in this *Planetara* turret. The end of everything for us.

Action came to me. I gasped, "Miko, you stay here! The controls are dead! You stay here—hold Anita."

I ignored Moa's weapon which she was still clutching mechanically. Snap thrust her away.

"Sit back! Let us alone! We're falling! Don't you understand?"

This deadly danger, to level us all! No longer were we captors and captured. Not brigands for this moment. No thought of Grantline's treasure! Trapped humans only! Leveled by the common, instinct of self-preservation. Trapped here together, fighting for our lives.

Miko gasped. "Can you—check us? What happened?"

"I don't know. I'll try."

I stood clinging. This dizzying whirl! From the audiphone grid Coniston's voice sounded.

"I say, Haljan, something's wrong! Hahn doesn't signal."

The look-out in the forward tower was clinging to his window. On the deck below our turret a member of the crew appeared, stood lurching for a moment, then shouted, and turned and ran, swaying, aimless. From the lower hull-corridors our grids sounded with the tramping of running steps. Panic among the crew was spreading over the ship. A chaos below decks.

I pulled at the emergency switch again. Dead....

But down below there was the manual controls.

"Snap, we must get down. The signals."

"Yes."

Coniston's voice came like a scream from the grid.
"Hahn is dead—the controls are broken! Hahn is dead!"

We barely heard him. I shouted, "Miko—hold Anita!
Come on, Snap!"

We clung to the ladders. Snap was behind me.
"Careful, Gregg! Good God!"

This dizzying whirl. I tried not to look. The deck under me was now a blurred kaleidoscope of swinging patches of moonlight and shadow.

We reached the deck. Ran, swaying, lurching.

It seemed that from the turret Anita's voice followed us. "Be careful!"

Within the ship our senses steadied. With the rotating, reeling, heavens shut out, there were only the shouts and tramping steps of the panic-stricken

crew to mark that anything was amiss. That, and a pseudo-sensation of lurching caused by the pulsing of gravity—a pull when the Moon was beneath our hull to combine its force with our magnetizers; a lightening when it was overhead. A throbbing, pendulum lurch—that was all.

We ran down to the corridor incline. A white-faced member of the crew, came running up.

"What's happened? Haljan, what's happened?"

"We're falling!" I gripped him. "Get below. Come on with us!"

But he jerked away from me. "Falling?"

A steward came running. "Falling? My God!"

Snap swung at them. "Get ahead of us! The manual controls—our only chance—we need all you men at the compressor pumps!"

But it was an instinct to try and get on deck, as

though here below we were rats caught in a trap. The men tore away from me and ran. Their shouts of panic resounded through the dim, blue-lit corridors.

Coniston came lurching from the control room. "I say —falling! Haljan, my God, look at him!"

Hahn was sprawled at the gravity-plate switchboard. Sprawled, head-down. Dead. Killed by something? Or a suicide?

I bent over him. His hands gripped the main switch. He had ripped it loose. And his left hand had reached and broken the fragile line of tubes that intensified the current of the pneumatic plate-shifters. A suicide? With his last frenzy determined to kill us all?

Then I saw that Hahn had been killed! Not a suicide! In his hand he gripped a small segment of black fabric, a piece torn from an invisible cloak? Was it?

The questions were swept away by the necessity for action. Snap was rigging the hand-compressors. If he could get the pressure back in the tanks....

I swung on Coniston. "You armed?"

"Yes." He was white-faced and confused, but not in a panic. He showed me his heat-ray cylinder. "What do you want me to do?"

"Round up the crew. Get all you can. Bring them here to man these pumps."

He dashed away. Snap shouted after him. "Kill them down if they argue!"

Miko's voice sounded from the turret call grid:
"Falling! Haljan, you can see it now! Check us!"

I did not answer that. I pumped with Snap.

Desperate moments. Or was it an hour? Coniston brought the men. He stood over them with menacing weapon.

We had all the pumps going. The pressure rose a little in the tanks. Enough to shift a bow-plate. I tried it. The plate slowly clicked into a new combination. A

gravity repulsion just in the bow-tip.

I signaled Miko. "Have we stopped swinging?"

"No. But slower."

I could feel it, that lurch of the gravity. But not steady now. A limp. The tendency of our bow was to stay up.

"More pressure, Snap."

"Yes."

One of the crew rebelled, tried to bolt from the room.

"God, we'll crash, caught in here!"

Coniston shot him down.

I shifted another bow-plate. Then two in the stern. The stern-plates seemed to move more readily than the others.

"Run all the stern-plates," Snap advised.

I tried it. The lurching stopped. Miko called. "We're

bow down. Falling!"

But not falling free. The Moon-gravity pull upon us was more than half neutralized.

"I'll go up, Snap, and try the engines. You don't mind staying down? Executing my signals?"

"You idiot!" He gripped my shoulders. His eyes were gleaming, his face haggard, but his pale lips twitched with a smile.

"Maybe it's good-by, Gregg. We'll fall—fighting."

"Yes. Fighting. Coniston, you keep the pressure up."

With the broken set-tubes it took nearly all the pressure to maintain the few plates I had shifted. One slipped back to neutral. Then the pumps gained on it, and it shifted again.

I dashed up to the deck. Ah, the Moon was so close now! So horribly close! The deck shadows were still. Through the forward bow windows the Moon surface

glared up at us.

I reached the turret. The *Planetara* was steady. Pitched bow-down, half falling, half sliding like a rocket downward. The scarred surface of the Moon spread wide under us.

These last horrible minutes were a blur. And there was always Anita's face. She left Miko. Faced with death, he sat clinging. Ignoring her, Moa, too, sat apart. Staring—

And Anita crept to me. "Gregg, dear one. The end...."

I tried the electronic engines from the stern, setting them in the reverse. The streams of their light glowed from the stern, forward along our hull, and flared down from our bow toward the Lunar surface. But no atmosphere was here to give resistance. Perhaps the electronic streams checked our fall a little. The pumps gave us pressure, just in the last minutes, to slide a few of the hull-plates. But our bow stayed down. We slid, like a spent rocket falling.

I recall the horror of that expanding Lunar surface.
The maw of Archimedes yawning. A blob. Widening to
a great pit. Then I saw it was to one side. Rushing
upward.

A phantasmagoria of uprushing crags. Black and gray.
Spires tinged with Earth-light.

"Gregg, dear one—good-by."

Her gentle arms around me. The end of everything for
us. I recall murmuring, "Not falling free, Anita. Some
hull-plates are set."

My dials showed another plate shifting, checking us a
little further. Good old Snap.

I calculated the next best plate to shift. I tried it. Slid
it over. Good old Snap....

Then everything faded but the feeling of Anita's arms
around me.

"Gregg, dear one—"

The end of everything for us....

There was an up-rush of gray-black rock.

An impact....

Chapter 22 The Hiss of Death

I opened my eyes to a dark blur of confusion. My shoulder hurt—a pain shooting through it. Something lay like a weight on me. I could not seem to move my left arm. Very queer! Then I moved it, and it hurt. I was lying twisted: I sat up. And with a rush, memory came. The crash was over. I am not dead. Anita—

She was lying beside me. There was a little light here in this silent blur—a soft, mellow Earth-light filtering in the window. The weight on me was Anita. She lay sprawled, her head and shoulders half way across my lap.

Not dead! Thank God, not dead! She moved. Her arms went around me, and I lifted her. The Earth-light glowed on her pale face; but her eyes opened and she

faintly smiled.

"It's past, Anita! We've struck, and we're still alive."

I held her as though all life's turgid danger were powerless to touch us.

But in the silence my floating senses were brought back to reality by a faint sound forcing itself upon me. A little hiss. The faintest murmuring breath like a hiss. Escaping air!

I cast off her clinging arms. "Anita, this is madness!"

For minutes we must have been lying there in the heaven of our embrace. But air was escaping! The *Planetara's* dome was broken—or cracked—and our precious air was hissing out.

Full reality came to me at last. I was not seriously injured. I found that I could move freely. I could stand. A twisted shoulder, a limp left arm, but they were better in a moment.

And Anita did not seem to be hurt. Blood was upon her. But not her blood.

Beside Anita, stretched face down on the turret grid, was the giant figure of Miko. The blood lay in a small pool against his face. A widening pool.

Moa was here. I thought her body twitched; then was still. This soundless wreckage! In the dim glow of the wrecked turret with its two motionless, broken human figures, it seemed as though Anita and I were ghouls prowling. I saw that the turret had fallen over to the *Planetara's* deck. It lay dashed against the dome-side.

The deck was aslant. A litter of wreckage. A broken human figure showed—one of the crew, who at the last must have come running up. The forward observation tower was down on the chart-room roof: in its metal tangle I thought I could see the legs of the tower look-out.

So this was the end of the brigands' adventure! The *Planetara's* last voyage! How small and futile are human struggles! Miko's daring enterprise—so

villainous, inhuman—brought all in a few moments to this silent tragedy. The *Planetara* had fallen thirty thousand miles. But why? What had happened to Hahn? And where was Coniston, down in this broken hull?

And Snap. I thought suddenly of Snap.

I clutched at my wandering wits. This inactivity was death. The escaping air hissed in my ears. Our precious air, escaping away into the vacant desolation of the Lunar emptiness. Through one of the twisted, slanting dome-windows a rocky spire was visible. The *Planetara* lay bow-down, wedged in a jagged cradle of Lunar rock. A miracle that the hull and dome had held together.

"Anita, we must get out of here!"

I thought I was fully alert now. I recalled that the brigands had spoken of having partly assembled their Moon equipment. If only we could find suits and helmets!

"We must get out," I repeated. "Get to Grantline's camp."

"Their helmets are in the forward storage room, Gregg. I saw them there."

She was staring at the fallen Miko and Moa. She shuddered and turned away and gripped me. "In the forward storage room, by the port of the emergency lock-exit."

If only the exit locks would operate! We must get out of here, but find Snap first. Good old Snap! Would we find him lying dead?

We climbed from the slanting, fallen turret, over the wreckage of the littered deck. It was not difficult, a lightness was upon us. The *Planetara's* gravity-magnetizers were dead: this was only the light Moon-gravity pulling us.

"Careful, Anita. Don't jump too freely."

We leaped along the deck. The hiss of the escaping

pressure was like a clanging gong of warning to tell us to hurry. The hiss of death so close!

"Snap—" I murmured.

"Oh, Gregg. I pray we may find him alive—!"

"And get out. We've got to rush it. Get out and find the Grantline camp."

But how far? Which way? I must remember to take food and water. If the helmets were equipped with admission ports. If we could find Snap. If the exit locks would work to let us out.

With a fifteen foot leap we cleared a pile of broken deck chairs. A man lay groaning near them. I went back with a rush. Not Snap! A steward. He had been a brigand, but he was a steward to me now.

"Get up! This is Haljan. Hurry, we must get out of here. The air is escaping!"

But he sank back and lay still. No time to find if I

could help him: there were Anita and Snap to save.

We found a broken entrance to one of the descending passages. I flung the debris aside and cleared it. Like a giant of strength with only this Moon-gravity holding me, I raised a broken segment of the superstructure and heaved it back.

Anita and I dropped ourselves down the sloping passage. The interior of the wrecked ship was silent and dim. An occasional passage light was still burning. The passage and all the rooms lay askew. Wreckage everywhere: but the double-dome and hull-shell had withstood the shock. Then I realized that the Erentz system was slowing down. Our heat, like our air, was escaping, radiating away, a deadly chill settling upon everything. And our walls were bulging. The silence and the deadly chill of death would soon be here in these wrecked corridors. The end of the *Planetara*. I wondered vaguely if the walls would explode.

We prowled like ghouls. We did not see Coniston. Snap had been by the shifter-pumps. We found him in

the oval doorway. He lay sprawled. Dead? No, he moved. He sat up before we could get to him. He seemed confused, but his senses clarified with the movement of our figures over him.

"Gregg! Why, Anita!"

"Snap! You're all right? We struck—the air is escaping."

He pushed me away. He tried to stand. "I'm all right. I was up a minute ago. Gregg, it's getting cold. Where is she? I had her here—she wasn't killed. I spoke to her."

Irrational!

"Snap!" I held him, shook him. "Snap, old fellow!"

He said, normally. "Easy, Gregg. I'm all right now."

Anita gripped him. "Who, Snap?"

"She! There she is."

Another figure was here! On the grid-floor by the door oval. A figure partly shrouded in a broken invisible cloak and hood. An invisible cloak! I saw a white face with opened eyes regarding me. The face of a girl.

Venza!

I bent down. "You!"

Anita cried, "Venza!"

Venza here? Why—how—my thoughts swept away. Venza here, dying? Her eyes closed. But she murmured to Anita. "Where is he? I want him."

Dying? I murmured impulsively, "Here I am, Venza dear." Gently, as one would speak with gentle sympathy to humor the dying. "Here I am, Venza."

But it was only the confusion of the shock upon her. And it was upon us all. She pushed at Anita. "I want him." She saw me. This whimsical Venus girl! Even here as we gathered, all of us blurred by the shock, confused in the dim, wrecked ship with the chill of

death coming—even here she could make a jest. Her pale lips smiled.

"You, Gregg. I'm not hurt—I don't think I'm hurt." She managed to get herself up on one elbow. "Did you think I wanted you with my dying breath? Why, what conceit! Not you, Handsome Haljan! I was calling Snap."

He was down to her. "We're all right, Venza. It's over. We must get out of the ship—the air is escaping."

We gathered in the oval doorway. We fought the confusion of panic.

"The exit port is this way."

Or was it? I answered Snap, "Yes, I think so."

The ship suddenly seemed a stranger to me. So cold. So vibrationless. Broken lights. These slanting, wrecked corridors. With the ventilating fans stilled, the air was turning fetid. Chilling. And thinning, with escaping pressure, rarifying so that I could feel the

grasp of it in my lungs and the pin-pricks of my burning cheeks.

We started off. Four of us, still alive in this silent ship of death. My blurred thoughts tried to cope with it all. Venza here. I recalled how she had bade me create a diversion when the women passengers were landing on the asteroid. She had carried out her purpose! In the confusion she had not gone ashore. A stowaway here. She had secured the cloak. Prowling, to try and help us, she had come upon Hahn. Had seized his ray-cylinder and struck him down, and been herself knocked unconscious by his dying lunge, which also had broken the tubes and wrecked the *Planetara*. And Venza, unconscious, had been lying here with the mechanism of her cloak still operating, so that we did not see her when we came and found why Hahn did not answer my signals.

"It's here, Gregg."

Snap and I lifted the pile of Moon equipment. We located four suits and helmets and the mechanisms to operate them.

"More are in the chart-room," Anita said.

But we needed no others. I robed Anita, and showed her the mechanisms.

"Yes. I understand."

Snap was helping Venza. We were all stiff from the cold; but within the suits and their pulsing currents, the blessed warmth came again.

The helmets had admission ports through which food and drink could be taken. I stood with my helmet ready. Anita, Venza and Snap were bloated and grotesque beside me. We had found food and water here, assembled in portable cases which the brigands had prepared. Snap lifted them, and signed to me he was ready.

My helmet shut out all sounds save my own breathing, my pounding heart, and the murmur of the mechanism. The blessed warmth and pure air were good.

We reached the hull port-locks. They operated! We went through in the light of the head-lamps over our foreheads.

I closed the locks after us. An instinct to keep the air in the ship for the other trapped humans lying there.

We slid down the sloping side of the *Planetara*. We were unweighted, irrationally agile with the slight gravity. I fell a dozen feet and landed with barely a jar.

We were out on the Lunar surface. A great sloping ramp of crags stretched down before us. Gray-black rock tinged with Earth-light. The Earth hung amid the stars in the blackness overhead like a huge section of glowing yellow ball.

This grim, desolate, silent landscape! Beyond the ramp, fifty feet below us, a tumbled naked plain stretched away into blurred distance. But I could see mountains off there. Behind us the towering, frowning rampart-wall of Archimedes loomed against the sky.

I had turned to look back at the *Planetara*. She lay broken, wedged between spires of upstanding rock. A few of her lights still gleamed. The end of the *Planetara*!



IMAGEDescription

The three grotesque figures of Anita, Venza and Snap

had started off. Hunchback figures with the tanks mounted on their shoulders. I bounded and caught them. I touched Snap. We made audiphone contact.

"Which way do you think?" I demanded.

"I think this way, down the ramp. Away from Archimedes, toward the mountains. It shouldn't be too far."

"You run with Venza. I'll hold Anita."

He nodded. "But we must keep together, Gregg."

We could soon run freely. Down the ramp, out over the tumbled plain. Bounding, grotesque leaping strides. The girls were more agile, more skilful. They were soon leading us. The Earth-shadows of their figures leaped beside them. The *Planetara* faded into the distance behind us. Archimedes stood back there. Ahead, the mountains came closer.

An hour perhaps. I lost count of time. Occasionally we stopped to rest. Were we going toward the Grantline

camp? Would they see our tiny waving headlights?

Another interval. Then far ahead of us on the ragged plain, lights showed! Moving tiny spots of light! Headlights on helmeted figures!

We ran, monstrously leaping. A group of figures were off there. Grantline's party? Snap gripped me.

"Grantline! We're safe, Gregg! Safe!"

He took his bulb-light from his helmet: we stood in a group while he waved it. A semaphore signal.

"*Grantline?*"

And the answer came. "*Yes. You, Dean?*"

Their personal code. No doubt of this—it was Grantline, who had seen the *Planetara* fall and had come to help us.

I stood then with my hand holding Anita. And I whispered, "It's Grantline! We're safe, Anita, my

darling!"

Death had been so close! Those horrible last minutes on the *Planetara* had shocked us, marked us.

We stood trembling. And Grantline and his men came bounding up.

A helmeted figure touched me. I saw through the helmet-pane the visage of a stern-faced, square-jawed, youngish man.

"Grantline? Johnny Grantline?"

"Yes," said his voice at my ear-grid. "I'm Grantline. You're Haljan? Gregg Haljan?"

They crowded around us. Gripped us to hear our explanations.

Brigands! It was amazing to Johnny Grantline. But the menace was over now, over as soon as Grantline had realized its existence. As though the wreck of the *Planetara* were foreordained by an all-wise

Providence, the brigands' adventure had come to tragedy.

We stood for a time discussing it. Then I drew apart, leaving Snap with Grantline. And Anita joined me. I held her arm so that we had audiphone contact.

"Anita, mine."

"Gregg, dear one."

Murmured nothings which mean so much to lovers!

As we stood in the fantastic gloom of the Lunar desolation, with the blessed Earth-light on us, I sent up a prayer of thankfulness. Not that a hundred millions of treasure were saved. Not that the attack upon Grantline had been averted. But only that Anita was given back to me. In moments of greatest emotion the human mind individualizes. To me, there was only Anita.

Life is very strange! The gate to the shining garden of our love seemed swinging wide to let us in. Yet I

recall that a vague fear still lay on me. A premonition?

I felt a touch on my arm. A bloated helmet visor was thrust near my own. I saw Snap's face peering at me.

"Grantline thinks we should return to the *Planetara*. Might find some of them alive."

Grantline touched me. "It's only humanity."

"Yes," I said.

We went back. Some ten of us—a line of grotesque figures bounding with slow, easy strides over the jagged, rock-strewn plain. Our lights danced before us.

The *Planetara* came at last into view. My ship. Again that pang swept me as I saw her. This, her last resting place. She lay here in her open tomb, shattered, broken, unbreathing. The lights on her were extinguished. The Erentz system had ceased to pulse—the heart of the dying ship, for a while beating faintly, but now at rest.

We left the two girls with some of Grantline's men at the admission port. Snap, Grantline and I, with three others, went inside. There still seemed to be air, but not enough so that we dared remove our helmets.

It was dark inside the wrecked ship. The corridors were black; the hull control-rooms were dimly illumined with Earth-light straggling through the windows.

This littered tomb! Already cold and silent with death. We stumbled over a fallen figure. A member of the crew.

Grantline straightened from examining him.

"Dead."

Earth-light fell on the horrible face. Puffed flesh, bloated red from the blood which had oozed from its pores in the thinning air. I looked away.

We prowled further. Hahn lay dead in the pump-room.

The body of Coniston should have been near here. We did not see it.

We climbed up to the slanting littered deck. The dome had not exploded, but the air up here had almost all hissed away.

Again Grantline touched me. "That the turret?"

"Yes."

No wonder he asked! The wreckage was all so formless.

We climbed after Snap into the broken turret room. We passed the body of that steward who just at the end had appealed to me and I had left dying. The legs of the forward look-out still poked grotesquely up from the wreckage of the observatory tower where it lay smashed down against the roof of the chart-room.

We shoved ourselves into the turret. What was this? No bodies here! The giant Miko was gone! The pool of his blood lay congealed into a frozen dark splotch on

the metal grid.

And Moa was gone! They had not been dead. Had dragged themselves out of here, fighting desperately for life. We would find them somewhere around here.

But we did not. Nor Coniston. I recalled what Anita had said: other suits and helmets had been here in the nearby chart-room. The brigands had taken them, and food and water doubtless, and escaped from the ship, following us through the lower admission ports only a few minutes after we had gone out.

We made careful search of the entire ship. Eight of the bodies which should have been here were missing: Miko, Moa, Coniston, and five of the steward-crew.

We did not find them outside. They were hiding near here, no doubt, more willing to take their chances than to yield now to us. But how, in all this Lunar desolation, could we hope to locate them?

"No use," said Grantline. "Let them go. If they want

death—well, they deserve it."

But we were saved. Then, as I stood there, realization leaped at me. Saved? Were we not indeed fatuous fools?

In all these emotion-swept moments since we had encountered Grantline, memory of that brigand ship coming from Mars had never once occurred to Snap or me!

I told Grantline now. His eyes through the visor stared at me blankly.

"What!"

I told him again. It would be here in eight days. Fully manned and armed.

"But Haljan, we have almost no weapons! All my *Comet's* space was taken with mining equipment and the mechanisms for my camp. I can't signal Earth! I was depending on the *Planetara*!"

It surged upon us. The brigand menace past? We were blindly congratulating ourselves on our safety! But it would be eight days or more before in distant Ferrok-Shahn the non-arrival of the *Planetara* would cause any real comment. No one was searching for us—no one was worried over us.

No wonder the crafty Miko was willing to take his chances out here in the Lunar wilds! His ship, his reinforcements, his weapons were coming rapidly!

And we were helpless. Almost unarmed. Marooned here on the Moon with our treasure!

Chapter 23 The Prowling Watchman

Try it again," Snap urged. "Good God, Johnny, we've got to raise some Earth station! Chance it! Use your power—run it up to the full. Chance it!"

We were gathered in Grantline's instrument room. The duty-man, with blanched grim face, sat at his senders. The Grantline crew shoved close around us, tense and silent.

Above everything we must make some Earth station aware of our plight. Conditions were against us. There were very few observers, in the high-powered Earth stations who knew that an exploring party was on the Moon. Perhaps none of them. The Government officials who had sanctioned the expedition—and Halsey and his confrères in the Detective Bureau—were not anticipating trouble now. The *Planetara* was supposed to be well on her course to Ferrok-Shahn. It was when she was due to return that Halsey would be alert.

And it seemed, too, that nature was against us. The

bulging half-Earth* hung poised near the zenith over our little crater. Its rotation through the hours was clearly visible. We timed our signals when the western hemisphere was facing us. But nature was against us. No clouds, no faintest hint of mist could fog the airless Lunar surface.

*[Between the half and the full illumined disc, the complete Earth now was some ten days old.]

But there were continuous clouds over the Americas.

"Try it again," Snap urged.

These bulging walls! Grantline used his power far beyond the limits of safety. He cut down his lights; the telescope intensifiers were permanently disconnected; the ventilators were momentarily stilled, so that the air here in the little room crowded with men rapidly grew fetid. All to save power pressure, that the vital Erentz system might survive.

Even so it was strained to the danger point. The walls seemed to bulge outward with the pressure of the

room, the aluminite braces straining and creaking. And our heat was radiating away; the deadly chill of space crept in.

"Again!" ordered Grantline.

The duty-man flung on the power in rhythmic pulses. In the silence the tubes hissed. The light sprang through the banks of rotating prisms, intensified up the scale until, with a vague, almost invisible beam, it left the last swaying mirror and leaped through our overhead dome into space.

"Commander!" The duty-man's voice carried an appeal. These bulging walls! If they cracked, or even sprung a serious leak, the camp would be uninhabitable....

"Enough," said Grantline. "Switch it off. We'll let it go at that for now."

It seemed that every man in the room had been holding his breath in the darkness. The lights came on again: the Erentz motors accelerated to normal. The

strain on the walls eased up, and the room began warming.

Had the Earth caught our signal? We did not want to waste the power to find out. Our receivers were disconnected. If an answering signal came, we could not know it. One of the men said:

"Let's assume they saw us." He laughed, but it was a high-pitched, tense laugh. "We don't dare even use the telescope. Our rescue ship will be right overhead, visible to the naked eye before we see it. Three days more—that's what I'll give it."

But the three days passed, and no rescue ship came. The Earth was almost at the full. We tried signaling again. Perhaps it got through—we did not know. But our power was weaker now. The wall of one of the rooms sprang a leak, and the men were hours repairing it. I did not say so, but never once did I feel that our signals were seen on Earth. Those cursed clouds! The Earth almost everywhere seemed to have poor visibility.

Four of our eight days of grace were all too soon passed. The brigand ship must be half-way here by now.

They were busy days for us. If we could have captured Miko and his band, our danger would have been less imminent. With the treasure insulated so that its Gamma rays could not betray us, and our camp in darkness, the arriving brigand ship might never find us. But Miko knew our location: he would signal his oncoming ship when it was close and lead it to us.

Three times during those days—and the days which followed them—Grantline sent out searching parties. But it was unavailing. Miko, Moa and Coniston, with their five underlings, could not be found. We searched all the territory from the camp to the *Planetara*, and off to the foot-crags of Archimedes, and a score of miles into the flatness of the Mare Imbrium. There was no sign of the brigands. Yet we knew they could be near here—it was so easy to hide amid the tumbled crags, the ravines, the gullies, the numberless craters and pit-holes: or underground in the vast honeycombed subterranean recesses.

We had at first hoped that the brigands might have perished. But that was soon dispelled! I went—about the third day—with the party that was sent to the *Planetara*. We wanted to salvage such of its equipment, its unbroken power units, as might be available. And Snap and I had worked out an idea which we thought might be of service. We needed some of the *Planetara's* smaller gravity-plate sections. Those in Grantline's wrecked little *Comet* had stood so long that their radiations had gone dead. But the *Planetara's* were still efficacious.

We secured the fragments of Newtonia.* But our hope that Miko might have perished was dashed. He too had returned to the *Planetara*! The evidence was clear before us. The vessel was stripped of all its power units save those which were dead and useless. The last of the food and water stores was taken. The weapons in the chart-room—the Benson curve-lights, bullet projectors, and heat-rays—had vanished.

*[An allusion to the element Newtonia, named in memory of the great founder of celestial mechanics, Sir Isaac Newton. Artificially electronized, this metal

element may be charged either positively or negatively, thus to attract or repel other masses of matter. The gravity plates of all space-ships were built of it.]

Other days passed. The Earth reached the full, and began waning. The twenty-eight day Lunar night was in its last half. No rescue ship came from Earth. We had ceased our efforts to signal, for we needed all our power to maintain ourselves. The camp would be in a state of siege. That was the best we could hope for. We had a few short-range weapons, such as Bensons, heat-rays and rifles. A few hundred feet of effective range was the most any of them could obtain. The heat-rays—in giant form one of the most deadly weapons on Earth—were only slowly efficacious on the airless Moon. Striking an intensely cold surface, their warming radiations, without atmosphere to aid them, were slow to act. Even in a blasting heat-beam a man in his Erentz helmet-suit could withstand the ray for several minutes.

We were, however, well equipped with explosives. Grantline had brought a large supply for his mining

operations, and much of it was still unused. We had, also, an ample stock of oxygen fuses, and a variety of oxygen light flares in small fragile glass-globes.

It was to use these explosives against the brigands that Snap and I were working out our scheme with the gravity-plates. The brigand ship would come with giant projectors and with some thirty men. If we could hold out against them for a time, the fact that the *Planetara* was missing would bring us help from Earth.

"A month," said Grantline. "A month at the most. If we can hold them off that long—even in a week or two help may come."

Another day. A tenseness fell on us all, despite the absorption of our feverish activities. To conserve the power, the camp was almost dark, we lived in dim, chill rooms, with just a few weak spots of light outside to mark the watchmen on their rounds. We did not use the telescope,* but there was scarcely an hour when one or the other of the men was not sitting on a cross-piece up in the dome of the little instrument

room, casting tense searching gaze into the black, starry firmament. A ship might appear at any time now—a rescue ship from Earth, or the brigands from Mars.

*[An old-fashioned telescope, of limited field and needing no electronic power, would have been immensely serviceable to Grantline, but his was of the more modern type.]

Anita and Venza during these days could aid us very little save by their cheering words. They moved about the rooms, trying to inspire us; so that all the men, when they might have been humanly sullen and cursing their fate, were turned to grim activity, or grim laughter, making a joke of this coming siege. The morale of the camp now was perfect. An improvement indeed over the inactivity of the former peaceful weeks!

Grantline mentioned it to me. "We'll put up a good fight, Haljan. These fellows from Mars will know they've had a task before they ever sail off with this treasure."

I had many moments alone with Anita. I need not mention them. It seemed that our love was crossed by the stars, with an adverse fate dooming it. And Snap and Venza must have felt the same. Among the men we were always quietly, grimly active. But alone.... I came upon Snap once with his arms around the little Venus girl. I heard him say:

"Accursed luck! That you and I should find each other too late, Venza. We could have a mighty lot of fun in Great-New York together."

"Snap, we will!"

As I turned away, I murmured: "And, pray God, so will Anita and I."

The girls slept together in a small room of the main building. Often during the time of sleep, when the camp was stilled except for the night watch, Snap and I would sit in the corridor near the girls' door-grid, talking of that time when we would all be back on our blessed Earth.

Our eight days of grace were passed. The brigand ship was due—now, to-morrow, or the next day.

I recall, that night, my sleep was fitfully uneasy. Snap and I had a cubby together. We talked, and made futile plans. I went to sleep, but awakened after a few hours. Impending disaster lay heavily on me. But there was nothing abnormal nor unusual in that!

Snap was asleep. I was restless, but I did not have the heart to awaken him. He needed what little repose he could get. I dressed, left our cubby and wandered out into the corridor of the main building.

It was cold in the corridor, and gloomy with the weak blue light. An interior watchman passed me.

"All as usual, Haljan."

"Nothing in sight?"

"No. They're looking."

I went through the connecting corridor to the

adjacent building. In the instrument-room several of the men were gathered, scanning the vault overhead.

"Nothing, Haljan."

I stayed with them awhile, then wandered away. The outside man met me near the admission lock-chambers of the main building. The duty-man here sat at his controls, raising the air-pressure in the locks through which the outside watchman was coming. The relief sat here in his bloated suit, with his helmet on his knees. It was Wilks.

"Nothing yet, Haljan. I'm going up to the peak of the crater to see if anything is in sight. I wish that damnable brigand ship would come and get it over with."

Instinctively we all spoke in half whispers, the tenseness bearing in on us.

The outside man came out of his helmet. He was white and grim, but he grinned at Wilks.

"All is usual." He tried the familiar jest at Wilks, but his voice was flat: "Don't let the Earthlight get you!"

Wilks went out through the portes—a process of no more than a minute. I wandered away again through the corridors.

I suppose it was half an hour later that I chanced to be gazing through a corridor window. The lights along the rocky cliff-edge were tiny blue spots. The head of the stairway leading down to the abyss of the crater floor was visible. The bloated figure of Wilks was just coming up. I watched him for a moment making his rounds. He did not stop to inspect the lights. That was routine; I thought it queer that he passed them.

Another minute passed. The figure of Wilks went with slow bounds over toward the back of the ledge where the glassite shelter housed the treasure. It was all dark off there. Wilks went into the gloom, but before I lost sight of him he came back. As though he had changed his mind he headed for the foot of the staircase which led up the cliff-face to where, at the peak of the little crater, five hundred feet above us,

the narrow observatory platform was perched. He climbed with easy bounds, the light on his helmet bobbing in the gloom.

I stood watching. I could not tell why there seemed to be something queer about Wilks' actions. But I was struck with it, nevertheless. I watched him disappear over the peak of the summit.

Another minute went by. Wilks did not reappear. I thought I could make out his light on the platform up there. Then abruptly a tiny white beam was waving from the observatory platform! It flashed once or twice, then was extinguished. And now I saw Wilks plainly, standing in the Earthlight, gazing down.

Queer actions! Had the Earthlight touched him? Or was that a local signal-call which he had sent out? Why should Wilks be signalling? What was he doing with a hand-helio? Our watchmen, I knew, had no reason to carry one.

And to whom could Wilks be signalling across this Lunar desolation? The answer stabbed at me: to

Miko's band!

I waited another moment. No further light. Wilks was still up there!

I went back to the lock entrance. Spare suits and helmets were here beside the keeper. He gazed at me inquiringly.

"I'm going out, Franck, just for a minute." It struck me that perhaps I was a meddlesome fool. Wilks, of all Grantline's men, was, I knew, most in his commander's trust. The signal could have been some part of this night's ordinary routine, for all I knew.

I was hastily donning an Erentz suit. I added, "Let me out. I just got the idea Wilks is acting queerly." I laughed. "Maybe the Earthlight has touched him."

With my helmet on I went through the locks. Once outside, with the outer panel closed behind me, I dropped the weights from my belt and shoes and extinguished my helmet-light.

Wilks was still up there. Apparently he had not moved. I bounded off across the ledge to the foot of the ascending stairs. Did Wilks see me coming? I could not tell. As I approached the stairs the platform was cut off from my line of vision.

I mounted with bounding leaps. In my flexible gloved hand I carried my only weapon, a small bullet projector with oxygen firing caps for use in this outside near-vacuum. The leaden bullet with its slight mass would nevertheless pierce a man at the distance of twenty feet.

I held the weapon behind me. I would talk to Wilks first.

I went slowly up the last hundred feet. Was Wilks still up there? The summit was bathed in Earthlight. The little metal observatory platform came into view above my head.

Wilks was not there. Then I saw him standing on the rocks nearby, motionless. But in a moment he saw me coming.

I waved my left arm with a gesture of greeting. It seemed to me that he started, made as though to leap away, then changed his mind and waited for me.

I sailed from the head of the staircase with a twenty-foot leap and landed lightly beside him. I gripped his arm for audiphone contact.

"Wilks!"

Through the visors his face was visible. I saw him, and he saw me. And I heard his voice.

"You, Haljan! How nice!"

It was not Wilks, but the brigand Coniston!

Chapter 24 Imprisoned!

The duty-man at the exit locks of the main building stood at his window and watched me curiously. He saw me go up the spider-stairs. He could see the figure he thought was Wilks, standing at the top. He saw me join Wilks, saw us locked together in combat.

For an instant the duty-man stood amazed. There were two fantastic, misshapen figures swaying in the Earthlight five hundred feet above the camp, fighting desperately at the very brink. They were small, dwarfed by distance, alternately dim and bright as they swayed in and out of the shadows. Soon the duty-man could not tell one from the other. Haljan and Wilks—fighting to the death!

The duty-man recovered himself and sprang into action. An interior siren-call was on the instrument panel near him. He rang it, alarming the camp.

The men came rushing to him, Grantline among them.

"What's this? Good God, Franck!"

They saw the silent, deadly combat up there on the cliff. The two figures had fallen together from the observatory platform, dropped twenty feet to a lower landing on the stairs. They lay as though stunned for a moment, then fought on.

Grantline stood stricken with amazement. "That's

Wilks!"

"And Haljan," the duty-man gasped. "Went out—something wrong with Wilks—acting strangely—"

The interior of the camp was in a turmoil. The men awakened from sleep, ran out into the corridors, shouted questions.

"An attack?"

"Is it an attack?"

"The brigands?"

But it was Wilks and Haljan in a fight out there on the cliff. The men crowded at the bulls'-eye windows.

And over all the confusion the alarm siren, with no one thinking to shut it off, was screaming with its electrical voice.

Grantline, stricken for that moment of inactivity, stood gazing. One of the figures broke away from the other,

bounded up to the summit from the stair-platform to which they had fallen. The other followed. They locked together, swaying at the brink. For an instant it seemed to Grantline that they would go over; then they surged back, momentarily out of sight.

Grantline found his wits. "Stop them! I'll go out to stop them! What fools!"

He was hastily donning one of the Erentz suits which stood at the lock entrance. "Shut off that siren, Franck!"

Within a minute Grantline was ready. The duty-man called from the window:

"Still at it! By the infernal, such fools! They'll kill themselves!"

The figures had swayed back into view, then out of sight again.

"Franck, let me out."

Grantline was ready. He stood, helmet in hand.

"I'll go with you, Commander."

But the volunteer was not equipped. Grantline would not wait.

"I'm going at once. Hurry, Franck."

The duty-man turned to his panel. The volunteer shoved a weapon at Grantline. "Here, take this."

Grantline jammed on his helmet.

He moved the few steps into the small air-chamber which was the first of the three pressure locks. Its interior door-panel swung open for him. But the door did not close after him!

Cursing the duty-man's slowness, he waited a few seconds. Then he turned to the corridor. The duty-man came running.

Grantline took off his helmet. "What in hell—"

"Broken! Dead!"

"What!"

"Smashed from outside," gasped the duty-man. "Look there—my tubes—"

The control-tubes of the portes had flashed into a close-circuit and burned out. The admission portes would not open!

"And the pressure controls smashed! Broken from outside—!"

There was no way now of getting out through these pressure-locks. The doors, the entire pressure-lock system, was dead. Had it been tampered with from outside?

As though to answer Grantline's amazed question there came a chorus of shouts from the men at the corridor windows.

"Commander! By God—look!"

A figure was outside, close to the building! Clothed in suit and helmet, it stood, bloated and gigantic. It had evidently been lurking at the porte-entrance, had ripped out the wires there.

It moved past the windows, saw the staring faces of the men, and made off with giant bounds. Grantline reached the window in time to see it vanish around the building corner.

It was a giant figure, larger than a normal Earthman. A Martian?

Up on the summit of the crater the two small figures were still fighting. All this turmoil had taken no more than a minute or two.

A lurking Martian outside? The brigand, Miko? More than ever, Grantline was determined to get out. He shouted to his men to don some of the other suits, and called for some of the hand bullet projectors.

But he could not get out through these main admission portes. He could have forced the panels

open perhaps; but with the pressure-changing mechanisms broken, it would merely let the air out of the corridor. A rush of air, probably uncontrollable. How serious the damage was no one could tell as yet. It would perhaps take hours to repair it.

Grantline was shouting. "Get those weapons! That's a Martian outside! The brigand leader, probably! Get into your suits, anyone who wants to go with me! We'll go by the manual emergency exit!"

But the prowling Martian had found it! Within a minute Grantline was there. It was a smaller, two-lock gateway of manual control, so that the person going out could operate it himself. It was in a corridor at the other end of the main building. But Grantline was too late! The lever would not open the panels!

Had someone gone out this way and broken the mechanisms after him? A traitor in the camp? Or had someone come in from outside? Or had the skulking Martian outside broken this lock as he had broken the other?

The questions surged on Grantline. His men crowded around him. The news spread. The camp was a prison. No one could get out.

And outside, the skulking Martian had disappeared. But Wilks and Haljan were still fighting. Grantline could see the two figures up on the observatory platform. They bounded apart, then together again. Crazily swaying—bouncing—striking the rail.

They went together in a great leap off the platform onto the rocks, and rolled in a bright patch of Earthlight. First one on top, then the other, they rolled, unheeding, to the brink. Here, beyond the midway ledge which held the camp, it was a sheer drop of a thousand feet, on down to the crater-floor.

The figures were rolling: then one shook himself loose, rose up, seized the other and, with a desperate lunge, shoved him—

The victorious figure drew back to safety. The other fell, hurtling down into the shadows past the camp-level—down out of sight in the darkness of the crater-

floor.

Snap, who was in the group near Grantline at the windows, gasped.

"God! Was that Gregg Haljan who fell?"

No one could say. No one answered. Outside, on the camp-ledge, another helmeted figure now became visible. It was not far from the main building when Grantline first noticed it. It was running fast, bounding toward the spider-staircase. It began mounting.

And now still another figure became visible—the giant Martian again. He appeared from around the corner of the main Grantline building. He evidently saw the winner of the combat on the cliff, who now was standing in the Earthlight, gazing down. And he saw, too, no doubt, the second figure mounting the stairs. He stood quite near the window through which Grantline and his men were gazing, with his back to the building, looking up to the summit. Then he ran with tremendous leaps toward the ascending

staircase.

Was it Haljan standing up there on the summit? Who was it climbing the staircase? And was the third figure Miko?

Grantline's mind framed the questions. But his attention was torn from them, and torn even from the swift silent drama outside. The corridor was ringing with shouts.

"We're imprisoned! Can't get out! Was Haljan killed? The brigands are outside!"

And then an interior audiphone blared a call for Grantline. Someone in the instrument room of the adjoining building was talking:

"Commander, I tried the telescope to see who got killed—"

But he did not say who got killed, for he had greater news.

"Commander! The brigand ship!"

Miko's reinforcements from Mars had come.

Chapter 25 The Combat on the Crater-top

Not Wilks, but Coniston! His drawling, British voice:

"You, Gregg Haljan! How nice!"

His voice broke off as he jerked his arm from me. My hand with the bullet-protector came up, but with a sweeping blow he struck my wrist. The weapon dropped to the rocks.

I fought instinctively, those first moments; my mind was whirling with the shock of surprise. This was not Wilks, but the brigand Coniston.

His blow wrenched him around. Awkward, fighting in the air-puffed suits, with only a body-weight of some thirty pounds! Coniston stumbled over the rocks. I had still scarce recovered my wits, but I avoided his outflung arms, and, stooping, tried to recover my revolver. It lay nearby. But Coniston followed my scrambling steps and fell upon me. My foot struck the weapon; it slid away and fell down a crag into a six-foot pit.

We locked together, and when I rose erect he had me around the middle. His voice jangled with broken syllables in my receiver.

"Do for you now, Haljan—"

It was an eery combat. We swayed, shoving, kicking, wrestling. His hold around my middle shut off the Erentz circulation; the warning buzz rang in my ears to mingle with the rasp of his curses. I flung him off, and my tiny Erentz motors recovered. He staggered away, but in a great leap came at me again.

I was taller, heavier and far stronger than Coniston. But I found him crafty, and where I was awkward in handling my lightness, he seemed more skilfully agile.

I became aware that we were on the twenty-foot square grid of the observatory platform. It had a low metal railing. We surged against it. I caught a dizzying glimpse of the abyss. Then it receded as we bounced the other way. And then we fell to the grid. His helmet bashed against mine, striking as though butting with the side of his head to puncture my visor-

panel. His gloved fingers were trying to rip at the fabric around my throat.

As we regained our feet, I flung him off, and bounded, like a diver, head-first into him. He went backward, but skilfully kept his feet, gripped me again and shoved me.

I was tottering at the head of the staircase—falling. But I clutched at him.

We fell some twenty or thirty feet to the next lower spider landing. The impact must have dazed us both. I recall my vague idea that we had fallen down the cliff—my Erentz motors smashed—my air shut off. Then the air came again. The roaring in my ears was stilled; my head cleared, and I found that we were on the landing—fighting.

He presently broke away from me, bounded to the summit, with me after him. In the close confines of the suit I was bathed in sweat, and gasping. I had had no thought to increase the oxygen content of my air. But I sorely needed more oxygen for my laboring,

pounding heart and my panting breath. I fumbled for the oxygen control-lever. I could not find it; or it would not operate.

I realized I was fighting sluggishly, almost aimlessly. But so was Coniston!

It seemed dreamlike. A phantasmagoria of blows and staggering steps. A nightmare with only the horrible vision of this goggled helmet always before my eyes.

It seemed that we were rolling on the ground, back on the summit. The unshadowed Earthlight was clear and bright. The abyss was beside me. Coniston, rolling, was now on top, now under me, trying to shove me over the brink. It was all like a dream—as though I were asleep, dreaming that I did not have enough air.

I strove to keep my senses. He was struggling to roll me over the brink. Ah, that would not do! But I was so tired. One cannot fight without oxygen!

I suddenly knew that I had shaken him off and gained

my feet. He rose up, swaying. He was as tired, confused, half-asphyxiated as I.

The brink of the abyss was behind us. I lunged, desperately shoving, avoiding his clutch.

He went over, and fell soundlessly, his body whirling end over end down into the shadows, far down.

I drew back. My senses faded as I sank panting to the rocks. But with inactivity, my thumping heart quieted. My respirations slowed. The Erentz circulation gained on my poisoned air. It purified.

That blessed oxygen! My head cleared again. Strength came to me. I felt better.

Coniston had fallen to his death. I was victor. I went to the brink, cautiously, for I was still dizzy. I could see, far down there on the crater-floor, a little patch of Earthlight in which a mashed human figure was lying.

I staggered back again. A moment or two must have

passed while I stood there on the summit, with my senses clearing and my strength renewed as the blood-stream cleared in my veins.

I was victor. Coniston was dead. I saw now, down on the lower staircase below the camp-ledge, another goggled figure lying huddled. That was Wilks, no doubt. Coniston had doubtless caught him there, surprised him, killed him.

My attention, as I stood gazing, went down to the camp-buildings. Another figure was outside! It bounded along the ledge, reached the foot of the ascending staircase at the top of which I was standing. With agile leaps, it came mounting at me!

Another brigand! Miko? No, it was not large enough to be Miko, not nearly large enough. I was still confused. I thought of Hahn. But that was absurd. Hahn was in the wreck of the *Planetara*. One of the stewards then....

The figure came up the staircase recklessly, to assail me. I took a step backward, bracing myself to receive

this new antagonist.

And then I saw Miko! Unquestionably he: for there was no mistaking his giant figure. He was down on the camp-ledge, running toward the foot of the staircase, coming up to help this other man in advance of him.

I thought of my revolver. I turned to try and find it. I was aware that the first of my assailants was at the stairhead. I could not locate at once where the revolver had fallen. I would be caught, leaped upon from behind. Should I run?

I swung back to see what the oncoming brigand was doing. He had reached the summit. His arms went up, legs bent under him. With a sailing leap he launched for me. I could have bounded away, but with a last look to locate the revolver, I braced myself for the shock.

The figure hit me. It was small and light in my clutching arms. I recall I saw that Miko was half-way up the staircase. I gripped my assailant. The audiphone contact brought a voice.

"Gregg! Is it you?"

It was Anita clutching at me!

Chapter 26 At Bay

"Gregg, you're safe!"

She had heard the camp corridors resounding with the shouts that Wilks and Haljan were fighting. She had come upon a suit and helmet by the manual emergency lock, had run out through the lock, confused, with her only idea to stop Wilks and me from fighting. Then she had seen one of us killed. Impulsive, barely knowing what she was doing, she mounted the stairs, frantic to find if I were alive.

"Anita!"

Miko was coming! She had not seen him: for she had no thought of brigands—only the belief that either Wilks or I had been killed.

But now, as for an instant we stood together on the rocks near the observation platform, I could see the

towering figure of Miko nearing the top of the stairs.

"Anita, that's Miko! We must run."

Then I saw my bullet projector. It lay in a bowl-like depression quite near us. I jumped for it. And as I tore loose from Anita, she leaped down after me. It was a broken bowl in the rocks, some six feet deep. It was open on the side facing the staircase—a narrow, ravinelike gully, full of gray, broken, tumbled rock-masses. The little gully was littered with crags and boulders. But I could see out through it.

Miko had come to the head of the staircase. He stopped there, his great figure etched sharply by the Earthlight. I think he must have known that Coniston was the one who had fallen over the cliff, as my helmet and Coniston's were different enough for him to recognize which was which. He did not know who I was, but he did know me for an enemy.

He stood now at the summit, peering to see where we had gone. He was no more than fifty feet from us.

"Anita, lie down."

I pulled her down on the rocks. I took aim with the bullet projector. But I had forgotten our helmet-lights. Miko must have seen them just as I pulled the trigger. The flying bullet missed him as he jumped sidewise. He dropped, but I could see him moving in the shadows to where a jutting rock gave him shelter. I fired again.

"Gregg."

I had stood up to take aim. I saw the bullet chip a bit of rock. Anita pulled me sharply down beside her.

"Gregg, he's armed!"

It was his turn to fire. It came—the familiar vague flash of the paralyzing ray. It spat its tint of color on the rocks near us, but could not reach us.

Miko rose a moment later and bounded to another rock. I scrambled up, and shot at him, but missed. Then he crouched and returned my fire from his new

angle; but Anita and I had shifted.

Time passed—only a few moments. I could not see Miko momentarily. Perhaps he was crouching; perhaps he had moved away again. He was, or had been, on slightly higher ground than the bottom of our bowl. It was dim down here where we were lying, but I feared that every moment Miko might appear and strike at us. His ray at any short range would penetrate our visor-panes, even though our suits might temporarily resist it.

"Anita—it's too dangerous here."

Had I been alone, I might perhaps have leaped up to lure Miko. But with Anita I did not dare chance it.

"We've got to get back to the camp," I told her. The audiphone brought her comment:

"Perhaps he has gone."

But he had not. We saw him again, out in a distant patch of Earthlight. He was further from us than

before, but on still higher ground. We had extinguished our small helmet-lights. But he knew we were here, and possibly he could see us. His projector flashed again. But we had again shifted, and were untouched. He was a hundred feet or more away now. His weapon was of longer range than mine. I did not answer his fire, for I could not hope to hit him at such a distance, and the flash of my weapon would help him with his aim.

I murmured to Anita, "We must get out of here."

Yet how did I dare take Anita from these concealing shadows? Miko could reach us so easily as we bounded away, in plain view in the Earthlight of the open summit! We were caught, at bay in this little bowl.

The camp from here was not visible. But out through the broken gully, beyond the staircase top, a white beam of light suddenly came up from below.

"*Haljan.*"

It spelled the signal.

"Haljan."

It was coming from the Grantline instrument room, I knew.

I could answer it with my helmet-light, but I did not dare. I hesitated.

"Try it," urged Anita.

We crouched where we thought we might be safe from Miko's fire. My little light-beam shot up from the bowl. It was undoubtedly visible to the camp.

"Yes? I am Haljan."

And I added:

"Help! Send us help."

I did not mention Anita. Miko could doubtless read these signals. And in the camp they must have missed Anita by now. They answered:

"*Cannot—*"

I lost the rest of it. There came a flash from Miko's weapon. But it gave us confidence. He could not reach us at the moment.

The Grantline beam repeated:

"Cannot come out. Portes broken. You cannot get in. Stay where you are—an hour or two. We may be able to repair portes."

The portes were broken! Stay here an hour or two! But I could not hold this position against Miko that long! Sooner or later he would find a place from where he could sweep this bowl beyond possibility of our hiding. I saw him running now, well beyond my range, to ferret out another point of vantage.

I extinguished my light. What use was it to tell Grantline anything further? Besides, my light was dangerous.

But the Grantline beam spelled another message:

"The brigand ship is coming! It will be here before we can get out to you! No lights! We will try and hide our location."

And the signal-beam brought a last appeal to me:

"Miko and his men will divulge where we are. Unless you can stop them—"

The beam vanished. The lights of the Grantline camp made a faint glow that showed above the crater-edge. The glow died, as the camp now was plunged into darkness.

Chapter 27 Anita's Plan

We crouched in the shadows, the Earthlight filtering down to us. The skulking figure of Miko had vanished; but he was out there somewhere on the crags I was sure, lurking, maneuvering to where he could strike us with his ray. Anita's metal-gloved hand was on my arm; in my ear diaphragm her voice sounded eager and unmistakable:

"What was the signal, Gregg?"

She could not read the semaphore lights. I told her.

"Oh Gregg, the Martian ship coming!"

Her mind clung to that as the most important thing. But not so myself. To me there was only the realization that Anita was caught out here, almost at the mercy of Miko's ray. Grantline's men could not get out to help us, nor could I get Anita into the camp.

She added, "Where do you suppose the ship is? In telescopic view?"

"Yes—twenty or thirty thousand miles up, probably."

The stars and the Earth were visible over us. Somewhere up there disclosed by Grantline's instrument but not yet discernible to the naked eye, Miko's reinforcements were hovering.

I stood up cautiously to try and locate Miko. Immediately I saw him. He jumped as though fearing

my coming bullet, and I dropped back, barely avoiding his flash, which swept across the top of our bowl.

"Gregg—Gregg, don't take such a chance!"

We lay for a moment in silence. It was horribly nerve-straining. Miko could be creeping up on us. Would he dare chance my sudden fire? Creeping—or would he make a swift, unexpected rush?

The feeling that he was upon us abruptly swept me. I jumped to my feet, against Anita's effort to hold me. But again Miko had vanished. Where was he now?

I sank back. "That ship will be here in a few hours."

I told her what Grantline's signal had suggested: the ship was hovering overhead. It must be fairly close; for Grantline's telescope had revealed its identity as a bandit flyer, unmarked by any of the standard code-identification lights. It was doubtless too far away as yet to have located the whereabouts of Grantline's camp. The Martian brigands knew that we were in the

vicinity of Archimedes, but no more than that.

Searching this glowing Moon surface, our little lights, the tiny local semaphore beams we had momentarily been using, could easily pass unnoticed.

But as the brigand ship approached now—dropping close to Archimedes as it probably would—our danger was that Miko and his men would then signal it, join it, and reveal the camp's location, and the brigand attack would be upon us.

I told this now to Anita. "The signal said, '*Unless you can stop them.*'"

It was an appeal to me. But how could I respond to it? What could I do, alone out here with Anita, to cope with this enemy?

Anita made no comment.

I added, "That ship will land near Archimedes I imagine, within an hour or two! If Grantline can repair his portes, and I can get you inside—"

Again she made no comment. Then suddenly she gripped me. "Gregg, look there!"

Out through the gully break in our bowl the figure of Miko showed! He was running. But not at us. Circling the summit, leaping to keep himself behind the upstanding crags. He passed the head of the staircase; he did not descend it, but headed off along the summit of the curving crater-rim.

I stood up to watch him. He was making off. Abandoning us!

"He's going!"

I let her stand up beside me; cautiously, at first, for it occurred to me that this might be a ruse to cover some other of Miko's men who might be lurking up here.

But the summit seemed clear. The figure of Miko was a thousand feet away now. We could see the tiny blob of it bobbing over the rocks. Then it plunged down—not into the crater-valley, but out toward the open

Moon surface.

Miko had abandoned his attack on us. The reason seemed plain. He had come here from his encampment with Coniston, had sent Coniston ahead to lure and kill Wilks. When this was done, Coniston had flashed his brief signal to Miko, who was hiding nearby.

It was not like the brigand leader to remain in the background. Miko was no coward. But Coniston could impersonate Wilks, whereas Miko's giant stature at once would reveal his identity. Miko had been engaged in smashing the portes. He had looked up and seen me kill Coniston. He had come up to assail me. And then he had read Grantline's signal to me. It was his first knowledge that his ship was at hand. With the camp exits inoperative, Grantline and his men were imprisoned. Miko made an effort to kill me. He did not know my companion was Anita. The effort was taking too long: with the Grantline camp imprisoned and his ship at hand, it was Miko's best move to return to his own camp, rejoin his men, and await their opportunity to signal the ship.

At least, so I reasoned it. Anita and I stood alone.
What could we do?

We went to the brink of the cliff. The unlighted
Grantline buildings showed vaguely in the Earthlight.

I said, "We'll go down, I'll leave you there. You can
wait at the porte. They'll repair it soon, perhaps, and
let you in."

"And what will you do?" she demanded.

I was hurrying her down the stairs. But suddenly she
stopped. "What are you going to do, Gregg?"

I had not intended to tell her. "Hurry, Anita!"

"Why?" She stood stock still. Through the visors I
could see her white face gazing at me rebelliously.

"Why should I hurry, Gregg?"

"Because I want to leave you at the porte. I'm going
after Miko—try and locate where he and his men are

camping."

I had indeed no specific plan as yet. But it seemed useless for me to sit at the porte waiting to be let in.

"But he's gone, Gregg."

She was right on that. Miko was already a mile or more away, down on the outer surface, making off. He would soon be out of sight. It would be impossible to follow him.

"Gregg, let me go with you."

She jerked away from me and bounded back up the staircase. I caught her on the summit.

"Anita!"

"I'm going with you."

"You're going to stay here."

"I'm not!"

This exasperating controversy! And time was so precious!

"Anita, please."

"I'll be safer with you than waiting here, Gregg."

It almost decided me. Perhaps she would. It was only my intention to follow Miko at a distance. And with much more of this delay here, he would be lost to me.

And she added, "Besides, I won't stay, and you can't make me."

We ran along the crater-top. At its distant edge the lower plain spread before us. Far down, and far away on the distant broken surface, the leaping figure of Miko showed.

We plunged down the broken outer slope, reached the level. Soon, as we ran, the little Grantline crater faded behind us.

Anita ran more skillfully than I. Ten minutes or so

passed. We had seen Miko, and the direction he was taking, but down here on the plain we could no longer see him. It struck me that this was purposeless—and dangerous. Suppose Miko were to see us following? Suppose he stopped and lay in ambush to fire at us as we came leaping heedlessly by?

"Anita, wait," I said, checking her.

I drew her down amid a group of tumbled boulders. And then abruptly she clung to me.

"Gregg, I know what we can do! Gregg, don't tell me you won't let me try it!"

I listened to her plan. Incredible! Incredibly dangerous! Yet, as I pondered it, the very daring of the thing seemed the measure of its possible success. The brigands would never imagine we could be so rash!

"But Anita—"

"Gregg, you're stupid!" It was her turn to be

exasperated. In truth, I was indeed in no mood for daring, for my mind was obsessed with Anita's safety. I had been planning that we might see the glow of Miko's encampment, and then return to Grantline and hope that he would have the portes repaired.

"But Gregg—the safety of the treasure—of all the Grantline men...."

"To the infernal with that! It's you—your safety."

"My safety, then! If you put me in the camp and the brigands attack it and I am killed—what then? But this plan of mine, if we can do it, Gregg ... safety, in the end, for all of us."

And it seemed possible. We crouched, discussing it. So daring a thing!

The brigand ship would come down near Archimedes. That was fifty miles from Grantline. The brigands from Mars would not have seen the dark Grantline buildings hidden in the little crater-pit. They would wait for Miko and his men to make their whereabouts

known.

Miko's encampment was ahead of us now, undoubtedly. We had been following him toward the Mare Imbrium; we were at its borders now. Archimedes from here was also about fifty miles.

And Anita proposed that we go to Archimedes, climb in slope and await the coming of the brigand ship. Miko would be off in the Mare Imbrium. Or at least, we hoped so. He would signal his ship. But Anita and I, closer to it, would also signal it—and, posing as brigands, could join it!

"Remember, Gregg, I am Anita Prince, George's sister." Her voice trembled as, she mentioned her dead brother. "They know that George was in Miko's pay, and I am his sister.... It will help convince them."

This daring scheme! If we could join the ship, we might be able to persuade its leader that Miko's distant signals were merely a ruse of Grantline to lure the brigands in that direction. A long-range projector from the ship would kill Miko and his men as they

came forward to join it! And then we could falsely direct the brigands, lead them away from Grantline and the treasure.

"Gregg, we must try it."

Heaven help me, I yielded to her persuasion!

We turned at right angles and ran toward where the distant frowning walls of Archimedes loomed against the starlit sky.

Chapter 28 The Ascent of Archimedes

The broken shaggy ramparts of the giant crater rose above us. We toiled upward, out of the foothills, clinging now to the crags and pitted terraces of the main ascent. An hour had passed since we turned from the borders of the Mare Imbrium. Or was it two hours? I could not tell. I only know that we ran with desperate frantic haste.

Anita would not admit that she was tired. She was more skilful than I in this leaping over the broken rock masses. Yet I felt that her slight strength must give out. It seemed miles up the undulating slopes of the foothills with the black and white ramparts of the massive crater close before us.

And then the main ascent. There were places where, like smooth black frozen ice, the walls rose sheer. We avoided them, toiling aside, plunging into gullies, crossing pits where sometimes we perforce went downwards, and then up again; or sometimes we stood, hot and breathless, upon ledges, recovering

our strength, selecting the best route upward.

This tumbled mass of rock! Honeycombed everywhere with caves and passages leading into darkness impenetrable. There were pits into which we might so easily have fallen; ravines to span, sometimes with a leap, sometimes by a long and arduous detour.

Endless climb! We came to a ledge, with the plains of the Mare Imbrium stretching out beneath us. We might have been upon this main ascent for an hour; the plains were far down, the broken surface down there smoothed now by the perspective of our height. And yet still above us the brooding circular wall went up into the sky. Ten thousand feet still above us—I think it was at least that, or more.

"You're tired, Anita. We'd better stay here."

"No! If we could only get to the top—the ship may land on the other side—they would see us if we were at the top."

There was as yet no sign of the brigand ship. With

every stop for rest we searched the starry vault. The Earth hung over us, flattened beyond the full. The stars blazed to mingle with the Earthlight and illumine these massive crags of the Archimedes walls. But no speck appeared to tell us that the ship was up there.

We were on the curving side of the Archimedes wall which fronted the Mare Imbrium to the North. The plains lay like a great frozen sea, congealed ripples shining in the light of the Earth, with dark patches to mark the hollows. Somewhere down there—six or eight thousand feet below us now, or even more than that, for all I could tell—Miko's encampment lay concealed. We searched for lights of it, but could see none.

Or had Miko rejoined his party, left his camp and come here like ourselves to climb Archimedes? Or was our assumption wholly wrong—perhaps the brigand ship would not land near here at all?

Sweeping around from the Mare Imbrium, the plains were less smooth—the shattered, crag-littered, crater-

scarred region beyond which the distant Apennines raised their terraced walls. The little crater which concealed the Grantline camp was off that way. There was nothing to mark it from here.

"Gregg, do you see anything up there? There seems to be a blur."

Her sight, sharper than mine, had picked it out. The descending brigand ship! A faintest tiny blur against the stars, a few of them occulted as though strangely an invisible shadow were upon them. A growing shadow, materializing into a blur—a blob, a shape faintly defined. Then sharper until we were sure of what we saw. It was the brigand ship. It came dropping slowly, silently down.

We crouched on the little ledge. A cave-mouth was behind us. A gully was beside us, a break in the ledge; and at our feet the wall dropped sheer.

We had extinguished our little lights. We crouched, silently gazing up into the stars.

The ship, when first we distinguished it was central over Archimedes. We thought for a while that it might descend into the crater. But it did not; it came sailing forward.

I whispered into the audiphone—whispering by instinct, as though out here in all this airless desolation someone might overhear us!

"It's coming over the crater."

Her hand pressed my arm in answer.

I recalled that when, from the *Planetara*, Miko had forced Snap to signal this brigand band on Mars, Miko's only information as to the whereabouts of the Grantline camp was that it lay between Archimedes and the Apennines. That was Grantline's first message to us, and Miko had relayed it to his men. The brigands from Mars now were following that information.

A tense interval passed. We could see the ship plainly above us now, a gray-black shape among the stars up

beyond the shaggy, towering crater-rim. The vessel came upon a level keel, hull-down, slowly circling, looking for Miko's signal, no doubt, or for possible lights of Grantline. They were also picking a landing place.

We saw it soon as a cylindrical, cigarlike shape, rather smaller than the *Planetara*, but similar of design. It bore lights now. The ports of its hull were tiny rows of illumination, and the glow of light under its rounding upper dome was faintly visible.

A bandit ship, no doubt of that. Its identification keel-plate was empty of official pass-code lights. These brigands had not attempted to secure official sailing lights when leaving Ferrok-Shahn. It was an outlawed ship, unmistakably. And here upon the deserted Moon there was no need for secrecy. Its lights were openly displayed, that Miko might see it and join it.

It went slowly past us, only a few thousand feet higher than our level. We could see the whole outline of its pointed cylinder-hull, with the rounded dome on top. And under the dome was its open deck-space,

with a little cabin superstructure in the center.

I thought for a moment that by some fortunate chance it might land quite near us. There was a wide ledge a quarter of a mile away.

"Anita, look."

But it went past. And then I saw that it was heading for a level, plateau-like surface a few miles further on. It dropped, cautiously floating down.

There was still no sign of Miko. But I realized that haste was necessary. We must be the first to join the brigand ship.

I lifted Anita to her feet. "I don't think we should signal from here."

"No. Miko might see it."

We could not tell where he was. Down on the plains, perhaps? Or up here, somewhere in these miles of towering rocks?

"Are you ready, Anita?"

"Yes, Gregg."

I stared through the visors at her white, solemn face.

"Yes, I'm ready," she repeated.

Her hand-pressure seemed to me suddenly like a farewell. Were we plunging rashly into what was destined to mean our death? Was this a farewell?

An instinct swept me not to do this thing. Why, in an hour or two I could have Anita back to the comparative safety of the Grantline buildings. The exit portes would doubtless be repaired by now. I could get her inside.

She had bounded away from me, leaped down some thirty feet into the broken gully, to cross it and then up on the other side. I stood for an instant watching her fantastic shape, with the great rounded, goggled, trunked helmet and the lump on her shoulders which held the little Erentz motors. Then I made after her.

It did not take us long—two or three miles of circling along the giant wall. The ship lay only a few hundred feet above our level.

We stood at last on a buttelike pinnacle. The hull-port lights of the ship were close over us. And there were moving lights up there, tiny moving spots on the adjacent rocks. The brigands had come out, prowling around to investigate their location.

No signal yet from Miko. But it might come at any moment.

"I'll flash now," I whispered.

"Yes."

The brigands had probably not yet seen us. I took the lamp from my helmet. My hand was trembling.

Suppose my signal were answered by a shot? A flash from some giant projector mounted on the ship?

Anita crouched behind a rock, as she had promised. I stood with my torch, and flung its switch.

My puny light-beam shot up. I waved it, touched the ship with its faint glowing circle of illumination.

They saw me. There was a sudden movement among the lights up there.

I semaphored:

"I am from Miko. Do not fire."

I used the open Universal Code. In Martian first, and then in English.

There was no answer, but no attack. I tried again.

"This is Haljan, once of the Planetara. George Prince's sister is with me. There has been disaster to Miko."

A small light-beam came down from the brink of the overhead cliff beside the ship.

"We read you."

I went steadily on: *"Disaster—the Planetara is wrecked. All killed but me and George Prince's sister."*

We want to join you."

I flashed off my light. The answer came: "*Where is the Grantline camp?*"

"Near here. The Mare Imbrium."

As though to answer my lie, from down on the Earthlit plains, ten miles or so from the crater-base, a tiny signal-light shot up. Anita saw it and gripped me.

"There is Miko's light!"

It spelled in Martian, "*Come down. Land Mare Imbrium.*"

Miko had seen the signalling up here and was joining it! He repeated, "*Land Mare Imbrium.*"

I flashed a protest up to the ship: "*Beware! That is Grantline! Trickery!*"

From the ship the summons came: "*Come up.*"

We had won this first encounter! Miko must have

realized his disadvantage. His distant light went out.

"Come, Anita."

There was no retreat now. But again I seemed to feel in the pressure of her hand that vague farewell.

Her voice whispered, "We must do our best, act our best to be convincing."

In the white glow of a search-beam we climbed the crags, reached the broad upper ledge. Helmeted figures rushed at us, searched us for weapons, seized our helmet lights. The evil face of a giant Martian peered at me through the visors. Two other monstrous, towering figures seized Anita.

We were shoved toward the port-locks at the base of the ship's hull. Above the hull bulge I could see the grids of projectors mounted in the dome-side, and the figures of men standing on the deck, peering down at us.

We went through the admission locks into a hull

corridor, up an incline passage, and reached the lighted deck. Our helmets were taken off. The Martian brigands crowded around us.

Chapter 29 On the Brigand Ship

Anita's words echoed in my memory: "We must act our best to be convincing." It was not her ability that I doubted as much as my own. She had played the part of George Prince cleverly, unmasked only by an evil chance.

I steeled myself to face the searching glances of the brigands as they shoved around us. This was a desperate game into which we had plunged! For all our acting, how easy it would be for some small chance thing abruptly to undo us! I realized it, and now, as I gazed into the peering faces of these men from Mars, I cursed my witless rashness which had brought Anita into this!

The brigands—some ten or fifteen of them here on the deck—stood in a ring around us. They were all big men, nearly of a seven-foot average, dressed in

leather jerkins and short leather breeches, with bare knees and flaring leatherboots. Piratical swaggering fellows, knife-blades mingled with small hand-projectors fastened to their belts. Gray, heavy faces, some with scraggling, unshaved beard. They plucked at us, jabbering in Martian.

One of them seemed the leader. I said sharply, "Are you the commander here? I speak not Ilton* well. You speak the Earth English?"

*[Ilton, the ruling race and official language of the Martian Union.]

"Yes," he said readily, "I am Commander here." He spoke English with the same freedom and accent of Miko. "Is this George Prince's sister?"

"Yes. Her name is Anita Prince. Tell your men to take their hands off her."

He waved his men away. They all seemed more interested in Anita than in me. He added:

"I am Set Potan." He addressed Anita. "George Prince's sister? You are called Anita? I have heard of you. I knew your brother—indeed, you look very much like him."

He swept his plumed hat to the grid with a swaggering gesture of homage. A courtierlike fellow this, debonair as a Venus cavalier!

He accepted us. I realized that Anita's presence was immensely valuable in making us convincing. Yet there was about this Potan—as with Miko—a disturbing suggestion of irony. I could not make him out. I decided that we had fooled him. Then I remarked the steely glitter of his eyes as he turned to me.

"You were an officer of the *Planetara*?"

The insignia of my rank was visible on my white jacket-collar which showed beneath the Erentz suit, now that my helmet was off.

"Yes, I was supposed to be. But a year ago I embarked

upon this adventure with Miko."

He was leading us to his cabin. "The *Planetara* wrecked? Miko dead?"

"And Hahn and Coniston. George Prince, too—we are the only survivors."

While we divested ourselves of our Erentz suits at his command, I told him briefly of the *Planetara's* fall. All had been killed on board save Anita and me. We had escaped, awaited his coming. The treasure was here; we had located the Grantline camp, and were ready to lead him to it.

Did he believe me? He listened quietly. He seemed not shocked at the death of his comrades. Nor yet pleased: merely imperturbable.

I added with a sly, sidelong glance, "There were too many of us on the *Planetara*. The purser had joined us, and many of the crew. And there was Miko's sister, the Setta Moa—too many. The treasure divides better among less."

An amused smile played on his thin gray lips. But he nodded. The fear which had leaped in me was allayed by his next words.

"True enough, Haljan. He was a domineering fellow, Miko. A third of it all was for him alone. But now...."

The third would go to this sub-leader, Potan! The implication was obvious.

I said, "Before we go any further—I can trust you for my share?"

"Of course."

I figured that my very boldness in bargaining so prematurely would convince him. I insisted, "And Miss Prince? She will have her brother's share?"

Clever Anita! She put in swiftly, "I give no information until you promise! We know the location of the Grantline camp, its weapons, its defense, the amount and location of the ore. I warn you, if you do not play us fair...."

He laughed heartily. He seemed to like us. He spread his huge legs as he lounged in his settle, and drank of the bowl which one of his men set before him.

"Little tigress! Fear me not—I play fair!" He pushed two of the bowls across the table. "Drink, Haljan. All is well with us, and I am glad to hear it. Miss Prince, drink my health as your leader."

I waved it away from Anita. "We need all our wits; your strong Martian drinks are dangerous. Look here, I'll tell you just how the situation stands—"

I plunged into a glib account of our supposed wanderings to find the Grantline camp; its location off in the Mare Imbrium—hidden in a cavern there. Potan, with the drink, and under the gaze of Anita's eyes, was in a high good humor. He laughed when I told him that we had dared to invade the Grantline camp, had smashed its exit portes, had even gotten up to have a look at where the ore was piled.

"Well done, Haljan! You're a fellow to my liking!" But his gaze was on Anita. "You dress like a man, or a

charming boy."

She still wore the dark clothes of her brother. She said, "I am used to action—man's garb pleases me. You shall treat me like a man, give me my share of the gold-leaf."

He had already demanded of us the meaning of that signal from the Mare Imbrium. Miko's signal! It had not come again, though any moment I feared it. I told him that Grantline had doubtless repaired his damaged portes and sallied out to assail me in reprisal. And seeing the brigand ship landing on Archimedes, had tried to lure it.

I wondered if my explanation were very convincing. It did not sound so. But he was flushed now with the drink. And Anita added:

"Grantline knows the territory near his camp very well. He is equipped only for short-range fighting."

I took it up. "It's like this, Potan: if he could get you to land unsuspectingly near the mouth of his cavern...."

I pictured how Grantline might have figured on a sudden surprise attack upon the ship. It was his only chance to catch it unprepared.

We were all three in friendly, intimate mood now. Potan said, "We'll land down there right enough! But I need a few hours for my assembling."

"He will not dare advance," I said. "For one thing, he can't leave the treasure."

"He knows we have unmasked his lure," Anita put in smilingly. "Haljan and I joining you—that silenced him. His light went out very promptly, didn't it?"

She flashed me a side-gaze. Were we acting convincingly? But if Miko started up his signals again, they might so quickly betray us! Anita's thoughts were upon that, for she added:

"Grantline will not dare show his light! If he does, Set Potan, we can blast him with a ray from here! Can't we?"

"Yes," Potan agreed. "If he comes within ten miles, I have one powerful enough. We are assembling it now."

"And we have thirty men?" Anita persisted. "When we sail down to attack him it should not be very difficult to kill all the Grantline party. Thirty of us—that's enough to share in this treasure. I'm glad Miko is dead."

"By Heaven, Haljan, this girl of yours is small, but very blood-thirsty!"

"That accursed Miko murdered her brother," I explained.

Acting! And never once did we dare relax! If only Miko's signals would hold off and give us time!

We may have talked for half an hour. We were in a small, steel-lined cubby, located in the forward deck-space of the ship. The dome was over it. I could see from where I sat at the table that there was a forward observatory tower under the dome quite near here.

The ship was laid out in rather similar fashion to the *Planetara*, though considerably smaller.

Potan had dismissed his men from his cubby so as to be alone with us. Out on the deck I could see them dragging apparatus about—bringing the mechanisms of giant projectors up from below, beginning to assemble them. Occasionally some of the men would come to our cubby windows to peer in at us curiously.

My mind was roaming as I talked. For all my manner of casualness, I knew that haste was necessary. Whatever Anita and I were to do must be quickly done. But to win this fellow's utter confidence first was necessary, so that we might have the freedom of the ship, might move about unnoticed, unwatched.

I was horribly tense inside. Through the dome windows across the deck from the cubby the rocks of the Lunar landscape were visible. I could see the brink of this ledge upon which the ship lay, the descending crags down the precipitous wall of Archimedes to the Earthlit plains far below. Miko, Moa, and a few of the *Planetara's* crew were down

there somewhere.

Anita and I had a fairly definite plan. We were now in Potan's confidence. With this interview at an end, I felt that our status among the brigands would be established. We would be free to move about the ship, join in its activities. It ought to be possible to locate the signal-room, get friendly with the operator there.

Perhaps we would find a secret opportunity to flash a signal to Earth. This ship, I was confident, would have the power for a long-range signal, if not of too sustained a length. It was a desperate thing to attempt but our whole procedure was desperate! And I felt—if Anita perhaps could cajole the guard or the duty-man from the signal-room—I might send a single flash or two that would reach the Earth. Just a distress call, signed "Grantline." If I could do that and not get caught.

Anita was engaging Potan in talking of his plans. The brigand leader was boasting of his well-equipped ship, the daring of his men, and questioning her about the size of the treasure. My thoughts were free to

roam.

A signal to Earth. And while we were making friends with these brigands, the longest range electronic projector was being assembled. Miko then could flash his signal and be damned to him! I would be on the deck with that projector. Its operator, and I would turn it upon Miko—one flash of it and he and his little band would be wiped out.

But there was our escape to be thought of. We could not remain very long with these brigands. We could tell them that the Grantline camp was on the Mare Imbrium. It would delay them for a time, but our lie would soon be discovered. We must escape from them, get away and back to Grantline. With Miko dead—a distress signal to Earth—and Potan in ignorance of Grantline's location, the treasure would be safe until help arrived from Earth.

It all fitted together so nicely! It seemed possible of success.

Our futile plans! Star-crossed always, doomed, fated

always to be upset by such unforeseen evil chances!

"By the infernal, little Anita, you look like a dove, but you're a tigress! A comrade after my own heart—blood-thirsty as a fire-worshipper!"

Her laugh rang out to mingle with his. "Oh no, Set Potan! I am treasure-thirsty."

"We'll get the treasure, never fear, little Anita."

"With you to lead us, Potan, I'm sure we will."

A man entered the cubby. Potan looked frowningly around. "What is it, Argle?"

The fellow answered in Martian, leered at Anita and withdrew.

Potan stood up. I noticed that he was unsteady with the drink.

"They want me with the work at the projectors."

"Go ahead," I said.

He nodded. We were comrades now.

"Amuse yourself, Haljan. Or come out on deck if you wish. I will tell my men you are one of us."

"And tell them to keep their hands off Miss Prince."

He stared at me. "I had not thought of that—a woman among so many men."

His own gaze at Anita was as leeringly offensive as any of his men could have given. He said, "Have no fear, little tigress."

Anita laughed. "I am afraid of nothing."

But when he had lurched from the cabin she touched me. Smiled with her mannish swagger, for fear we were still observed, and murmured:

"Oh, Gregg, I am afraid!"

We stayed in the cubby a few moments, whispering—trying to plan.

"You think the signal room is in the tower, Gregg?
This tower outside our window here?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Shall we go out and see?"

"Yes. Keep near me always."

"Oh, Gregg. I will!"

We deposited our Erentz suits carefully in a corner of the cubby. We might need them so suddenly! Then we swaggered out to join the brigands working on the deck.

Chapter 30 Desperate Plans

The deck glowed lurid in the queer blue-greenish glare of Martian electro-fuse lights. It was in a bustle of ordered activity. Some twenty of the crew were scattered about, working in little groups. Apparatus was being brought up from below to be assembled. There was a pile of Erentz suits and helmets, of Martian pattern, but still very similar to those with

which Grantline's expedition was equipped. There were giant projectors of several kinds, some familiar to me, others of a fashion I had never seen before. It seemed there were six or eight of them, still dismantled, with a litter of their attendant batteries and coils and tube-amplifiers. They were to be mounted here on the deck, I surmised; I saw in the dome-side one or two of them already rolled into position at the necessary pressure portes.

Anita and I stood outside Potan's cubby, gazing around us curiously. The men looked at us, but none of them spoke.

"Let's watch from here a moment," I whispered. She nodded, standing with her hand on my arm. I felt that we were very small, here in the midst of these seven-foot Martian men. I was all in white, the costume used in the warm interior of the Grantline camp.

Bareheaded, white silk *Planetara* uniform jacket, broad belt and tight-laced trousers. Anita was a slim black figure beside me, somber as Hamlet, with her pale boyish face and wavy black hair.

The gravity being maintained here on the ship we had found to be stronger than that of the Moon—rather more like Mars.

"There are the heat-rays, Gregg."

A pile of them was visible down the deck-length. And I saw caskets of fragile glass globes, bombs of different styles; hand-projectors of the paralyzing ray; search-beams of several varieties; the Benson curve-light, and a few side-arms of ancient Earth-design—swords and dirks, and small bullet projectors.

There seemed to be some mining equipment also. Far along the deck, beyond the central cabin in the open space of the stern, steel rails were stacked; half a dozen small-wheeled ore-carts; a tiny motor engine for hauling them—and what looked as though it might be the dismembered sections of an ore-shute.

The whole deck was presently strewn with this mass of equipment.

Potan moved about, directing the different groups of

workers. The news had spread that we knew the location of the treasure. The brigands were jubilant. In a few hours the ship's armament would be ready, and it would advance to attack Grantline.

I saw many glances being cast out the dome side-windows toward the distant, far-down plains of the Mare Imbrium. The brigands believed that the Grantline camp lay in that direction.

Anita whispered, "Which is their giant electronic projector, Gregg?"

I could see it amidships of the deck. It was already in place. Potan was there now, superintending the men who were connecting it. The most powerful weapon on the ship, it had, Potan said, an effective range of some ten miles. I wondered what it would do to a Grantline building! The Erentz double walls would withstand it for a time, I was sure. But it would blast an Erentz fabric-suit, no doubt of that. Like a lightning bolt, it would kill—its flashing free-stream of electrons shocking the heart, bringing instant death.

I whispered, "We must smash that before we leave! But first turn it on Miko, if he signals now."

I was tensely watchful for that signal. The electronic projector obviously was not yet ready. But when it was connected, I must be near it, to persuade its duty-man to fire it on Miko. With this done we would have more time to plan our other tasks. I did not think Potan would be ready for his attack before another time of sleep here in the ship's routine. Things would be quieter then—I would watch my chance to send a signal to Earth, and then we would escape.

With my thoughts roving, we had been standing quietly at the cubby door-oval for perhaps fifteen minutes. My hand in my side pouch clutched the little bullet projector. The brigands had taken it from me and given it to Potan. He had placed it on the settle with my Erentz suit; and when we gained his confidence he had forgotten it and left it there. I had it now, and the feel of its cool sleek handle gave me a measure of comfort. Things could go wrong so easily—but if they did, I was determined to sell my life as dearly as possible. And a vague thought was in my

mind: I must not use the last bullet. That would be for Anita.

I shook myself free from such sinister fancy.

"That electronic projector is remote-controlled. Look, Anita—that's the signal room over us. The giant projector will be aimed and fired from up there."

It seemed so. A thirty-foot skeleton tower stood on the deck near us, with a spiral ladder leading up to a small square steel cubby at the top. Through the cubby window-ovals I could see instrument panels. A single Martian was up there; he had called down to Potan concerning the electronic projector.

The roof of this little tower room was close under the dome—a space of no more than four feet. A pressure lock-exit in the dome was up there, with a few steps leading up to it from the roof of the tower signal-room. We could escape that way, perhaps. In the event of dire necessity it might be possible. But only as a desperate resort, for it would put us on the top of the glassite dome, with a sheer hundred feet or more

down its sleek bulging exterior side, and down the outside bulge of the ship's hull, to the rocks below. There might be a spider ladder outside leading downward, but I saw no evidence of it. If Anita and I were forced to escape that way, I wondered how we could manage a hundred foot jump to the rocks and land safely. Even with the slight gravity of the Moon it would be a dangerous fall.

"You are Gregg Haljan?"

I started as one of the brigands, coming up behind us, addressed me.

"Yes."

"Commander Potan tells me you were chief navigator of the *Planetara*?"

"Yes."

"You shall pilot us when we advance upon the Grantline camp. I am control-commander here—Brotow, my name."

He smiled. A giant fellow, but spindly. He spoke good English. He seemed anxious to be friendly.

"We are glad to have you and George Prince's sister with us." He shot Anita an admiring glance. "I will show you our controls, Haljan."

"All right," I said. "Whatever I can do to help...."

"But not now. It will be some hours before we are ready."

I nodded, and he wandered away. Anita whispered:

"Did he mean that signal room up here in the tower? Oh, Gregg, maybe it's only the ship's control room!"

"I don't know. But the projector range-finders are up there, and I think it's the signal room."

"Suppose we go up and see? Gregg, Miko's signals might start any minute."

And the electronic projector now seemed about ready.

It was time for me to act. But a reluctant instinct was upon me. Our Erentz suits were here close behind us in Potan's cubby. I hated to leave them: if anything happened and we had to make a sudden dash, there would be no time to garb ourselves in the suits. To adjust the helmets was bad enough.

I whispered swiftly, "We must get into our suits—find some pretext." I drew her back through the cubby doorway where we would be more secluded.

"Anita, listen: I've been a fool not to plan our escape more carefully! We're in too great a danger here."

It seemed to me suddenly that we were in desperate plight. Was it premonition?

"Anita, listen: if anything happens and we have to make a dash—"

"Up through that dome-lock, Gregg? It's a manual control; you can see the levers."

"Yes. It's a manual. But up there—how would we get

down?"

She was far calmer than I. "There may be an outside ladder, Gregg."

"I don't think so. I haven't seen it."

"Then we can get out the way they brought us in. The hull-port—it's a manual, too."

"Yes, I think I can find our way down through the hull corridors. I mean, for a quick run. If we have to run, you stay close behind me. I've this bullet projector, and evidently there aren't many men in the lower corridors."

"There are guards outside on the rocks."

We had seen them through the dome windows. But there were not many—only two or three. A surprise rush at them would turn the trick.

We donned our Erentz suits.

"What will we do with the helmets?" Anita demanded.
"Leave them here?"

"No—take them with us. I'm not going to get separated from them; it's too dangerous."

"We'll look strange going up to that signal room equipped like this," she commented.

"I can't help it. We'll figure out something to explain it."

She stood before me, a queer-looking little figure in the now deflated, bagging suit with her slim neck and head protruding above the metal circle of its collar.

"Carry your helmet, Anita. I'll take mine."

We could adjust the helmets and start the Erentz motors all within a few seconds.

"I'm ready, Gregg."

"Come on, then. Let me go first."

I had the bullet projector in an outer pouch of the suit where I could instantly reach it. This was more rational: we had a fighting chance now. The fear which had swept me so suddenly began to recede. I was calm.

"We'll climb the tower to the signal room," I whispered. "Do it boldly."

We stepped from the cubby. Potan was not in sight; he was on the further deck beyond the central cabin structure perhaps, or had gone below.

On the deck, we were immediately accosted. This was different—our appearance in the Erentz suits!

"Where are you going?"

This fellow spoke in Martian. I answered in English.

"Up there."

He stood before us, towering over me. I saw a group of nearby workers stop to regard us. In a moment we

would be causing a commotion, and it was the last thing I desired.

I said in Martian, "Commander Potan told me, what I wish I can do. From the dome we look around—see where is the Grantline camp—I am pilot of this ship to go there."

The man who had called himself Brotow passed near us. I appealed to him.

"We put on our suits. I thought we might go up on the dome for a minute and look around. If I'm to pilot the ship...."

He hesitated, his glance sweeping the deck as though to ask Potan. Someone said in Martian:

"The commander is down in the stern storeroom."

It decided Brotow. He waved away the Martian who had stopped me.

"Let them alone."

Anita and I gave him our most friendly smiles.

"Thanks."

He bowed to Anita with a sweeping gesture. "I will show you over the control room presently."

His gaze went to the peak of the bow. The little hooded cubby there was the control room. Satisfaction swept me. Then this, above us in the tower, must surely be the signal room. Would Brotow follow us up? I hoped not. I wanted to be alone with the duty-man up there, giving me a chance to get at the projector controls if Miko's signal should come.

I drew Anita past Brotow, who had stood aside. "Thanks," I repeated. "We won't be long."

We mounted the little ladder.

Chapter 31 In the Tower Cubby

Hurry, Anita!"

I feared that Potan might come up from the hull at

any moment and stop us. The duty-man over us gazed down, his huge head and shoulders blocking the small signal room window. Brotow called up in Martian, telling him to let us come. He scowled, but when we reached the trap in the room floor-grid, we found him standing aside to admit us.

I flung a swift glance around. It was a metallic cubby, not much over fifteen feet square, with an eight-foot arched ceiling. There were instrument panels. The range-finder for the giant projector was here; its little telescope with the trajectory apparatus and the firing switch were unmistakable. And the signalling apparatus was here! Not a Martian set, but a fully powerful Botz ultra-violet helio sender with its attendant receiving mirrors. The *Planetara* had used the Botz system, so I was thoroughly familiar with it. I saw, too, what seemed to be weapons: a row of small fragile glass globes, hanging on clips along the wall—bombs, each the size of a man's fist. And a broad belt with bombs in its padded compartments.

My heart was pounding as my first quick glance took in these details. I saw also that the room had four

small oval window openings. They were breast-high above the floor; from the deck below I knew that the angle of vision was such that the men down there could not see into this room except to glimpse its upper portion near the ceiling. And the helio set was banked on a low table near the floor.

In a corner of the room a small ladder led through a ceiling trap to the cubby roof. This upper trap was open. Four feet above the room-roof was the arch of the dome, with the entrance to the upper exit-lock directly above us. The weapons and the belt of bombs were near this ascending ladder, evidently placed here as equipment for use from the top of the dome.

I turned to the solitary duty-man. I must gain his confidence at once. Anita had laid her helmet aside. She spoke first.

"We were with Set Miko," she said smilingly, "in the wreck of the *Planetara*. You heard of it? We know where the treasure is."

This duty-man was a full seven feet tall, and the most

heavy-set Martian I had ever seen. A tremendous, beetling-browed, scowling fellow. He stood with hands on his hips, his leather-garbed legs spread wide; and as I fronted him I felt like a child. He was silent, glaring down at me as I drew his attention from Anita.

"You speak English? We are not skilled with Martian."

I wondered if at the next time of sleep this fellow would be on duty here. I hoped not; it would not be easy to trick him and find an opportunity to flash a signal. But that task was some hours away as yet; I would worry about it when the time came. Just now I was concerned with Miko and his little band, who at any moment might arrive in sight. If we could persuade this scowling duty-man to turn the projector on them....

He answered me in ready English:

"You are the man Gregg Haljan? And this is the sister of George Prince—what do you want up here?"

"I am a navigator. Brotow wants me to pilot the ship when we advance to attack Grantline."

"This is not the control room."

"No, I know it isn't."

I put my helmet carefully on the floor-grid beside Anita's. I straightened to find the brigand gazing at her. He did not speak; he was still scowling. But in the dim blue glow of the cubby I caught the look in his eyes.

I said hastily, "Grantline knows your ship has landed here on Archimedes. His camp is off there on the Mare Imbrium. He sent up a signal—you saw it, didn't you?—just before Miss Prince and I came aboard. He was trying to pretend that he was your Earth-party, Miko and Coniston."

"Why?"

The fellow turned his scowl on me, but Anita brought his gaze back to her. She put in quickly:

"Grantline, as Brother always said, has no great cunning. I believe he's planning now to creep up on us, catch us unaware by pretending that he is Miko."

"If he does that," I said, "we will turn this electronic projector on him and annihilate him. You have its firing mechanism here."

"Who told you so?" he shot at me.

I gestured. "I see it here. It's obvious. I'm skilled at trajectory-firing. If Grantline appears down there now, I'll help you—"

"Is it connected?" Anita demanded boldly.

"Yes," he said. "You have on your Erentz suits: are you going to the dome-roof? Then go."

But that was what we did not want to do. Anita's glance seemed to tell me to let her handle this. I turned toward one of the cubby windows; she said sweetly:

"Are you in charge of this room? Show me how that projector is operated; it will be invincible against the Grantline camp."

"Yes."

I had my back to them for a moment. Through the breast-high oval I could see down across the deck-space and out through the side dome windows. And my heart suddenly leaped into my throat. It seemed that down there in the Earthlit shadows, where the spreading base of the giant crater joined the plains, a light was bobbing. I gazed, stricken. Miko's lights? Was he advancing, preparing to signal? I tried to gauge the distance; it was not over two miles from here.

Or was it not a light at all? With the naked eye, I could not be sure. Perhaps there was a telescopic finder here in the cubby....

I was subconsciously aware of the voices of Anita and the duty-man behind me. Then abruptly I heard Anita's low cry. I whirled around.

The giant Martian had gathered her into his huge arms, his heavy-jowled gray face with a leering grin close to hers!

He saw me coming. He held her with one arm: his other flung at me, caught me, knocked me backward. He rasped:

"Get out of here! Go up to the dome, leave us."

Anita was silently struggling with her little hands at his thick throat. His blow flung me against a settle. But I held my feet. I was partly behind him. I leaped again, and as he tried to disengage himself from Anita to front me, her clutching fingers impeded him.

My bullet projector was in my hand. But in that second as I leaped, I had the sense to realize I should not fire it and with its noise alarm the ship. I grasped its barrel, reached upward and struck with its heavy metal butt. The blow caught the Martian on the skull, and simultaneously my body struck him.

We went down together, falling partly upon Anita. But

the giant had not cried out, and as I gripped him now, I felt his body limp. I lay panting. Anita squirmed silently from under us. Blood from the giant's head was welling out, hot and sticky against my face as I lay sprawled on him.

I cast him off. He was dead, his fragile Martian skull split open by my blow.

There had been no alarm. The slight noise we made had not been heard down on the busy deck. Anita and I crouched by the floor. From the deck all this part of the room could not be seen.

"Dead!"

"Oh, Gregg—"

It forced our hand. I could not wait now for Miko to come. But I could flash the Earth signal now, and then we would have to make our run to escape.

Abruptly I remembered that light down at the crater-base! I kept Anita out of sight on the floor and went

cautiously to a window. The deck was in turmoil with brigands moving about excitedly. Not because of what had happened in our tower signal room; they were unaware of that.

Miko's signals were showing! I could see them now plainly, down at the crater-base. A group of hand-lights and a small waving helio-beam.

And they were being answered from the ship! Potan was on the deck—a babble of voices, above which his rose with roars of command. At one of the dome windows a brigand with a hand search-beam was sending its answering light. And I saw that Potan was working over a deck telescope-finder.

It had all come so suddenly that I was stunned. But I did not wait to read the signals. I swung back at Anita.

"It's Miko! And they are answering him! Get your helmet; I'll try firing the projector."

Or would I instead try to send a brief flash-signal to

Earth? There would be no time to do both: we must escape out of here. The route up through the dome was the only feasible one now.

This range mechanism of the projector was reasonably familiar, and I felt that I could operate it. The range-finder and switch were on a ledge at one of the windows. I rushed to it. As I swung the little telescope, training it down on Miko's lights, I could see the huge projector on the deck swinging similarly. Its movement surprised the men who were attending it. One of them called up to me, but I ignored him.

Then Potan looked up and saw me. He shouted in Martian at the duty-man, whom he doubtless thought was behind me: "Be ready! We may fire on them, whoever they are. I'll give you the word."

The signals were proceeding. It had only been a moment. I caught something like, "*Haljan is impostor*."

I was aiming the projector. I was aware of Anita at my elbow. I pushed her back.

"Put on your helmet!"

I had the range. I flung the firing switch.

At the deck window the giant projector spat its deadly electronic stream. The men down there leaped away from it with surprise. I heard Potan's voice, his shout of protest and anger.

But down in the Earthglow at the crater-base, Miko's lights had not vanished! I had missed! An error in the range? Abruptly I knew it was not that. Miko's lights were still there. His signals still coming. And I remarked now a faint distortion about them, the glow of his little group of hand-lights faintly distorted and vaguely shot with a greenish cast. Benson curve-lights! I realized it.

My thoughts whirled in the few seconds while I stood there at the tower window. Miko had feared he might summarily be fired upon. He had gone back to his camp, equipped all his lights with the Benson curve. He was somewhere at the crater-base now. But not where I thought I saw him! The Benson curve-light

changed the path of the light-rays traveling from him to me—I could not even approximate his true position!

Anita was plucking at me. "Gregg, come."

"I can't hit him!" I gasped.

Should I try the flash-signal to Earth? Did we dare linger here? I stood another few seconds fascinated at the window. I saw Potan down in the confusion of the deck, training a telescope. He had shouted up violently at his duty-man here not to fire again.

And now he suddenly let out a roar. "I can see them! It's Miko! By the Almighty—his giant stature—Brotow, look! That's not an Earthman!"

He flung aside his little telescope finder. "Disconnect that projector! It's Miko down there! This Haljan is a trickster! Where is he? Braile—Braile, you accursed fool! Are Haljan and the girl up there with you?"

But the duty-man lay weltering in his blood at our

feet.

I had dropped back from the window. Anita and I crouched for an instant in confusion, fumbling with our helmets.

The ship rang with the alarm. And amid the turmoil we could hear the shouts of the infuriated brigands swarming up the tower ladder after us!

Chapter 32 A Speck Amid the Stars

I was only inactive a moment. I had thought Anita would have on her helmet. But she was reluctant, or confused.

"Gregg."

"We've got to get out of here! Up through the overhead locks to the dome."

"Yes—" She fumbled with the helmet. Under the floor-grid the climbing men on the ladder were audible. They were already nearing the top. The trap door was closed: Anita and I were crouching on it. There was a

thick metal bar set in a depressed groove of the grid. I slid it in place—it would seal the trap for a time, at any rate.

A degree of confidence came to me. We had a few moments before there could be any hand-to-hand conflict. That giant electronic projector would eventually be used against Grantline: it was the brigands' most powerful weapon. Its controls were here—by Heaven, I would smash them! That at least I could do!

I jumped for the window. Miko's signals had stopped, but I caught a glimpse of his distant moving curve-lights.

A flash came up at me, as in the window I became visible to the brigands on the ship's deck. It was a small hand-projector, hastily fired, for it went wide of the window. It was followed by a rain of small beams, but I was warned and I dropped my head beneath the high sill. The rays flashed diagonally upward through the oval opening, hissed against our vaulted roof. The air snapped and tingled with a shower of blue-red

sparks, and the acrid odor of the released gases settled down upon me.

The trajectory controls of the projector were beside me. I seized them, ripped and tore at them. There was a roar down on the deck. The projector had exploded. A man's agonized scream split the confusion of sounds.

It silenced the brigands on the deck. Under our floor-grid those on the ladder had been pounding at the trap-door. They stopped, evidently to see what had happened. The bombardment of our windows ceased momentarily.

I cautiously peered out the window again. In the wreck of the projector three men were lying. One of them was screaming horribly. The dome-side was damaged. Potan and other men were frantically investigating to see if the ship's air were hissing out.

A triumph swept me. They had not found me so meek and inoffensive as they might have thought!

Anita clutched at me. She still had not donned her helmet.

"Put it on!"

"But Gregg—"

"Put it on!"

"I—I don't want to put it on until you put yours on."

"I've smashed the projector! We've stopped them coming up for a while."

But they were still on the ladder under our floor. They heard our voices; they began thumping again. Then pounding. They seemed now to have some heavy implement. They rammed with it against the trap.

But the floor seemed holding. The square of metal grid trembled, yielded a little. But it was good for a few minutes longer.

I called down, "The first one who comes through will

be shot." My words mingled with their oaths. There was a moment's pause, then the ramming went on. The dying man on the deck was still screaming.

I whispered, "I'll try an Earth-signal."

She nodded. Pale, tense, but calm. "Yes, Gregg. And I was thinking—"

"It won't take a minute. Have your helmet ready."

"I was thinking—"

She hurried across the room. I swung on the Botz signaling apparatus. It was connected. Within a moment I had it humming. The fluorescent tubes lighted with their lurid glare; they painted purple the body of the giant duty-man who lay sprawled at my feet. I drew on all the ship's power. The tube-lights in the room quivered and went dim.

I would have to hurry. Potan could shut this off from the main hull control room. I could see, through the room's upper trap, the primary sending mirror

mounted in the peak of the dome. It was quivering, radiant with its light-energy. I sent the flash.

The flattened, past-full Earth was up there. I knew that the western hemisphere faced the Moon at this hour. I flashed in English, with the open Universal Earth-code:

"Help! Grantline."

And again: *"Send help! Archimedes region near Apennines. Attacked by brigands. Send help at once! Grantline!"*

If only it would be received! I flung off the current. Anita stood watching me intently. "Gregg, look!"

She had taken some of the glass globe-bombs which lay by the foot of the ascending ladder. She held some of them now.

"Gregg. I threw some."

At the window we gazed down. The globes she flung

had shattered on the deck. They were occulting darkness bombs.*

*[Filled with an odorless, harmless gas, these bombs were used in warfare, taking the place of the old-fashioned smoke screens. The diffusing gas was of such a nature that, when released, it absorbed within itself all the color inherent to the light-rays striking it, thus creating a temporary darkness.]

Through the blackness of the deck, the shouts of the brigands came up. They were stumbling about. But the ramming of our trap went on, and I saw that it was beginning to yield. One corner of it was bent up.

"We've got to go, Anita!"

"Yes."

From out of the darkness which hung like a shroud over the deck an occasional flash came up, unaimed—wide of our windows. But the darkness was dissipating. I could see now the dim glow of the deck lights, blurred as through a heavy fog.

I dropped another of the bombs.

"Put on your helmet."

"Yes—yes, I will. You put on yours."

We had them adjusted in a moment. Our Erentz motors were pumping.

I gripped her. "Put out your helmet-light."

She extinguished it. I handed her my bullet projector.

"Hold it a moment. I'm going to take that belt of bombs."

The trap-door was all but broken under the ramming blows of the men on the ladder. I leaped over the body of the duty-man, seized the belt of bombs and strapped it about my waist.

Anita stood with me.

"Give me the projector."

She handed it to me. The trap-door burst upward! A man's head and shoulders appeared. I fired a bullet into him—the little leaden pellet singing down through the yellow powder-flash that spat from the projector's muzzle.

The brigand screamed, and dropped back out of sight. There was confusion at the ladder-top. I flung a bomb at the broken trap. A tiny heat-ray came wavering up through the opening, but went wide of us.

The instrument room was in darkness. I clung to Anita.

"Hold on to me! You go first—here is the ladder."

We found it in the blackness, mounted it and went through the cubby's roof-trap.

I took a hasty look and dropped another bomb beside us. The four-foot space up here between the cubby roof and the overhead dome went black. We were momentarily concealed.

Anita located the manual levers of the lock-entrance.

"Here, Gregg."

I shoved at them. Fear leaped in me that they would not operate. But they swung. The tiny porte opened wide to receive us. We clambered into the small air-chamber; the door slid closed, just as a flash from below struck at it. The brigands had seen our little cloud of darkness and were firing up through it.

We were through the locks in a moment, out on the open dome-top. A sleek, rounded spread of glassite, with broad aluminite girders. There were cross-ribs which gave us footing, and occasional projections—streamline fin-tips, the casings of the upper rudder shafts, and the upstanding stubby funnels into which the helicopters were folded.

We moved along the central footpath and crouched by a six-foot casing. The stars and the glowing Earth were over us. The curving dome-top—a hundred feet or so in length, and bulging thirty feet wide beneath us—glistened in the Earthlight. It was a sheer drop

down these curving sides past the ship's hull, a hundred feet to the rocks on which the vessel rested. The towering wall of Archimedes was beside us; and beyond the brink of the ledge the thousands of feet down to the plains.

I saw the lights of Miko's band down there. He had stopped signaling. His little lights were spread out, bobbing as he and his men advanced up the crater's foothills, coming to join their ship.

I had an instant's glimpse. Anita and I could not stay here. The brigands would follow us up in a moment. I saw no exterior ladder. We would have to take our chances and jump.

There were brigands down there on the rocks. I saw three or four skulking helmeted figures, and they saw us! A bullet whizzed by us, and then came the flash of a hand-ray.

I touched Anita. "Can you make the leap? Anita, dear...."

Again it seemed that this must be farewell.

"Gregg, dear one—oh, we've got to do it!"

Those waiting figures would pounce on us.

"Anita, lie here a moment."

I jumped up and ran twenty feet toward the bow; then back, toward the stern, flinging down the last of my bombs. The darkness was like a cloud down there, enveloping the outer brigands. But up here we were above it, etched by the starlight and Earthglow.

I came back to Anita.

"We'll have to chance it now."

"Gregg...."

"Good-by, dear. I'll jump first, down this side—you follow."

To leap into that black patch, with the rocks under it....

"Gregg—"

She was trying to tell me to look overhead. She gestured. "Gregg, see!"

I saw it out over the plains—a little speck amid the stars. A moving speck, coming toward us!

"Gregg, what is it?"

I gazed, held my breath. A moving speck out there. A blob now.

And then I realized that it was not a large object, far away, but small, and already very close—only a few hundred feet off, dropping toward the top of our dome. A narrow, flat, ten-foot object, like a wingless volplane. There were no lights on it, but in the Earthlight I could see two crouching, helmeted figures riding it.

"Anita! Don't you remember!"

I was swept with dawning comprehension. Back in the

Grantline camp Snap and I had discussed how to use the *Planetara's* gravity plates. We had gone to the wreck and secured them, had rigged this little volplane flyer....

The brigands on the rocks saw it now. A flash went up at it. One of the figures crouching on it opened a flexible fabric like a wing over its side. I saw another flash from below, harmlessly striking the insulated shield.

I gasped to Anita, "Light your helmet! It's from Grantline! Let them see us!"

I stood erect. The little flying platform went over us, fifty feet up, circling, dropping to the dome-top.

I waved my helmet-light. The exit-lock from below—up which we had come—was near us. The advancing brigands were already in it! I had forgotten to demolish the manuals. And I saw that the darkness down on the rocks was almost gone now, dissipating in the airless night. The brigands down there began firing up at us.

It was a confusion of flashing lights. I clutched at Anita.

"Come this way—run!"

The platform barely missed our heads. It sailed lengthwise of the dome-top, and crashed silently on the central runway near the stern-tip. Anita and I ran to it.

The two helmeted figures seized us, shoved us prone on the metal platform. It was barely four feet wide: a low railing, handles with which to cling, and a tiny hooded cubby in front, with banks of controls.

"Gregg!"

"Snap!"

It was Snap and Venza. She seized Anita, held her crouching in place. Snap flung himself face down at the controls.

The brigands in the lock were out on the dome now. I

took a last shot as we lifted. My bullet punctured one of them; he fell, slid scrambling off the rounded dome and dropped out of sight.

Light-rays and silent flashes seemed to envelop us. Venza held the side-shields higher.



IMAGEDescription

We tilted, swayed crazily, and then steadied.

The ship's dome dropped away beneath us. The rocks of the open ledge were under us. Then the abyss, with the moving climbing specks of Miko's lights far down.

I saw, over the side-shield, the already distant brigand ship resting on the ledge with the massive Archimedes' wall behind it. A confusion back there of futile flashing rays.

It all faded into a remote glow as we sailed smoothly up into the starlight and away, heading for the Grantline camp.

Chapter 33 Besieged!

"Wake up, Gregg! They're coming!"

I forced myself to consciousness. "Coming—"

"Yes. Wake up!"

I leaped from my bunk, followed Snap with a rush into the corridor. We had returned safely to the Grantline Camp. Anita and I found ourselves exhausted from lack of sleep, our arduous climb of Archimedes and that tense time on the brigand ship. On the flight back Snap had explained how the landing of the ship on Archimedes was observed through the Grantline

telescope, using but little of its power for this local range. They had read with amazement my signals to the brigands. Snap had rushed to completion the first of our contemplated flying platforms. Then he had seen Miko's signals from the crater-base, seen the lights of the fight to capture Anita and me in the cubby, and had come to rescue us.

Back at the camp we were given food, and Grantline forced me to try and sleep.

"They'll be on us in a few hours, Gregg. Miko will have joined them by now. He'll lead them to us. You must rest, for we need everyone at his best."

And surprisingly, in the midst of the camp's turmoil of last minute activities, I slept soundly, until Snap called me that the ship was coming.

The corridor echoed with the tramp of Grantline's busy crew. But there was no confusion now; a grim calmness had settled upon everyone.

Anita and Venza rushed up to join us. "It's in sight!"

There was no need of going to the instrument room. From the windows fronting the brink of the cliff the brigand ship was plainly visible. It came sailing from Archimedes, a dark shape blurring the stars. All its lights were extinguished save a single white search-beam in the bow-peak, slanting diagonally down.

The beam presently caught our little group of buildings; its glare shone in the windows as it clung for a moment. I could envisage the triumphant curiosity, of Potan and his fellows up there, gazing along the beam.

Then it swung away. The ship was at an altitude of no more than three thousand feet when I first saw it, coming upon a level keel. Would it circle over us, firing at us? Or sail past, after inspecting us? Or land, perhaps, boldly crowded upon our little ledge?

We were ready—as ready as we could be with our meager equipment. The camp was in a state of siege. The cliff-lights were extinguished: the interior lights were dim, save in the workshops of the main building, where the final assembling of Snap's other flying

platforms and their insulated protective shields was still in progress.

We had dimmed the lights to conserve our power, and to enable the Erentz motors to run at full capacity. Our buildings would have to withstand the brigand rays which soon would be upon us.

Outside on our dim, Earthlit cliff, the tiny lights showed where our few guards were lurking. As I stood at the window watching the oncoming ship, Grantline's voice sounded:

"Call in those men! Ring the call-lights, Franck!"

The siren buzzed over the camp's interior; the warning call-lights on the roof brought in the outer guards. They came running to the admission portes, which had been repaired after Miko disabled them.

The guards came in. We dimmed our lights further. The treasure sheds were black against the cliff behind us. No need for guards there—the bulk of the ore was such that we reasoned the brigands would not

attempt to move it until our buildings were captured. But, if they should try it, we were prepared to sally out with our hand-weapons and defend it.

In the dim lights we crouched. A silence was upon us, save for the clanging in the workshop down the corridor. Most of us wore our Erentz suits, with helmets ready, though I am sure there was not a man of us but who prayed he might not have to go out. At many of the windows—our weakest points to withstand the rays—insulated fabric shields were hung like curtains.

The brigand ship slowly advanced. It was soon over the opposite rim of our little crater. Its search-beam swung about the rim and down into the valley.

My thoughts ran like a turgid stream as I stood tensely watching.

Four hours ago I had sent that flash-signal to Earth. If it were received, a patrol-ship could come to our rescue and arrive here in another eight hours—or perhaps even less.

Ah, that "if!" *If* the signal were received! *If* the patrol-ship were immediately available! *If* it started at once....

Eight hours at the very least. I tried to assure myself that we could hold out that long....

The brigand ship crossed the opposite crater-rim. It dropped lower. It seemed poised over the crater-valley, almost at our own level and less than two miles from us. Its search-beam vanished. For a moment it hung, a sleek, cylindrical silver shape, gleaming in the Earthlight.

Snap looked at me and murmured, "It's descending."

It slowly settled, cautiously picked its landing-place amid the crags and pits of the tumbled scarred valley floor. It came to rest, a vague silver menacing shape lurking in the lower shadows, close at the foot of the inner opposite crater-wall.

A few moments of tense waiting passed. Soon tiny lights were moving down there, some out on the rocks

near the ship, others up under its deck-dome.

A stab of searchlight shot across the valley, swung along our ledge and clung with its glaring ten-foot circle to the front of our main building. Then a ray flashed.

The assault had begun!

Chapter 34 The First Encounters

The besieged Earth-men wage grim, ultra-scientific war with Martian bandits in a last great struggle for their radium-ore—and their lives.

It seemed, with that first shot from the enemy, that a great relief came to me—an apprehension fallen away. We had anticipated this moment for so long, dreaded it. I think all our men felt it. A shout went up:

"Harmless!"

It was not that. But our building withstood it better than I had feared. It was a flash from a large electronic projector mounted on the deck of the brigand ship. It stabbed up from the shadows across the valley at the foot of the opposite crater-wall, a beam of vaguely fluorescent light. Simultaneously the search-light vanished.

The stream of electrons caught the front face of our main building in a six-foot circle. It held a few seconds, vanished; then stabbed again, and still

again. Three bolts. A total, I suppose, of nine or ten seconds.

I was standing with Grantline at a front window. We had rigged an oblong of insulated fabric like a curtain: we stood peering, holding the curtain cautiously aside. The ray struck some twenty feet away from us.

"Harmless!"

The men in the room shouted it with derision. But Grantline swung on them.

"Don't think that!"

An interior signal-panel was beside Grantline. He called the duty-men in the instrument room.

"It's over. What are your readings?"

The bombarding electrons had passed through the outer shell of the building's double-wall, and been absorbed in the rarefied, magnetized air-current of

the Erentz circulation. Like poison in a man's veins, reaching his heart, the free alien electrons had disturbed the motors. They accelerated, then retarded. Pulsed unevenly, and drew added power from the reserve tanks. But they had normalized at once when the shot was past. The duty-man's voice sounded from the grid in answer to Grantline's question:

"Five degrees colder in your building. Can't you feel it?"

The disturbed, weakened Erentz circulation had allowed the outer cold to radiate through a trifle. The walls had had a trifle extra explosive pressure from the room-air. A strain—but that was all.

"It's probably their most powerful single weapon, Gregg." Grantline said.

I nodded. "Yes. I think so."

I had smashed the real giant, with its ten-mile range. The ship was only two miles from us, but it seemed as

though this projector were exerted to its distance limit. I had noticed on the deck only one of this type. The others, paralyzing-rays and heat rays, were less deadly.

Grantline commented: "We can withstand a lot of that bombardment. If we stay inside—"

That ray, striking a man outside, would penetrate his Erentz suit within a few seconds, we could not doubt. We had, however, no intention of going out unless for dire necessity.

"Even so," said Grantline. "A hand-shield would hold it off for a certain length of time."

We had an opportunity a moment later to test our insulated shields. The bolt came again. It darted along the front face of the building, caught our window and clung. The double window-shells were our weakest points. The sheet of flashing Erentz current was transparent: we could see through it as though it were glass. It moved faster, but was thinner at the windows than in the walls. We feared the

bombarding electrons might cross it, penetrate the inner shell and, like a lightning bolt, enter the room.

We dropped the curtain corner. The radiance of the bolt was dimly visible. A few seconds, then it vanished again, and behind the shield we had not felt a tingle.

"Harmless!"

But our power had been drained nearly an aeron, to neutralize the shock to the Erentz current. Grantline said:

"If they kept that up, it would be a question of whose power supply would last longest. And it would not be ours.... You saw our lights fade down while the bolt was striking?"

But the brigands did not know we were short of power. And to fire the projector with a continuous bolt would, in thirty minutes, perhaps, have exhausted their own power-reserve.

This strange warfare! It was new to all of us, for there

had been no wars on any of the three inhabited worlds for many years. Silent, electronic conflict! Not a question of men in battle. A man at a switch on the brigand ship was the sole actor so far in this assault. And the results were visible only in the movement of the needle-dials on our instrument panels. A struggle, so far, not of man's bravery, or skill, or strategy, but merely of electronic power supply.

Yet warfare, however modern, can never transcend the human element. Before this insult was ended I was to have many demonstrations of that!

"I won't answer them," Grantline declared. "Our game is to sit defensive. Conserve everything. Let them make the leading moves."

We waited half an hour, but no other shot came. The valley floor was patched with Earthlight and shadow. We could see the vague outline of the brigand ship backed up at the foot of the opposite crater-wall. The form of its dome over the illumined deck was visible, and the line of its tiny hull ovals.

On the rocks near the ship, helmet-lights of prowling brigands occasionally showed.

Whatever activity was going on down there we could not see with the naked eye. Grantline did not use our telescope at first. To connect it, even for local range, drew on our precious ammunition of power. Some of the men urged that we search the sky with the telescope. Was our rescue ship from Earth coming? But Grantline refused. We were in no trouble yet. And every delay was to our advantage.

"Commander, where shall I put these helmets?"

A man came wheeling a pile of helmets on a little truck.

"At the manual porte—other building."

Our weapons and outside equipment were massed at the main exit-locks of the large building. But we might want to sally out through the smaller locks also. Grantline sent helmets there; suits were not needed, as most of us were garbed in them now, but without

the helmets.

Snap was still in the workshop. I went there during this first half-hour of the attack. Ten of our men were busy there with the little flying platforms and the fabric shields.

"How is it, Snap?"

"Almost all ready."

He had six of the platforms, including the one we had already used, and more than a dozen hand-shields. At a squeeze, all of us could ride on these six little vehicles. We might have to ride them! We planned that, in the event of disaster to the buildings, we could at least escape in this fashion. Food supplies and water were now being placed at the portes.

Depressing preparations! Our buildings uninhabitable, a rush out and away, abandoning the treasure.... Grantline had never mentioned such a contingency, but I noticed, nevertheless, that preparations were being made.

"Only that one shot, Gregg?"

Snap's voice was raised over the clang of the workmen bolting the little gravity-plates of the last platform.

"Four blasts. But just the one projector. Their strongest."

He grinned. He wore no Erentz suit as yet. He stood in torn grimy work-trousers and a bedraggled shirt, with the inevitable red eyeshade holding back his unruly hair. Around his waist was the weighted belt and there were weights on his shoes for gravity stability.

"Didn't hurt us much."

"No."

"When I get the tube-panels in this thing I'll be finished. It'll take another half-hour. I'll join you. Where are you stationed?"

I shrugged. "I was at a front window with Johnny. Nothing to do as yet."

Snap went back to his work. "Well, the longer they delay, the better for us. If only your signal got through, Gregg! We'll have a rescue ship here in a few hours more."

Ah, that "if!"

I turned away. "Can't help you, Snap?"

"No. Take those shields," he added to one of the men.

"Take them where?"

"To Grantline. The front admission porte, or the back. He'll tell you which."

The shields were wheeled away on a little cart. I followed it. Grantline sent it to the back exit.

"No other move from them yet, Johnny?"

"No. All quiet."

"Snap's almost finished."

The brigands presently made another play. A giant heat-ray beam came across the valley. It clung to our front wall for nearly a minute.

Grantline got the reports from the instrument room. He laughed.

"That helped rather than hurt us. Heated the outer wall. Frank took advantage of it and eased up the motors."

We wondered if Miko knew that. Doubtless he did, for another interval passed and the heat-ray was not used again.

Then came a zed-ray. I stood at the window, watching it, faint sheen of beam in the dimness. It crept with sinister deliberation along our front building-wall, clung momentarily to our shielded windows and pried with its revealing glow into Snap's workshop.

"Looking us over," Grantline commented. "I hope they

like what they see."

I knew he did not feel the bravado that was in his tone. We had nothing but small hand weapons: heat-rays, electronic projectors, and bullet projectors. All for very short-range fighting. If Miko had not known that before, he could at least make a good guess at it after the careful zed-ray inspection. With his ship down there two miles away, we were powerless to reach him.

It seemed that Miko was now testing the use of all his mechanisms. A light-flare went up from the dome-peak of the ship. It rose in a slow arc over the valley, and burst. For a few seconds the two-mile circle of crags was brilliantly illumined. I stared, but I had to shield my eyes against the dazzling actinic glare, and I could see nothing. Was Miko making a zed-ray photograph of our interiors? We had no way of knowing.

He was testing his short-range projectors now. With my eyes again accustomed to the normal Earthlight in the valley, I could see the stabs of little electronic

beams, the Martian paralyzing-rays and heat-beams. They darted out like flashing swords from the rocks near the ship.

Then the whole ship and the crater-wall behind it seemed to shift sidewise as a Benson curve-light spread its glow about the ship, with a projector curve-beam coming up and touching the window through which I was peering.

"Haljan, come look at these damn girls! Commander—shall I stop them? They'll kill themselves, or kill us—or smash something!"

We followed the man into the building's broad central corridor. Anita and Venza were riding a midget flying platform! Anita, in her boyish black garb; Venza with a flowing white Venus-robe. They lay on the tiny, six-foot oblong of metal, one manipulating its side shields, the other at the controls. As we arrived, the platform came sliding down the narrow confines of the corridor, lurching, barely missing a door-grid projection. Up to skim the low vaulted ceiling, then down to the floor.

It sailed past our heads, rising over us as we ducked. Anita waved her hand.

Grantline gasped, "By the infernal!"

I shouted, "Anita, stop!"

But they only waved at us, skimming down the length of the corridor, seeming to avoid a smash a dozen times by the smallest margin of chance, stopping miraculously at the further end, hanging poised in mid-air, wheeling, coming back, undulating up and down.

Grantline clung to me. "By the gods of the airways!"

In spite of my astonished horror I could not but share Grantline's obvious admiration. Three of four other men were watching. The girls were amazingly skillful, no doubt of that. There was not a man among us who could have handled that gravity-platform indoors, not one who would have had the brash temerity to try it.

The platform landed with the grace of a humming

bird at our feet, the girls dexterously balancing so that it came to rest swiftly, without the least bump.

I confronted them. "Anita, what are you doing?"

She stood up, flushed and smiling.

"Practising."

Imperturbable girls! The product of their age. Oblivious to the brigand attack, they were in here practising!

"What for?" I demanded.

Venza's roguish eyes twinkled at me. Her hands went to her slim hips with a gesture of defiance.

She asked, "Are you speaking for yourself or the commander?"

I ignored her. "What for?" I reiterated.

"Because we're good at it," Anita retorted. "Better than any of you men. If you should need us...."

"We don't. We won't." I said shortly.

"But if you should...."

Venza put in, "If Snap and I hadn't come for you, you wouldn't be here, Gregg Haljan. I didn't notice you were so horrified to see me holding that shield up over you!"

It silenced me.

She added, "Commander, let us alone. We won't smash anything."

Grantline laughed, "I hope you won't!"

A warning call took us back to the front window. The brigand's search-beam was again being used. It swept slowly along the length of the cliff. Its circle went down the cliff steps to the valley floor, and came sweeping up again. Then it went up to the observatory platform at the summit above us, then back and crept over to the ore-sheds.

We had no men outside, if that was what the brigand wanted to determine. The search-beam presently vanished. It was replaced immediately by a zed-ray, which darted at once to our treasure sheds and clung.

That stung Grantline into his first action. We flung our own zed-ray down across the valley. It reached the brigand ship; this zed-ray and a search-light were our only two projectors of long range.

The brigand ray vanished when ours flashed on. I was with Grantline at an image grid in the instrument room. We saw the deck of the brigand ship and the blurred interior of the cabins.

"Try the search-beam, Franck. We don't need the other."

The zed-ray went off. We gazed down our search-light which clung to the dome of the distant enemy vessel. We could see movement there.

"The telescope," Grantline ordered.

The little dynamos hummed. The telescope-finder glowed and clarified. On the deck of the ship we saw the brigands working with the assembling of ore-carts. A deck landing-port was open. The ore-carts were being carried out through a porte-lock and down a landing incline. And on the rocks outside, we saw several of the carts—and rail-sections and the sections of an ore-shute.

Miko was unloading his mining apparatus! He was making ready to come up for the treasure!

The discovery, startling as it was, nevertheless was far overshadowed by an imperative danger alarm from our main building. Brigands were outside on our ledge! Miko's search-beam, sweeping the ledge a moment before, had carefully avoided revealing them. It had been done just for that purpose, no doubt—making us sure that the ledge was unoccupied and thus to guard against our own light making a search.

But there was a brigand group here close outside our walls! By the merest chance the radiating glow from our search-ray had shown the helmeted figures

scurrying for shelter.

Grantline leaped to his feet.

We rushed for the rear exit-porte which was nearest us. The giant bloated figures had been seen running along the outside of the connecting corridor, in this direction. But before we ever got there, a new alarm came. A brigand was crouching at a front corner of the main building! His hydrogen heat-torch had already opened a rift in the wall!

Chapter 35 Desperate Offensive

"In with you!" ordered Grantline. "Get your helmets on! How many? Six? Enough—get back there, Williams—you were last. The lock won't hold any more."

I was one of the six who jammed into the manual exit lock. We went through it: in a moment we were outside. It was less than three minutes since the prowling brigands had been seen.

Grantline touched me just as we emerged. "Don't wait for orders! Get them!"

"That fellow with the torch, the most dangerous—"

"Yes! I'm with you."

We went out with a rush. We had already discarded our shoe and belt weights. I leaped, regardless of my companions.

The scurrying Martians had disappeared. Through my visor bull's-eye I could see only the Earthlit rocky surface of the ledge. Beside me stretched the dark wall of our building.

I bounded toward the front. The brigand with the torch had been at this front corner. I could not see him from here: he had been crouching just around the angle.

I had a tiny bullet projector, the best weapon for short range outdoors. I was aware of Grantline close behind me.

It took only a few of my giant leaps. I landed at the corner, recovered my balance, and whirled around to the front.

The Martian was here, a giant misshapen lump as he crouched. His torch was a little stab of blue in the deep shadow enveloping him. Intent upon his work, he did not see me. Perhaps he thought his fellows had broken our exits by now.

I landed like a leopard upon his back and fired, my weapon muzzle ramming him. His torch fell hissing with a silent rain of blue fire upon the rocks.

As my grip upon him made audiphone contact, his agonized scream rattled the diaphragms of my ear-grids with horrible, deafening intensity.

He lay writhing under me, then was still. His scream choked into silence. His suit deflated within my encircling grip. He was dead; my leaden, steel-tipped pellet had punctured the double surface of his Erentz-fabric, penetrated his chest.

Grantline's following leap landed him over me.

"Dead?"

"Yes."

I climbed from the inert body. The torch had hissed itself out. Grantline swung on our building corner, and I leaned down with him to examine it. The torch had fused and scarred the surface of the wall, burned almost through. A pressure-rift had opened. We could see it, a curving gash in the metal wall-plate like a crack in a glass window-pane.

I went cold. This was serious damage! The rarefied Erentz-air would seep out. It was leaking now: we could see the magnetic radiance of it all up the length of the ten-foot crack. The leak would change the pressure of the Erentz system, constantly lower it, demanding steady renewal. The Erentz motors would overheat; some might go bad from the strain.

Grantline stood gripping me.

"Damn bad!"

"Yes. Can't we repair it, Johnny?"

"No. Have to take that whole plate-section out, shut off the Erentz plant and exhaust the interior air of all this bulkhead of the building. Day's job—maybe more."

And the crack would get worse, I knew. It would gradually spread and widen. The Erentz circulation would fail. All our power would be drained struggling to maintain it. This brigand who had unwittingly committed suicide by his daring act had accomplished more than he perhaps had realized. I could envisage our weapons, useless from lack of power. The air in our buildings turning fetid and frigid: ourselves forced to the helmets. A rush out to abandon the camp and escape. The buildings exploding—scattering into a litter on the ledge like a child's broken toy. The treasure abandoned, with the brigands coming up and loading it on their ship.

Our defeat. In a few hours now—or minutes. This

crack could slowly widen, or it could break suddenly at any time. Disaster, come now so abruptly upon us at the very start of the brigand attack....

Grantline's voice in my audiphone broke my despairing rush of thoughts. "Bad. Come on, Gregg; nothing to do here."

We were aware that our other four men had run along the building's other side. They emerged now—with the running brigands in front of them, rushing out toward the staircase on the ledge. Three giant Martian figures in flight, with our four men chasing.

A bullet projector spat, with its queer stab of exploding powder fed by the burning oxygen fumes of its artificial air-chamber—one of our men firing. A brigand fell to the rocks by the brink of the ledge. The others reached the descending staircase, tumbled down it with reckless leaps.

Our men turned back. Before we could join them, the enemy ship down in the valley sent up a cautious search-beam which located its returning men. Then

the beam swung up to the ledge, landed upon us.

We stood confused, blinded by the brilliant glare.
Grantline stumbled against me.

"Run, Gregg! They'll be firing at us."

We dashed away. Our companions joined us, rushing back for the porte. I saw it open, reinforcements coming out to help us—half a dozen figures carrying a ten-foot insulated shield. They could barely get it out through the porte.

The Martian search-ray abruptly vanished. Then almost instantly the electronic ray came with its deadly stab. Missed us at first, as we ran for the shield. It vanished, and stabbed again. It caught us, but now we were behind the shield, carrying it back to the porte, hiding behind it.

The ray stabbed once or twice more.

Whether Miko's instruments showed him how serious that damage was to our front wall, we never knew.

But I think that he realized. His search-beam clung to it, and his zed-ray pried into our interiors.

The brigand ship was active now. We were desperate: we used our telescope freely for observation. And used our zed-ray and search-light. Miko's ore-carts and mining apparatus were unloaded on the rocks. The rail-sections were being carried a mile out, nearly to the center of the valley. A subsidiary camp was being established there, only a mile from the base of our cliff, but still far beyond reach of our weapons. We could see the brigand lights down there.

Then the ore-shute sections were brought over. We could see Miko's men carrying some of the giant projectors, mounting them in the new position. Power tanks and cables. Light-flare catapults—little mechanical cannons for throwing the bombs.

The enemy search-light constantly raked our vicinity. Occasionally the giant electronic projector flung up its bolt as though warning us not to dare leave our buildings.

Half an hour went by. Our situation was even worse than Miko could know. The Erentz motors were running hot—our power draining, the crack widening. When it would break we could not tell; but the danger was like a sword over us.

An anxious thirty minutes for us, this second interlude. Grantline called a meeting of all our little force, with every man having his say. Inactivity was no longer a feasible policy. We recklessly used our power to search the sky. Our rescue ship might be up there; but we could not see it with our disabled instruments. No signals came. We could not—or, at least, did not—receive them.

"They wouldn't signal," Grantline protested. "They'd know the Martians would be more likely to get the signal than us. Of what use to warn Miko?"

But he did not dare wait for a rescue ship that might or might not be coming! Miko was playing the waiting game now—making ready for a quick loading of the ore when we were forced to abandon our buildings.

The brigand ship suddenly moved its position! It rose up in a low flat arc, came forward and settled in the center of the valley where the carts and rail-sections were piled, and the outside projectors newly mounted on the rocks. But the projectors only shot at us occasionally.

The brigands now began laying the rails from the ship toward the base of our cliff. The chute would bring the ore down from the ledge, and the carts would take it to the ship.

The laying of the rails was done under cover of occasional stabs from the electronic projector.

And then we discovered that Miko had made still another move. The brigand rays, fired from the depths of the valley, could strike our front building, but could not reach all our ledge. And from the ship's new and nearer position this disadvantage was intensified. Then abruptly we realized that under cover of darkness-bombs an electronic projector and search-ray had been carried to the top of the crater-rim, diagonally across and only half a mile from us.

Their beams shot down, raking all our vicinity from this new angle.

I was on the little flying platform which sallied out as a test to attack these isolated projectors. Snap and I and one other volunteer went. He and I held the shield; Snap handled the controls.

Our exit-port was on the lee side of the building from the hostile search-beam. We got out unobserved and sailed upward; but soon a light from the ship caught us. And the projector bolts came up....

Our sortie only lasted a few minutes. To me, it was a confusion of crossing beams, with the stars overhead, the swaying little platform under me, and the shield tingling in my hands when the blasts struck us. Moments of blurred terror....

The voice of the man beside me sounded in my ears: "Now, Haljan, give them one!"

We were up over the peak of the rim with the hostile projectors under us. I gauged our movement, and

dropped an explosive powder bomb.

It missed. It flared with a puff on the rocks, twenty feet from where the two projectors were mounted. I saw that two helmeted figures were down there. They tried to swing their grids upward, but could not get them vertical to reach us. The ship was firing at us, but it was far away. And Grantline's search-beam was going full-power, clinging to the ship to dazzle them.

Snap circled us. As we came back I dropped another bomb. Its silent puff seemed littered with flying fragments of the two projectors and the bodies of the men.

We flew swiftly back and got in.

It decided Grantline. For an hour past Snap and I had been urging our plan to use the gravity platforms. To remain inactive was sure defeat now. Even if our buildings did not explode—if we thought to huddle in them, helmeted in the failing air—then Miko could readily ignore us and proceed with his loading of the treasure under our helpless gaze. He could do that

now with safety—if we refused to sally out—for we could not fire our weapons through our windows.*

*[To fire a projector through the walls or windows would at once wreck the protective Erentz system. The enemy ship has pressure portes, constructed for the emission of the weapon-rays. Grantline's only weapons thus mounted were his search-beam and zed-ray.]

To remain defensive would end inevitably in our defeat. We all knew it now; it was obvious. The waiting game was Miko's—not ours! And he was playing it.

The success of our attack upon the distant isolated projectors heartened us. Yet it was a desperate offensive indeed upon which we now decided!

We prepared our little expedition at the larger of the exit portes. Miko's zed-ray was watching all our interior movements. We made a brave show of activity in our workshop with abandoned ore-carts which were stored there. We got them out, started to

recondition them.

It seemed to fool Miko. His zed-ray clung to the workshop, watching us. And at the distant porte we gathered the little platforms, the shields, helmets, bombs, and a few hand-projectors.

There were six platforms—three of us upon each. It left four people to remain indoors.

I need not describe the emotion with which Snap and I listened to Venza and Anita pleading to be allowed to accompany us. They urged it upon Grantline, and we took no part. It was too important a decision. The treasure—the life or death of all these men—hung now upon the fate of our venture. Snap and I could not intrude our personal feelings.

And the girls won. Both were undeniably more skilful at handling the midget platforms than any of us men. Two of the six platforms could be guided by them. That was a third of our little force! And of what use to go out and be defeated, leaving the girls here to meet death almost immediately afterward?

We gathered at the porte. A last minute change made Grantline order six of his men to remain guarding the buildings. The instruments—the Erentz system—all the appliances had to be attended.

It left four platforms, each with three men, with Grantline at the controls of one of them. And upon the other two of the six Venza rode with Snap, and I with Anita.

We crouched in the shadows outside the porte. So small an army, sallying out to bomb this enemy vessel or be killed in the attempt! Only sixteen of us. And thirty or so brigands.

I envisaged then this tiny Moon-crater, the scene of this battle we were waging. Struggling humans, desperately trying to kill. Alone here on this globe. Around us, the wide reaches of Lunar desolation. In all this world, every human being was gathered here, struggling to kill!

Anita drew me down to the platform. "Ready, Gregg."

The others were rising. We lifted, moved slowly out and away from the protective shadows of the building.

In a tiny queue the six little platforms sailed out over the valley toward the brigand ship.

Chapter 36 The Battle in the Crater

Grantline led us. We held about level. Five hundred feet beneath us the brigand ship lay, cradled on the rocks. When it was still a mile away from us I could see all its outline fairly clearly in the dimness. Its tiny hull-windows were now dark; but the blurred shape of the hull was visible and above it the rounded cap of dome, with a dim radiance beneath it.

We followed Grantline's platform. It was rising, drawing the others after it like a tail. I touched Anita where she lay beside me with her head half in the small hooded control-bank.

"Going too high."

She nodded, but followed the line nevertheless. It was

Grantline's command.

I lay crouched, holding the inner tips of the flexible side-shields. The bottom of the platform was covered with the insulated fabric. There were two side-shields. They extended upward some two feet, flexible so that I could hold them out to see over them, or draw them up and in to cover us.

They afforded a measure of protection against the hostile rays, though just how much we were not sure. With the platform level, a bolt from beneath could not harm us unless it continued for a considerable time. But the platform, except upon direct flight, was seldom level, for it was a frail, unstable little vehicle! To handle it was more than a question of the controls. We balanced, and helped to guide it, with the movement of our bodies—shifting our weight sidewise, or back, or forward to make it dip as the controls altered the gravity-pull in its tiny plate-sections.

Like a bird, wheeling, soaring, swooping. To me, it was a precarious business.

But now we were in straight flight diagonally upward. The outline of the brigand ship came under us. I crouched tense, breathless; every moment it seemed that the brigands must discover us and loose their bolts.

They may have seen us for some moments before they fired. I peered over the side-shield down at our mark, then up ahead to get Grantline's firing signal. It seemed long delayed. We were almost over the ship. An added glow down there must have warned Grantline that a shot was coming. The tiny red light flared bright on his platform.

I hissed on our Benson curve-light radiance. We had been dark, but a soft glow now enveloped us. Its sheen went down to the ship to reveal us. But its curving path showed us falsely placed. I saw the little line of platforms ahead of us seem to move suddenly sidewise.

It was everyone for himself now; none of us could tell where the other platforms actually were placed or headed. Anita swooped us sharply down to avoid a

possible collision.

"Gregg—?"

"Yes. I'm aiming."

I was making ready to drop the little explosive globe-bomb. Our search-light ray at the camp, answering Grantline's signal, shot down and bathed the ship in a white glare, revealing it for our aim. Simultaneously the brigand bolts came up at us.

I held my bomb out over the shield, calculating the angle to throw it down. The brigand rays flashed around me. They were horribly close; Miko had understood our sudden visible shift and aimed, not where we appeared to be, but where we had been a moment before.

I dropped my bomb hastily at the glowing white ship. The touch of a hostile ray would have exploded it in my hand. I could see its blue-sizzling fuse as it fell. I saw the others also dropping from our nearby platforms. The explosions from them merged in a

confusion of the white glare—and a cloud of black light-mist as the brigands out on the rocks used their occulting darkness bombs.

We swept past in a blur of leaping hostile beams. Silent battle of lights! Darkness bombs down at the ship struggling to bar our camp search-ray. The Benson radiance-rays from our passing platforms curving down to mingle with the confusion. The electronic rays sending up their bolts....

Our platforms dropped some ten dynamitrine bombs in that first passage over the ship. As we sped by, I dimmed the Benson's radiance. I peered. We had not hit the ship. Or if we had, the damage was inconclusive. But on the rocks I could see a pile of ore-carts scattered—broken wreckage, in which the litter of two or three projectors seemed strewn. And the gruesome deflated forms of several helmeted figures. Others seemed, to be running, scattering—hiding in the rocks and pit-holes. Twenty brigands at least were outside the ship. Some were running over toward the base of our camp-ledge. The darkness bombs were spreading like a curtain over the valley

floor; but it seemed that some of the figures were dragging their projectors away.

We sailed off toward the opposite crater-rim. I remember passing over the broken wreckage of Grantline's little space-ship, the *Comet*. Miko's bolts momentarily had vanished. We had hit some of his outside projectors; the others were abandoned, or being dragged to safer positions.

After a mile we wheeled and went back. I suddenly realized that only four platforms were in the re-formed line ahead of us. One was missing! I saw it now, wavering down, close over the ship. A bolt leaped up diagonally from a distant angle on the rocks and caught the disabled platform. It fell, whirling, glowing red—disappeared into the blur of darkness like a bit of heated metal plunged into water.

One out of six of our platforms already lost! Three men of our little force gone!

But Grantline led us desperately back. Anita caught

his signal to break our line. The five platforms scattered, dipping and wheeling like frightened birds—blurring shapes, shifting unnaturally in flight as the Benson curve-angles were altered.

Anita now took our platform in a long swoop downward. Her tense, murmured voice sounded in my ears:

"Hold off: I'll take us low."

A melee. Passing platform shapes. The darting bolts, crossing like ancient rapiers. Falling blue points of fuse-lights as we threw our bombs.

Down in a swoop. Then rising. Away, and then back. This silent warfare of lights! It seemed that around me must be bursting a pandemonium of sound. Yet I heard nothing. Silent, blurred melee, infinitely frightening. A bolt struck us, clung for an instant; but we weathered it. The light was blinding. Through my gloves I could feel the tingle of the over-charged shield as it caught and absorbed the hostile bombardment. Under me the platform seemed

heated. My little Erentz motors ran with ragged pulse. I got too much oxygen; my head roared with it. Spots danced before my closed eyes. Then not enough oxygen. I was dully smothering....

Then the bolt was gone. I found us soaring upward, horribly tilted. I shifted over.

"Anita! Anita, dear!"

"Yes. Gregg. All right."

The melee went on. The brigand ship and all its vicinity was enveloped in darkness-mist now—a turgid sable curtain, made more dense by the dissipating heavy fumes of our exploding bombs which settled low over the ship and the rocks nearby. The search-light from our camp strove futilely to penetrate the cloud.

Our platforms were separated. One went by high over us; I saw another dart close beneath my shield.

"God, Anita!"

"Too close! I did not mean that—I didn't see it."

Almost a collision.

"Oh, Gregg, haven't we broken the ship's dome yet?"

It seemed not. I had dropped nearly all my bombs. This could not go on much longer. Had it been only five minutes? Only that? Reason told me so, yet it seemed an eternity of horror.

Another swoop. My last bomb. Anita had brought us into position to fling it. But I could not. A bolt stabbed up from the gloom and caught us. We huddled, pulling the shields up and over us.

Blurred darkness again. Too much to the side now. I had to wait while Anita swung us back. Then we seemed too high.

We swooped. But not too low! Down in the darkness-mist we would immediately have lost direction, and crashed.

I waited with my last bomb. The other platforms were occasionally dropping them: I had been too hasty, too prodigal.

Had we broken the ship's dome with a direct hit? It seemed not.

The brigands were occasionally sending up catapulted light-flares. They came from positions on the rocks outside the ship. They mounted in lazy curves and burst over us. The concealing darkness, broken only by the flares of our explosions, enveloped the enemy. Our camp search-light was still struggling with it. But overhead, where the few little platforms were circling and swooping, the flares gave an almost continuous glare. It was dazzling, blinding. Even through the smoked pane which I adjusted to my visor I could not stand it.

But there were thoughts of comparative dimness. In a patch where the Earthlight struck through the darkness of the rocks, I saw another of our fallen platforms! Snap and Venza! Dear God....

It was not they, but three figures of our men. One was dead. Two had survived the fall. They stood up, staggering. And in that instant, before the turgid black curtain closed over them, I saw two brigands come rushing. Their hand projectors stabbed at close range. Our men crumpled and fell.

And now I saw why probably we had never yet hit the ship.

Its outline was revealed. "Now, Gregg—can you fling it from here?"

We were in position again. I flung my last missile, watched its light as it dropped. On the dome-roof two of Miko's men were crouching. My bomb was truly aimed—perhaps one of the few in all our bombardment which would have landed directly on the dome-roof. But the waiting marksmen fired at it with short-range heat projectors and exploded it harmlessly while it was still above them.

We swung up and away. I saw, high above us, Grantline's platform, recognizing its red signal light.

There seemed a lull. The enemy fire had died down to only a very occasional bolt. In the confusion of my whirling impressions I wondered if Miko were in distress? Not that! We had not hit his ship; perhaps we had done little damage indeed! It was we who were in distress. Two of our platforms had fallen—two out of six. Or more, of which I did not know.

I saw one rising off to the side of us. Grantline was over us. Well, we were at least three. And then I saw the fourth.

"Grantline is calling us up, Gregg."

"Yes."

Grantline's signal-light was summoning us from the attack. He was a thousand or two thousand feet above.

I was suddenly shocked with horror. The search-ray from our camp abruptly vanished! Anita wheeled us to face the distant ledge. The camp-lights showed, and over one of the buildings was a distress light!

Had the crack in our front wall broken, threatening explosion of all the buildings? The wild thoughts swept me. But it was not that. I could see light-stabs from the cliff outside the main building. Miko had dared to send some of his men to attack our almost abandoned camp!

Grantline realized it. His red helmet-light semaphored the command to follow him. His platform soared away, heading for the camp, with the other two behind him.

Anita lifted us to follow. But I checked her.

"No! Off to the right, across the valley."

"But Gregg!"

"Do as I say, Anita."

She swung us diagonally away from both the camp and the brigand ship. I prayed that we might not be noticed by the brigands.

"Anita, listen: I've an idea!"

The attack on the brigand ship was over. It lay enveloped in the darkness of the powder-gas cloud and its own darkness bombs. But it was uninjured.

Miko had answered us with our own tactics. He had practically unmanned the ship, no doubt, and had sent his men to our buildings. The fight had shifted. But I was now without ammunition, save for two or three small bullet projectors.

Of what use for our platform to rush back? Miko expected that. His attack on the camp was undoubtedly made just for that purpose.

"Anita, if we can get down on the rocks somewhere near the ship, and creep up on it unobserved in that blackness...."

I might be able to open its manual hull-lock, rip it open and let the air out. If I could get into its pressure chamber and unseal the inner slide....

"It would wreck the ship, Anita, exhaust all its air. Shall we try it?"

"Whatever you say, Gregg."

We seemed to be unobserved. We skimmed close to the valley floor, a mile from the ship. We headed slowly toward it, sailing low over the rocks.

Then we landed, left the platform.

"Let me go first, Anita."

I held a bullet projector. With slow, cautious leaps, we advanced. Anita was behind me. I had wanted to leave her with the platform, but she would not stay. And to be with me seemed at least equally safe.

The rocks were deserted. I thought there was very little chance that any of the enemy would lurk here. We clambered over the pitted, scarred surface. The higher crags, etched with Earthlight, stood like sentinels in the gloom.

The brigand ship with its surrounding darkness was not far from us. Then we entered the cloud.

No one was out here. We passed the wreckage of broken projectors, and gruesome, shattered human forms.

We prowled closer. The hull of the ship loomed ahead of us. All dark.

We came at last close against the sleek metal hull-side, slid along it toward where I was sure the manual-porte was located.

Abruptly I realized that Anita was not behind me! Then I saw her at a little distance, struggling in the grip of a giant helmeted figure! The brigand lifted her—turned, and, carrying her, ran the other way!

I did not dare fire. I bounded after them along the hull-side, around under the curve of the pointed bow, down along the other side.

I had mistaken the hull-porte location. It was here.

The running, bounding figure reached it, slid the panel. I was only fifty feet away—not much more than a single leap. I saw Anita being shoved into the pressure lock. The Martian flung himself after her.

I fired at him, but missed. I came with a rush. And as I reached the porte it slid closed in my face, barring me!

Chapter 37 In the Pressure Lock.

With puny fists I pounded the panel. A small pane in it was transparent. Within the lock I could see the blurred figures of Anita and her captor—and, it seemed, another figure. The lock was some ten feet square, with a low ceiling. It glowed with a dim tube-light.

I pounded, thumped with futile, silent blows. The mechanism was here to open this manual; but it was now clasped from within and would not operate.

A few seconds only, while I stood there in a panic of confusion, raging to get in. This disaster had come so

suddenly! I did not plan; I had no thought save to batter my way in and rescue Anita. I recall that I beat on the glassite pane with my bullet projector until the weapon was bent and useless; and I flung it with a wild, despairing rage at my feet.

They were letting the ship's air-pressure into this lock. Soon they would open the inner panel, step into the secondary chamber—and in a moment more would be within the ship's hull corridor. Anita, lost to me!

The outer panel suddenly opened! I had lunged against it with my shoulder; the giant figure inside slid it. I was taken by surprise! I half-fell inward.

Huge arms went around me. The goggled face of the helmet peered into mine.

"So it is you, Haljan! I thought I recognized that little device over your helmet-bracket. And there is my little Anita, come back to me again!"

Miko!

This was he. His great bloated arms encircling me, bending me backward, holding me almost helpless. I saw over his shoulder that Anita was clutched in the grip of another helmeted figure. No giant, but tall for an Earthman—almost as tall as myself. Then the tubelight in the room illumined the visor. I saw the face, recognized it. Moa!

I gasped, "So—I've—got you, Miko—"

"Got me! You're a fool to the last, Gregg Haljan! A fool to the last! But you were always a fool."

I could scarcely move in his grip. My arms were pinned. As he slowly bent me backward, I wound my legs around one of his; it was as unyielding as a steel pillar. He had closed the outer panel; the air-pressure in the lock was rising. I could feel it against my suit.

My helmeted head was being forced backward; Miko's left arm held me. In his gloved right hand as it came slowly up over my throat I saw a knife-blade, its naked, sharpened metal glistening blue-white in the light from overhead.

I seized his wrist. But my puny strength could not hold him. The knife, against all my efforts, came slowly down.

A moment of this slow deadly combat—the end of everything for me.

I was aware of the helmeted figure of Moa casting off Anita—and then the two girls leaping together upon Miko. It threw him off his balance, and my hanging weight made him topple forward. He took a step to recover himself; his hand with the knife was flung up with an instinctive, involuntary balancing gesture. And as it came swiftly down again, I forced the knife-blade to graze his throat. Its point caught in the fabric of his suit.

His startled oath jangled in my ears. The girls were clawing at him; we were all four scrambling, swaying. With despairing strength I twisted at his waist. The knife went into his throat. I plunged it deeper.

His suit went flabby. He crumpled over me and fell, knocking me to the floor. His voice, with the horrible

gurgling rasp of death in it, rattled my ear-grids.

"Not such a fool—are you, Haljan—"

Moa's helmeted head was close over us. I saw that she had seized the knife, jerked it from her brother's throat. She leaped backward, waving it.

I twisted from under Miko's inert, lifeless body. As I got to my feet, Anita flung herself to shield me. Moa was across the lock, backed up against its wall. The knife in her hand went up. She stood for the briefest instant regarding Anita and me holding each other. I thought that she was about to leap upon us; but before I could move, the knife came down and plunged into her breast. She fell forward, her grotesque helmet striking the floor-grid almost at my feet.

"Gregg!"

"She's dead."

"No! She moved! Get her helmet off! There's enough

air here."

My helmet pressure-indicator was faintly buzzing to show that a safe pressure was in the room. I shut off Moa's Erentz motors, unfastened her helmet, raised it off. We gently turned her body. She lay with closed eyes, her pallid face blue-cast from the light in the lock.

With our own helmets off, we knelt over her.

"Oh. Gregg, is she dead?"

"No. Not quite—but dying."

"Oh Gregg, I don't want her to die! She was trying to help you there at the last."

She opened her eyes; the film of death was glazing them. But she saw me, recognized me.

"Gregg—"

"Yes, Moa, I'm here."

Her livid lips were faintly drawn in a smile. "I'm—so glad—you took the helmets off, Gregg. I'm—going—you know."

"No!"

"Going—back to Mars—to rest with the fire-makers—where I came from. I was thinking—maybe you would kiss me, Gregg—?"

Anita gently pushed me down. I pressed the white, faintly smiling lips with mine. She sighed, and it ended with a rattle in her throat.

"Thank you—Gregg—closer—I can't talk so loudly—"

One of her gloved hands struggled to touch me, but she had no strength and it fell back. Her words were the faintest of whispers:

"There was no use living—without your love. But I want you to see—now—that a Martian girl can—die with a smile—"

Her eyelids fluttered down: it seemed that she sighed and then was not breathing. But on her livid face the faint smile still lingered to show me how a Martian girl could die.

We had forgotten for the moment where we were. As I glanced up I saw that through the inner panel, past the secondary lock, the ship's hull-corridor was visible, and along its length a group of Martians were advancing! They saw us, and came running.

"Anita! Look! We've got to get out of here!"

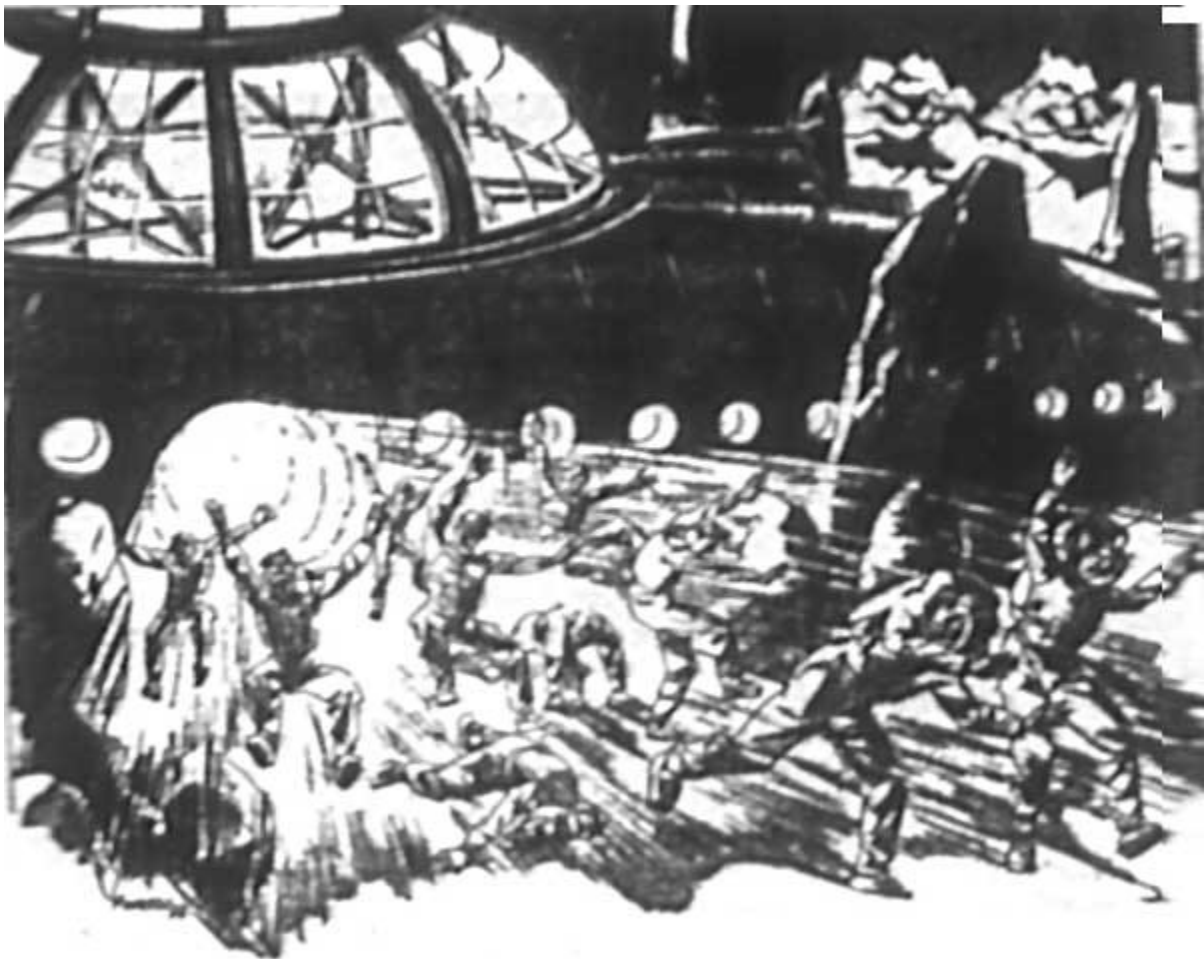
The secondary lock was open to the corridor. We jammed on our helmets. The unhelmeted brigands by then were fumbling at the inner panel. I pulled at the lever of the outer panel. The brigands were hurrying, thinking they could be in time to stop me. One of the more cautious fumbled with a helmet.

"Anita, run! Try and keep your feet."

I slid the outer panel and pushed at Anita. Simultaneously the brigands opened the inner porte.

The air came with a tempestuous rush. A blast through the inner porte—through the little pressure-lock—a wild rush out to the airless Moon. All the air in the ship madly rushing to escape....

Like feathers we were blown with it. I recall an impression of the hurtling brigand figures and swift-flying rocks under me. A silent crash as I struck.



IMAGEDescription

Then soundless, empty blackness.

Chapter 38 Triumph!

"Is he conscious? We'd better take him back, get his helmet off."

"It's over. We can get back now. Venza, dear, we've won—it's over."

"He hears us!"

"Gregg!"

"He hears us—he's all right!"

I opened my eyes. I lay on the rocks. Over my helmet other helmets were peering, and faint, familiar voices mingled with the roaring in my ears.

"—back to the camp and get his helmet off."

"Are his motors smooth? Keep them right, Snap—he must have good air."

I seemed unhurt. But Anita....

She was here. "Gregg, dear one!"

Anita safe! All four of us here on the Earthlit rocks, close outside the brigand ship.

"Anita!"

She held me, lifted me. I was uninjured. I could stand; I staggered up and stood swaying. The brigand ship, a hundred feet away, loomed dark and silent, a lifeless bulk, already empty of air, drained in that mad blast outward. Like the wreck of the *Planetara*—a dead, pulseless hulk already.

We four stood together, triumphant. The battle was over. The brigands were worsted, almost the last man of them dead or dying. No more than ten or fifteen had been available for that final assault upon the camp buildings. Miko's last strategy. I think perhaps he had intended, with his few remaining men, to take the ship and make away, deserting his fellows.

All on the ship, caught unhelmeted by the explosion, were dead long since.

I stood listening to Snap's triumphant account. It had not been difficult for the flying platforms to hunt down the attacking brigands on the open rocks. We had only lost one more platform.

Human hearts beat sometimes with very selfish emotions. It was a triumphant ending for us, and we hardly gave a thought that half of Grantline's little group had perished.

We huddled on Snap's platform. It rose, lurching drunkenly, barely carrying us.

And as we headed for the Grantline buildings, where still the rift in the wall had not quite broken, there came the final triumph. Miko had been aware of it, and knew he had lost. Grantline's search-light leaped upward, swept the sky, caught its sought-for object—a huge silver cylinder, bathed brightly in the white search-beam glare.

The police-ship from Earth!

Chapter 39 My Exit

My narrative lies now in this permanently recorded form before you, and I prepare my exit bow with the humble hope that I may have given you pleasure. If so, I do beg you to tell me of it. There are some who already have flashed their approval of my discs; I thank them most earnestly and gratefully.

My errors of recording unquestionably are many; and for them I ask your indulgence. There have been, I can readily see, errors of omission. I have not mentioned, for instance, the final rescue of the *Planetara's* marooned passengers on the asteroid. You will bear with me, since the disc-space has its technical limitations, that such omissions have been unavoidable.

Since the passage of the Earth-law by the Federated Board of Education, forcing narrative fiction to cling so closely to sworn facts of actual happening, I need offer no assurance of the truth of my narrative. My witnesses have filed their corroborating declarations. Indeed, the *Planetara's* wreck and the brigands'

attack upon the Moon-treasure were given the widest news-casters' publicity, as you all know. Yet I, who was unwittingly involved in those stirring events, may have added a more personal note, making the scenes more vivid to your imagination. I have tried to do that. I do hope that in some measure you will think I have succeeded.

There are many foolish girls now who say that they would like to know Gregg Haljan. They doubtless would be very disappointed. I really crave no more publicity. And the girls of all the Universe have no charm for me. There is only one, for me—an Earth-girl.

I think that life has very beautifully endowed me with its blessings.

#17 The Soul Master, by Will Smith and R. J. Robbins:

Desperately O'Hara plunged into Prof. Kell's mysterious mansion. For his friend Skip was the victim of the eccentric scientist's deastralizing experiment, and faced a fate more hideous than death.

Aproximate word count: 15,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The train was slowing down for Keegan. A whistle from the locomotive ahead had warned the two alert young men in the smoker to that effect, and they arose to leave the train. Both were neatly and quietly dressed. One carried a medium-sized camera with the necessary tripod and accessory satchel. The other carried no impediments of any sort. Both were

smoking cigars, evidently not of expensive variety, judging by the unaromatic atmosphere thereabouts.

“Can’t see what Bland shipped us up to this one-horse dump for,” grumbled Skip Handlon, the one who carried the camera. He was the slighter of the two and perhaps half a head shorter than the other. “Do you know anything about it?”

“Not much,” confessed the other as they alighted from the smoker. “All I can tell you is that Bland sent for me early this morning, told me to get a story out of this Professor Kell and to drag you along. After we get there you are to do as judgment dictates. But I remember that the Chief was specific as regards one thing. You are to get the proff’s mug. Don’t forget. The old fellow may growl and show fight, but it’s up to you to deliver the goods--or, in this case, get them. Don’t depend on me for help. I expect to have troubles of my own.” Thus gloomed Horace Perry, star reporter for the Journal.

“This Keegan place”--Handlon was using his eyes swiftly and comprehensively--“isn’t worth much.

Can't see how it manages to even rate a name. Some dump, all right!"

"You said a couple mouthfuls."

"How's the train service, if any?"

"Rotten. Two trains a day." The other was anything but enthusiastic. "We've a nice long wait for the next one, you can bet. Now, just add to that a rough reception after we reach the old lion's lair and you get a nice idea of what Bland expects from his men."

Handlon made a wry face at this. "The bird who first applied the words 'Hard Boiled' to the Chief's monniker knew something."

"You don't know the half of it," retorted Perry encouragingly. "Just wait and see what a beaut of a fit he can throw for *your* benefit if you fail to do your stuff--and I don't mean maybe."

Old Man Bland owned the Journal, hired and fired his crew and did his own editing, with the help of as

capable an office gang as could be gotten together. It is quite possible that “Hard Boiled” Bland demanded more from his men than any other editor ever has before or since. Nevertheless he got results, and none of his experienced underlings ever kicked, for the pay was right. If a hapless scribe had the temerity to enter the editorial sanctum with a negative report, the almost invariable reply had been a glare and a peremptory order, “Get the copy.”

And get it they did. If a person refused an interview these clever fellows generally succeeded in getting their information from the next most reliable source, and it arrived in print just the same.

Of such a breed was Perry. Handlon, being a more recent acquisition to the staff, was not yet especially aggressive in his work. On this account the former took keen zest in scaring him into displaying a bit more sand.

The train had disappeared around a bend and the two reporters felt themselves marooned. Keegan, without question, was a most forlorn looking spot. A dismal

shanty, much the worse for weather, stood beside the track. In front, a few rotting planks proclaimed that once upon a time the place had boasted a real freight platform. Probably, back in some long-forgotten age, a station agent had also held forth in the rickety shanty. A sign hung on each end of the crumbling structure on which could still be deciphered the legend "KEEGAN." On the opposite side of the track was an old, disused siding. The only other feature of interest thereabouts was a well traveled country road which crossed the tracks near the shanty, wound sinuously over a rock-strewn hill and became lost in the mazes of an upland forest.

There being no signboard of any kind to indicate their destination, the two, after a moment's hesitation, started off briskly in a chance direction. The air was hot and sultry, and in the open spaces the sun beat down mercilessly upon the two hapless ones. As they proceeded into the depths of the forest they were shielded somewhat from the worst of the heat. Gradually upon their city-bred nostrils there stole the odor of conifers, accompanied by a myriad of other

forest odors. Both sniffed the air appreciatively.

“This is sure the life,” remarked Perry. “If I weren’t so darn thirsty now....” He became lost in mournful thought.

A considerable time passed. The newspaper men trudged wearily along until finally another bend brought them to the beginning of a steep descent. The forest had thinned out to nothing.

“Seems to me I smell smoke,” blurted out Handlon suddenly. “Must be that we are approaching the old party’s lair. Remember? Bland said that he--”

“Uh huh!” the other grunted, almost inaudibly. Now that they seemed to be arriving at their destination something had occurred to him. He had fished from his pocket a sheaf of clippings and was perusing them intently. “Bland said, ‘Get the copy’,” he muttered irrelevantly and half to himself.

The clippings all related directly to Professor Kell or to happenings local to Keegan. Some were of peculiar

interest. The first one was headlined thus:

Mysterious Disappearance Of Robert Manion And Daughter Still Unsolved

The piece contained a description of the missing man, a fairly prosperous banker who had been seen four days previously driving through Keegan in a small roadster, and one of the girl, who was in the car with him. It told that the banker and his daughter were last seen by a farmer named Willetts who lived in a shack on the East Keegan road, fleeing before a bad thunder storm. He believed the pair were trying to make the Kell mansion ahead of the rain. Nothing more of the Manions or their car had been seen, and their personal effects remained at their hotel in a nearby village unclaimed. The heavy rain had of course effectually obliterated all wheel tracks.

Another clipping was fairly lengthy, but Perry glanced only at the headlines:

“Kell Still Carrying On His Strange Experiments

Has Long Been Known to Have Fantastic Theories.
Refuses to Divulge Exact Methods Employed, or
Nature of Results”

Still another appeared to be an excerpt from an article in an agricultural paper. It read:

“A prize bull belonging to Alton Shepard, a Keegan cattle breeder, has created considerable sensation by running amuck in a most peculiar manner. While seemingly more intelligent than heretofore, it has developed characteristics known to be utterly alien to this type of animal.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the case is the refusal of the animal to eat its accustomed food. Instead it now consumes enormous quantities of meat. The terrific bellow of the animal’s voice has also undergone a marked change, now resembling nothing earthly, although some have remarked that it could be likened to the bay of an enormous hound. Some of its later actions have seemingly added further canine attributes, which make the matter all the more

mystifying. Veterinaries are asking why this animal should chase automobiles, and why it should carry bones in its mouth and try to bury them!”

The last one read in part:

“Professor Kell has been questioned by authorities at Keegan relative to the disappearance there last Tuesday of Robert Manion and his daughter. Kell seemed unable to furnish clues of any value, but officials are not entirely satisfied with the man’s attitude toward the questions.”

Somewhat bewildered by these apparently unrelated items, the reporter remained lost in thought for quite a space, the while he endeavored to map out his course of action when he should meet the redoubtable Professor. That many of the weird occurrences could be traced in some way to the latter’s door had evidently occurred to Bland. Furthermore, the Old Man relied implicitly upon Perry to get results.

It must be said that for once the star reporter was not overly enthusiastic with the assignment. Certain

rumors aside from the clippings in his hand had produced in his mind a feeling of uneasiness. So far as his personal preference was concerned he would have been well satisfied if some cub reporter had been given the job. Try as he would, however, he could offer no tangible reason for the sudden wariness.

He was aroused from his absorption by his companion.

“Thought I smelled smoke a while back, and I was right. That’s the house up in the edge of the pines. Deep grounds in front and all gone to seed; fits the description exactly. Thank Heaven we struck off from the station in the right direction. This stroll has been long enough. Come out of it and let’s get this job finished.”

Suiting the action to the words Handlon started off at a brisk pace down the hill, followed at a more moderate rate by Perry. At length they came within full sight of the grounds. Extending for a considerable distance before them and enclosing a large tract of

land now well covered with lush grass, was a formidable looking wall. In former days a glorious mantle of ivy had covered the rough stones; but now there was little left, and what there was looked pitifully decrepit. They continued their progress along this barrier, finally coming upon a huge iron gate now much the worse for rust. It stood wide open.

The road up to the house had long since become overgrown with rank grass and weeds. Faintly traceable through the mass of green could be seen a rough footpath which the two followed carefully. They met no one. As they approached the night of black pines the mass of the old mansion began to loom up before them, grim and forbidding.

Instinctively both shivered. The silence of the place was complete and of an uncannily tangible quality. Nervously they looked about them.

“How do you like it, Skip?” The words from Perry’s previously silent lips broke upon the stillness like a thunderclap. The other started.

“I should hate to die in it,” Handlon answered solemnly. “I’ll bet the old joint is haunted. Nobody but a lunatic would ever live in it.”

“I get a good deal the same impression myself,” said Perry. “I don’t wonder that Bland sent two of us to cover the job.”

As he spoke he mounted a flight of steps to a tumbledown veranda. There was no sign of a door bell on the weather-beaten portal, but an ancient knocker of bronze hanging forlornly before him seemed to suggest a means of attracting attention. He raised it and rapped smartly.

No answer.

Possessing all the attributes of the conventional reporter and a few additional ones, Perry did not allow himself to become disheartened, but merely repeated his summons, this time with more vim.

“Well, Horace,” grinned Handlon, “it does look as if we were not so very welcome here. However, seems

to me if you were to pick up that piece of dead limb and do some real knocking with it.... The dear Professor may be deaf, you know, or maybe he's--"

"Skip, my boy, I don't know as we ought to go in right now after all. Do you realize it will soon be dark?"

"To tell you the truth, Horace, I'm not stuck on this assignment either. And I feel that after dark I should like it even less, somehow. But, gee, the Old Man...."

"Oh, I'm not thinking of quitting on the job. We don't do that on the Journal." Perry smiled paternally at the photographer. Could it be he had purposely raised the other's hopes in order to chaff him some more? "But I was thinking that it might be a good idea to look about the outbuildings a bit while we have a little daylight. Eh?"

Handlon looked disappointed, but nodded gamely. He delayed only long enough to deposit his camera and traps behind a grossly overgrown hydrangea by the steps, then, with a resigned air, declared himself ready to follow wherever the other might lead.

Perry elected to explore the barn first. This was a depressing old pile, unpainted in years, with what had once been stout doors now swinging and bumping in the light breeze. As the two men drew nearer, this breeze--which seemed to sigh through the place at will--brought foul odors that told them the place was at least not tenantless. In some trepidation they stepped inside and stood blinking in the half darkness.

“Pretty Polly!”

“Good God! What was that?” Handlon whispered. He knew it was no parrot’s voice. This was a far deeper sound than that, a sound louder than anything a parrot’s throat could produce. It came from the direction of a ruinous stall over near a cobwebbed window. As Perry started fearfully toward this, there issued from it a curious scraping sound, followed by a fall that shook the floor, and a threshing as of hoofs. Now the great voice could be heard again, this time uttering what sounded strangely like oaths roared out in a foreign tongue. Yet when the newspaper men reached the stall they found it occupied only by a

large mule.

The animal was lying on its side, its feet scraping feebly against the side of the stall. The heaving, foam-flecked body was a mass of hideous bruises, some of which were bleeding profusely. The creature seemed to be in the last stage of exhaustion, lying with lips drawn back and eyes closed. Beneath it and scattered all over the stall floor was a thick layer of some whitish seeds.

“That’s--why that’s sunflower seed, Horace!” Handlon almost whimpered. “And look! Look in that crib! It’s full of the same stuff! Where’s the hay, Horace? Does this thing--”

He was interrupted by a mighty movement of the beast--a threshing that nearly blinded the men in the cloud of bloodstained seeds it raised. With something between a curse and a sob, the mule lunged at its crib as if attempting to get bodily into it. But no: it was only trying to perch on its edge! Now it had succeeded. The ungainly beast hung there a second, two, three. From its uplifted throat issued that usually

innocuous phrase, a phrase now a thing of delirious horror:

“Pretty Polly!”

With a crash the tortured creature fell to the floor, to lie there gasping and moaning.

Skip Handlon left that barn. Perry retained just enough wit to do what he should have done the instant he first saw the animal. He whipped out his automatic and fired one merciful shot. Then he too started for the outside. He arrived in the yard perhaps ten seconds behind Handlon.

“Good Heavens, Perry,” gibbered Handlon. “I’m not going to stay around this place another minute. Just let me find where I left that suffering camera, that’s all I ask.”

“Easy now.” Perry laid a hand on his companion’s shoulder. “I guess we’re up against something pretty fierce here, but we’re going to see it through, and you know it. So let’s cut out the flight talk and go raise

the Professor.”

Handlon tried earnestly to don a look of determination. If Perry was set on staying here the least he could do was stay with him. However, could Perry have foreseen the events which were to entangle them, he probably would have led the race to the gate. As it was, he grasped a stick and marched bravely up toward the front door.

A sudden commotion behind him caused him to wheel sharply around. Simultaneously a yell burst from Handlon.

“Look out, Horace!”

What he saw almost froze the blood in his veins. From a tumbledown coach house had issued an enormous wolf-hound which was now almost upon them, eyes flaming, fangs gleaming horribly.

So unexpected was the attack that both men stood rooted in their tracks. The next moment the charging brute was upon them, and had bowled Handlon off his

equilibrium as if he were a child. The unfortunate photographer made a desperate attempt to prevent injury to his precious camera, which he had but a moment earlier succeeded in retrieving, and in doing so fell rather violently to the ground. Every moment he expected to feel the powerful jaws crunch his throat, and he made no effort to rise. For several seconds he remained thus, until he could endure the suspense no longer. He glanced around only to see Perry, staring open-mouthed at the animal which had so frightened them. Apparently it had forgotten the presence of the two men.

Handlon regained his feet rather awkwardly, the while keeping a watchful eye on the beast, of whose uncertain temper he was by now fully aware. In an undertone he addressed his companion.

“What do you make of it?” he wanted to know. “Did the critter bite you?”

“No. That’s the queer part of it. Neither did he bite you, if you were to think it over a minute. Just put his nose down and *rammed* you, head on.”

The photographer was flabbergasted. Involuntarily his gaze stole again in the direction of the offending brute.

“What on earth--” he began. “Is he sharpening his teeth on a rock preparatory to another attack upon us? Or--What the deuce *is* he doing?”

“If you ask me,” came astonishingly from the watchful Perry, “he’s eating grass, which is my idea of something damn foolish for a perfectly normal hound, genus lupo, to be--Look out!”

The animal, as if suddenly remembering the presence of the men, suddenly charged at them again, head down, eyes blazing. As before, it made no effort to bite. Though both men were somewhat disconcerted by the great brute they held their ground, and when it presented the opportunity the older reporter planted a terrific kick to the flank which sent the animal whimpering back to its shed behind.

“Score one,” breathed Handlon. “If we--” At a sudden grating sound overhead, he stopped.

Both turned to face the threatening muzzle of an ancient blunderbuss. Behind it was an irate countenance, nearly covered by an unclipped beard of a dirty gray color. In the eyes now glaring at them malevolently through heavily concaved spectacles they read hate unutterable. The barrel of the blunderbuss swung slightly as it covered alternately one and the other. Both sensed that the finger even now tightening on the trigger would not hesitate unduly. Being more or less hardened to rebuffs of all kinds in the pursuance of their calling, the reporters did not hesitate in stating their purpose.

“What?” yelled the old man. “You dare to invade my grounds and disturb me at my labors for such a reason? Reporters! My scientific research work is not for publicity, sirs; and futhermore I want it understood that I am not to be dragged from my laboratory again for the purpose of entertaining you or any others of your ilk. Get away!”

Without further ado the window was slammed down, a shutter closed on the inside, and once more the silence of the dead descended upon the spot. The two

men grinned ruefully at each other, Handlon finally breaking the stillness.

“My idea of the world’s original one-sided conversation. We simply didn’t talk--and yet we’re supposed to be reporters. You’ve got to hand it to the Proff, Horace, for the beautiful rock-crusher he just handed us.”

“You didn’t think we had anything easy, did you?” said Perry irritably. “He’ll change his tune presently, when--”

Handlon’s jaw dropped. “You don’t mean you’re going to take any more chances! Would you rouse him again after the way he treated us with that gun? Besides, the train....”

Perry bent a scathing glance at his companion. “What on earth has the train to do with our getting the Professor’s confession of crime or whatever he has to offer? You evidently don’t know Bland--much. I deduce that a lot of my sweetness has been wasted on the desert air. Once more, let me assure you that if

you propose to go back without the Proff's mug on one of those plates you might as well mail your resignation from *here*. Get me?"

The other wilted.

"I wonder," Perry ruminated as he stared in the direction of the shed wherein the canine monstrosity had disappeared. "Do you suppose that you can get a snap of the old boy's mug if I can get him to the window again? If you can do that, just leave the rest to me. I've handled these crusty birds before. What say?"

"Go as far as you like." The photographer was once more grinning as he unslung his camera and carefully adjusted a plate in place. Everything at last to his satisfaction he gripped flash pan and bulb.

"I'm going to make some racket now," announced Perry grimly. "If Kell shows up, work fast. He may shoot at you, but don't get excited. It's almost dark, so his aim *might* be poor."

At this suggestion his companion showed signs of panic, but the other affected not to notice this. There came a deafening hullabaloo as Perry beat a terrific tattoo on the ancient door. Followed a deep silence, while Perry leaped back to stand in front of Skip and his camera. After perhaps a full minute's wait he once more opened up his bombardment, to jump quickly back to the camera as before. This time he had better success. The window was again opened and the muzzle of the blunderbuss put in its appearance. Handlon stood close behind Perry as he silently swung the camera into a more favorable position for action. The face at the window was purple with wrath.

“You damned pests! Leave my grounds at once or I shall call my hound and set him upon you. And when--”

Crack! Flash! Click! Perry had made a sudden sidewise movement as Handlon went into action.

“Much obliged, Professor,” said Perry politely. “Your pose with that old cannon is going to be very effective from the front page. The write-up will doubtless be

interesting too. Probably the story won't be quite so accurate as it would be had you told it to us yourself; but we shall get as many of the details from the natives hereabouts as we can. Good-day to you, sir!"

Motioning to the other he turned on his heel and started down the driveway. It was an old trick, and for a long moment of suspense he almost feared that it would fail. Another moment--

"Wait!" The quavering voice of the irascible old villain had lost some of its malice. "Come back here a minute."

With simulated reluctance the two slowly retraced their steps. "Is there something else, sir?"

"Perhaps...." The old man hesitated, as if pondering upon his words. "Perhaps if you care to step in I can be of assistance to you after all. It occurs to me that possibly I have been too abrupt with you."

"I am very glad that you have decided to cooperate with us, Professor Kell," answered the reporter

heartily, as they ascended the steps. The old man's head disappeared from the window and shortly the sound of footsteps inside told of his approach. Finally the oaken door swung open, and they were silently ushered into the musty smelling hallway. Though outwardly accepting the Professor's suddenly pacific attitude, Perry made up his mind to be on his guard.

As they entered what had evidently been the parlor in bygone days, an oppressive, heavy odor smote their nostrils, telling of age-old carpets and of draperies allowed to decay unnoticed. On the walls hung several antique prints, a poorly executed crayon portrait of a person doubtless an ancestor of the present Kell, and one or two paintings done in oil, now badly cracked and stained. Everything gave the impression of an era long since departed, and the two men felt vaguely out of place. Their host led them to a pair of dilapidated chairs, which they accepted gratefully. The ride to Keegan after a hard day's work had not tended to improve their spirits.

"Now to business." Perry went straight to the point, desiring to get the interview over as soon as possible.

“We have heard indirectly of various happenings in this vicinity which many think have some connection with your scientific experiments. Any statement you may care to make to us in regard to these happenings will be greatly appreciated by my paper. Inasmuch as what little has already been printed is probably of an erroneous nature, we believe it will be in your own best interest to give us as complete data as possible.” Here he became slightly histrionic. “Of course we do not allow ourselves to take the stories told by the local inhabitants too literally, as such persons are too liable to exaggerate, but we must assume that some of these stories have partial basis in fact. Any information relative to your scientific work, incidentally, will make good copy for us also.”

Perry gazed steadily at the patriarch as he spoke. For a moment, a crafty expression passed over the old man’s face, but as suddenly it disappeared. Evidently he had arrived at a decision.

“Come with me,” he wheezed.

The two newspaper men exchanged swift glances, the

same thought in the mind of each. Were they about to be led into a trap? If the old man's shady reputation was at all deserved they would do well to be wary. Perry thought swiftly of the clippings he had read and of what gossip he had heard, then glanced once more in the direction of Handlon. That worthy was smiling meaningly and had already arisen to follow the Professor. Reluctantly Perry got to his feet and the three proceeded to climb a rickety stairway to the third floor. The guide turned at the head of the stairs and entered a long dark corridor. Here the floor was covered with a thick carpet which, as they trod upon it, gave forth not the slightest sound.

The hall gave upon several rooms, all dark and gloomy and giving the same dismal impression of long disuse. How could the savant endure such a depressing abode! The accumulation of dust and cobwebs in these long forgotten chambers, the general evidence of decay--all told of possible horrors ahead. They became wary.

But they were not wary enough!

The uncouth figure ahead of them had stopped and was fumbling with the lock of an ancient door.

Instinctively Perry noted that it was of great thickness and of heavy oak. Now the Professor had it open and was motioning for them to enter. Handlon started forward eagerly, but hurriedly drew back as he felt the grip of the other reporter's hand on his arm.

"Get back, you fool!" The words were hissed into the ear of the incautious one. Then, to the Professor, Perry observed: "If you have no objection we would prefer that you precede us."

A look of insane fury leaped to the face of the old man, lingered but an instant and was gone. Though the expression was but momentary, both men had seen, and seeing had realized their danger.

They followed him into the chamber, which was soon illumined fitfully by a smoky kerosene lamp. Both took a rapid survey of the place. Conceivably it might have been the scene of scientific experiments, but its aspect surely belied such a supposition. The average imagination would instantly pronounce it the abode of

a maniac, or the lair of an alchemist. Again, that it might be the laboratory of an extremely slovenly veterinary was suggested by the several filthy cages to be seen resting against the wall. All of these were unoccupied except one in a dark corner, from which issued a sound of contented purring, evidently telling of some well-satisfied cat.

The air was close and foul, being heavy with the odor of musty, decaying drugs. In every possible niche and cranny the omnipresent dust had settled in a uniform sheen of gray which showed but few signs of recent disturbance.

“Here, gentlemen,” their host was saying, “is where I carry on my work. It is rather gloomy here after dark, but then I do not spend much time here during the night. I have decided to acquaint you with some of the details of one or two of my experiments. Doubtless you will find them interesting.”

While speaking he had, mechanically it seemed, reached for a glass humidor in which were perhaps a dozen cigars. Silently he selected one and extended

the rest to the two visitors.

After all three had puffed for a moment at the weeds, the old man began to talk, rapidly it seemed to them. Perry from time to time took notes, as the old man proceeded, an expression of utter amazement gradually overspreading his face. Handlon pulled away contentedly at his cigar, and on his features there grew an almost ludicrous expression of well-being. Was the simple photographer so completely at ease that he had at length forsaken all thought of possible danger?

As Professor Kell talked on he seemed to warm to his subject. At the end of five minutes he began uncovering a peculiar apparatus which had rested beneath the massive old table before which they were sitting. The two men caught the flash of light on glass, and a jumble of coiled wires became visible.

Was the air in the laboratory getting unbearably close? Or was the queer leaden feeling that had taken possession of Perry's lungs but an indication of his overpowering weariness? He felt a steadily increasing

irritation, as if for some strange reason he suddenly resented the words of their host, which seemed to be pouring out in an endless stream. The cigar had, paradoxically, an oddly soothing quality, and he puffed away in silence.

Why had the room suddenly taken on so hazy an aspect? Why did Handlon grin in that idiotic manner? And the Professor ... he was getting farther and farther away ... that perfecto ... or was it an El Cabbajo? What was the old archfiend doing to him anyhow?... Why was he laughing and leering at them so horribly?... Confound it all ... that cigar ... where was it?... Just one more puff....

Blindly he groped for the missing weed, becoming aware of a cackle of amusement nearby. Professor Kell was standing near the spot where he had fallen and now began prodding him contemptuously with his toe.

“Fools!” he was saying. “You thought to interfere with my program. But you are in my power and you have no hope of escape. I am unexpectedly provided with

more subjects for my experiments. You will....” His words became hazy and unintelligible, for the hapless reporter was drifting off into a numb oblivion. He had long since lost the power to move a muscle. Out of the corner of an eye, just before he lost consciousness altogether, he perceived Handlon lying upon the floor still puffing at the fateful drugged cigar.

Eons passed.

To the reporter came a vision of a throbbing, glaring inferno, wherein he was shaken and tossed by terrific forces. His very vital essence seemed to respond to a mighty vibration. Now he was but a part of some terrific chaos. Dimly he became aware of another being with whom he must contend. Now he was in a death struggle, and to his horror he found himself being slowly but surely overpowered. A demoniac grin played upon the features of the other as he forced the reporter to his knees. It was Handlon.... Once more he was sinking into soft oblivion, the while a horrid miasma assailed his nostrils. He was nothing....

Slowly, and with infinite effort, Perry felt himself

returning to consciousness, though he had no clear conception of his surroundings. His brain was as yet but a whirling vortex of confused sounds, colors and--yes, odors. A temporary rift came in the mental cloud which fettered his faculties, and things began to take definite shape. He became aware that he was lying upon his back at some elevation from the floor. Again the cloudy incubus closed in and he knew no more.

When he finally recovered the use of his faculties it was to discover himself the possessor of a violent headache. The pain came in such fearsome throbs that it was well nigh unendurable. The lamp still sputtered dimly where the professor had left it. At the moment it was on the point of going out altogether. The reporter noticed this, and over him stole a sense of panic. What if the light should fail altogether, leaving him lying in the dark in this frightful place! Still dizzy and sick, he managed to rise upon his elbows enough to complete a survey of the room. He was still in the laboratory of Professor Kell, but that worthy had disappeared. Of Handlon there was no sign. The mysterious apparatus, of which he now had

but a vague remembrance, also had vanished.

His thoughts became confused again, and wearily he passed a hand over his brow in the effort to collect all of his faculties. The lamp began to sputter, arousing him to action. Desperately he fought against the benumbing sensation that was even again stealing over him. Gradually he gained the ascendancy. He struggled dizzily to his feet and took a few tentative steps.

Where was Handlon? He decided his friend had probably recovered from the drug first and was gone, possibly to get a doctor for him, Perry. However, he must make some search to determine if Skip had really left the premises.

As he walked through the open door the lamp in his hand gave a last despairing flicker and went out. From there he was forced to grope his way down the dark hall to the stairs. Just how he reached the lower floor he was never able to remember, for as yet all the effect of the powerful drug had not worn off. He had a dim recollection of being thankful to the ancestor of

Kell who had provided such thick carpets in these halls. Thanks to them his footsteps had been noiseless, at any rate.

What was Kell's real object in giving them those drugged cigars? he wondered. How long had they been under the influence of the lethal stuff? Surely several hours. Upon glancing through a hall window he found that outside was the blackness of midnight.

Cautiously he explored the desolate chambers on the ground floor: the kitchen--where it could be plainly seen that cooking of a sort had been done--the barn, and woodshed. Not a living thing could he find, not even the huge wolf-hound which had attacked them in so strange a manner that afternoon.

By now he was quite frankly worried on Handlon's account. At that moment, could he have known the actual fate that had overtaken his companion, it is quite probable he would have gone mad. He stumbled back and into the dark front hall, shouting his friend's name. The response was a hollow echo, and once or twice he thought he heard the ghost of a mocking

chuckle.

At length he gave up the search and started for the door, intent now only upon flight from the accursed place. He would report the whole thing to the office and let Bland do what he pleased about it. Doubtless Handlon had already left. Then he stumbled over Handlon's camera. Evidently the Professor had neglected to take possession of it. That must be rescued, at all costs. He picked it up and felt the exposed plate still inside. He started again for the door.

What little light there was faded out and he felt stealing over him a horrid sensation of weakness. Again came a period of agony during which he felt the grip of unseen forces. Once more it seemed that he was engaged in mortal strife with Skip Handlon. Malevolently Handlon glared at him as he endeavored with all his strength to overcome Perry. This time, however, the latter seemed to have more strength and resisted the attack for what must have been hours. Finally the other drew away baffled.

At this the mental incubus surrounding Perry's faculties broke. Dimly he became aware of a grinding noise nearby and a constant lurching of his body. At length his vision cleared sufficiently to enable him to discover the cause of the peculiar sensations.

He was in a railroad coach!

He took a rapid glance around and noted a drummer sitting in the seat across the aisle, staring curiously at him. With an effort Perry assumed an inscrutable expression and determined to stare the other out of countenance. Reluctantly the man glanced away, and after a moment, under Perry's stony gaze, he suddenly arose and chose a new seat in front of the car. Perry took to the solace of a cigarette and stared out at the flying telegraph poles. From time to time he noted familiar landmarks. The train had evidently left Keegan far behind and was already nearly into the home town.

For the balance of the ride the reporter experienced pure nightmare. The peculiar sensations of dizziness, accompanied by frightful periods of insensibility, kept

recurring, now, however, not lasting more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time. At such times as he was conscious he found opportunity to wonder in an abstracted sort of way how he had ever managed to get on the train and pay his fare, which must have been a cash one, without arousing the conductor's suspicions. Discovery of a rebate in his pocket proved that he must have done so, however. The business of leaving the train and getting to the office has always been an unknown chapter in Perry's life.

He came out of one of his mental fogs to find himself seated in the private editorial sanctum of the Journal. Evidently he had just arrived. Bland, a thick-set man with the jaw of a bulldog, was eyeing him intently.

"Well! Any report to make?" The question was crisp.

The reporter passed a hand across his perspiring forehead. "Yes, I guess so. I--er--that is--you see--"

"Where's Handlon? What happened to you? You act as if you were drunk." Bland was not in an amiable mood.

“Search me,” Perry managed to respond. “If Skip isn’t here old man Kell must have done for him. I came back alone.”

“You wha-a-t?” the irate editor fairly roared, half rising from his chair. “Tell me exactly what happened and get ready to go back there on the next train. Or--no, on second thoughts you’d better go to bed. You look all used up. Handlon may be dead or dying at this minute. That Kell could do anything.” He pressed the button on his desk.

“Johnny,” he said to the office boy, “get O’Hara in here on the double quick and tell him to bring along his hat and coat.”

He turned again to Perry, who was gazing nervously at the door. “Now tell me everything that happened and make it fast,” he ordered.

The reporter complied, omitting nothing except the little matter of his mental lapses at the house of Professor Kell and later on the train. The incident of the drugged cigars seemed to interest the Old Man

hugely, and Perry did not forget to play up Handlon's exploits in getting the picture of the Professor. All through the recital he was in a sweat for fear that he might have a recurrence of one of his brain spells and that Bland would become cognizant of it. When would the Chief finish and let him escape from the office? Desperately he fought to prevent the numbing sensation from overcoming him. All that kept him from finally fleeing the place in panic was the entrance of Jimmie O'Hara.

Slight, wiry and efficient looking, this individual was a specimen of the perfect Journal reporter. This is saying a good deal, for the news crew and editorial force of the paper were a carefully selected body of men indeed. Bland never hired a man unless experience had endowed him with some unusual qualification. Most of them could write up a story with realistic exactitude, being able in most cases to supply details gleaned from actual experience in one walk of life or another.

Of this redoubtable crew probably the queerest was Jimmie O'Hara. Jimmie had just finished a sentence in

the “pen” for safe-cracking at the time he landed the job with the Journal. Theoretically all men should have shunned him on account of his jailbird taint. Not so Bland. The Chief was independent in his ideas on the eternal fitness of things and allowed none of the ordinary conventions of humanity to influence his decisions. So Jimmie became one of the staff and worked hard to justify Bland in hiring him. His former profession gave him valuable sidelights upon crime stories of all kinds, and he was almost invariably picked as the man to write these up for the columns.

“Jimmie,” said the Chief, “we have need of an experienced strong-arm man and all around second story worker. You are the only man on the force who fills the bill for this job. Perry here has just returned from Keegan, where I sent him to interview Professor Kell. Skip Handlon went with him, but failed to return. We want to know what happened to Skip. That is your job. *Get Handlon!* If he is dead let me know by long distance phone and I’ll have a couple of headquarters men down there in a hurry. Get a good fast car and don’t waste any time. That’s all.”

O'Hara stopped long enough to get the location of Professor Kell's place fixed in his mind, then abruptly departed. Bland gazed after him musingly.

"The Professor will have some job to put anything over on that bird," he said grimly. "Personally, I'm sorry for the old soul."

After leaving the Journal office Jimmie proceeded directly to a certain stable where he kept his private car. It was a long, low speedster with a powerful engine, and capable of eating up distance. It was the work of a minute to touch the starter and back out of the yard.

For the next hour he held the wheel grimly while the car roared over the seventy-odd miles to Keegan. Would he be in time? At last a sign post told him that he was within five miles of the railroad crossing at Keegan. Now the headlights were picking out the black outlines of the freight shed, and the next moment he had swept over the tracks. The luminous dial on his wrist watch notified him that he had been on the road but little over an hour, but his spirits

somehow refused to revive with the knowledge.

About a mile beyond the station he drove the car into a dark wood road and parked it, turning off all lights. The rest of the way to the Professor's mansion he did on foot. Rather than approach from the front of the grounds he nimbly climbed a stone wall and, crossing a field or two, entered the stretch of woods which extended just behind the mansion. His pocket flashlight here came into use, and once or twice he gave a reassuring pat to a rear pocket where bulged a heavy Colt automatic.

What was that? He had approached very close to the rear of the house now. No lights were visible as yet, but unless he was greatly mistaken he had heard a muffled scream. He stopped in his tracks and listened intently. Again it came, this time with a blood-curdling cadence ending in what he would have sworn was a choking sob.

The little job of getting the old-fashioned rear window open was a mere nothing to the experienced O'Hara, and in a moment he was inside the house. His feet

struck soft carpet. Catlike, he stepped to one side in order to prevent any hidden eyes from perceiving his form silhouetted in the dim light of the open window. He dared not use his flashlight for fear that the circle of light would betray his position, thus making him an excellent target for possible bullets. Following the wall closely he managed to circle the room without mishap. His searching fingers finally came in contact with a door frame, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Here there was nothing to bar his progress except some moth-eaten portieres. These he brushed aside.

The room which he now entered was probably the same into which the Professor had ushered Handlon and Perry the day before. There being still no sign of life about, the reporter decided to throw caution to the winds. He brought his flash into play. Quickly casting the powerful beam around the chamber he examined the place with an all-searching glance.

Nothing.

With a stifled oath he turned his attention to the other rooms in the immediate vicinity. The brilliant light

revealed not the slightest trace of a person, living or dead. The sound must have come from the second story or from the cellar. He decided on the upper floor.

Feverish with impatience because of the valuable time he had already lost, he bounded up the heavily carpeted stairs two at a time. Now to his keen ears came certain faint sounds which told him that he was on the right track. Before him extended a long, dusty hall, terminating in a single heavy door. Several other doors opened at intervals along the corridor. One or two of these were open, and he threw the beam from his flash hastily into one after another of them. He saw only dusty and mildewed chamber furnishings of an ancient massive style.

Suddenly he pricked up his ears.

The door ahead of him was creaking slowly open. Instantly he extinguished his torch and leaped into the nearest room. Whoever was opening that end door was carrying a lamp. What if the Professor had accomplices who might discover him and overpower

him by force of numbers! O'Hara drew the automatic from his pocket, deriving a comforting assurance from the feel of the cold steel. Here was something no man could resist could he but get it into action. The light was now nearly abreast of his door, and for a sickening instant he thought the prowler was coming into the room. He held his breath. Now the lamp was at the open door, and now it was quickly withdrawn. After a breathless second he tip-toed forward and peered cautiously down the hallway.

About here it was that James O'Hara began to realize that this was going to be a horrible night indeed. He had wondered why the progress of the light had been so deathly slow. Now he knew why, by reason of what he saw--and what he saw made him feel rather sick. The man with the lantern was quite plainly Professor Kell, bent nearly double with the weight of a grotesquely big thing on his back, a thing that flung a dim, contorted shadow on the ceiling. And that thing was a dead man.

A corpse it was--the attitude proved that. With a numb relief O'Hara realized it was not the body of

Skip Handlon. This had been a much larger man than Skip, and the clothing was different from anything Handlon had worn.

The light was now disappearing down the stairway. For a moment O'Hara felt undecided as to his next move. Should he follow Kell and his burden, or should he not take advantage of this fine opportunity to continue his search of the upper story? That scream still rang in his ears; there had been a very evident feminine quality in it, and the remembrance of that fact reproached him. Had he been guilty of mincing daintily about in this old house while a woman was being done to death under his nose, when a little bolder action on his part might have saved her?

Stepping once more into the hall he advanced to the door just closed behind the Professor and tried it, only to find it locked. Out of a pocket came several articles best known to the "profession"--a piece of stiff wire, a skeleton key and other paraphernalia calculated to reduce the obstinate mechanism to submission. For a minute, two, three, he worked at the ancient lock; then, without a creak, the door

swung open. A touch of oil to the hinges had insured their silence. Jimmie O'Hara believed in being artistic in his work, especially when it came to fine points, and he was.

He found himself in the same room where the drugged cigars had been proved the undoing of Handlon and Perry. In order not to alarm the Professor unduly by chance noises and perhaps invite a surprise attack upon himself, O'Hara closed the laboratory door behind him and let the lock spring again. Hastily he made search of the place. No trace of the missing reporter could he find, except two half-consumed cigars in a corner whence the Professor had impatiently kicked them.

On the big table in the center of the room, however, was an object which excited his interest. It was apparently nothing more or less than a giant Crookes tube, connected in some way with a complicated mechanism contained in a wooden cabinet under the table. Probably this apparatus was concerned in the Professor's weird experiments which had so aroused the countryside. He studied it curiously, his eyes for

the moment closed in thought, until a slight sound somewhere near at hand caused him to open them wide. Was the Kell returning?

Quickly he extinguished the lamp and glided to a nearby door, thinking to secrete himself here, and take Kell by surprise. To his consternation the door swung inward at a touch. He prepared instinctively for battle against any foe who might present himself. For a moment he held himself taut; then, nothing of an alarming nature having happened, he drew a swift breath of relief and flashed on his light. He gave vent to a low exclamation. The swiftly darting shaft from the torch had revealed the figure of a girl, bound and gagged.

The girl lay trembling on a wretched bed in a corner of the dilapidated old chamber. O'Hara crossed the room and bent over her. Still wary of a trap he glanced back in the direction of the laboratory door: all safe there. Jimmie made haste to remove the cruel gag from her mouth.

"Courage," he whispered. "Half a minute and you will

be free.”

He produced a knife with a suspiciously long blade and cut her bonds. He then assisted her to her feet, where she reeled dizzily. Realizing the need for fast action he made her sit down while he massaged the bruised arms and ankles, which were badly swollen from the tight ropes. The girl had apparently been in the grip of such terrible fright that she had temporarily lost her power of speech. Mentally he chalked up another score against the Professor as the girl made several ineffectual attempts to speak.

“Easy, kid,” Jimmie whispered. “Just sit tight, and when you feel able you can tell me all about it. I’m going to get him good for this, you can bank on that.”

She thanked him with a faint smile, and of a sudden she found her voice.

“Who are you? Where is father? Oh, tell me, please! I am afraid that horrible man has murdered him. Are you a servant here? Oh, I don’t know whom to trust.”

“My name is Jimmie O’Hara,” replied the reporter briefly; “and I hope you won’t worry about me. I am gunning for the Proff myself. Tell me as quickly as you can what you know about him.” He still kept an eye on the door of the adjoining laboratory. Any moment he expected to hear the sound of the old man’s approach. The room would make an ideal place to ambush the maniac, he had swiftly decided.

“I am Norma Manion. Please don’t delay, but see if you can locate father.” The girl’s voice was agonized. “I heard him groan a half-hour ago, and a little later came a terrific crash. Oh, I’m afraid he’s dead!”

Reluctantly Jimmie gave up the idea of ambushing the Professor.

“Wait here,” he commanded curtly. “If you hear a shot join me as soon as you can. I want to take him alive if I can, but....” With this parting hint he disappeared through the door into the laboratory. Down the carpeted hall he crept to the stairway. Here he stopped and listened, but to his sensitive ears came no sound from below.

“Must have gone down the cellar with the body,” he muttered. “Here goes for a general exploration.”

With more boldness than the occasion perhaps really justified he descended the stairs and proceeded to examine the ground floor rooms minutely. The first was the room through which he had made entrance to the house. It proved to be but a storeroom containing nothing of interest, and he soon decided to waste no more time on it.

The adjoining chamber, however, yielded some surprising finds. He had pushed back a dusty portiere to find himself in what could be nothing less than the Professor's sleeping chamber. At present the bed was unoccupied, though it showed signs of recent use. The electric torch played swiftly over every possible corner which could constitute a hiding place for an assassin, revealing nothing. Now the ever-searching ray fell upon an old-fashioned dresser, on which was piled a miscellaneous array of articles. Here were combs, brushes, a wig, a huge magnifying glass, and a gold watch. With a barely suppressed exclamation, Jimmie pounced upon the gold timepiece.

Handlon's! So well did he know the particular design of his watch that he could have recognized it in the dark by sense of touch alone. So the old man was not averse to robbery among his other activities! The former two-story man thought fast. Handlon had probably been done in, and the body had been disposed of in some weird manner. The only thing that remained to be done, since the unlucky photographer was evidently past human help, was to cut short the Professor's list of murders.

With the intention of missing no essential detail O'Hara swept the ray of the searchlight around the chamber once more, but discovered no more of importance. Deciding that the sleeping chamber could yield no further clue he shut off the tell-tale ray and stepped noiselessly back into the next room. Here he groped his way around until he encountered a door, which stood open. A moment's cautious exploration with an outstretched foot revealed the top step of a descending staircase. No faintest glimmer of light was visible, but muffled sounds proceeding from the depths told him that someone was below.

With infinite care, feeling his way gingerly over the rickety old steps and fearful that an unexpected creak from one of the ancient boards would at any moment prove his undoing, he commenced the descent. Once a board did groan softly, causing him to stop in his tracks and stand with bated breath. He listened for sign of a movement below, while his heart loudly told off a dozen strokes. Stealthily he continued his progress, until finally soft earth under his feet told him he had reached the cellar bottom.

Now his straining eyes perceived a tiny bit of light, and simultaneously he became conscious of a deathly stench. The damp earth padding his footsteps, he advanced swiftly toward the source of light, which now seemed to lie in stripes across his line of vision. He soon saw that the stairs gave upon a small boarded-off section of the cellar proper, and light was seeping between the boards. Ah, and here was a rickety door, fortuitously equipped with a large knot-hole. O'Hara applied an eye to this--and what he saw nearly ruined even his cast iron nerve.

The Professor was working beside a heavy wooden

cask, from which issued the horrible stench. From time to time a sodden thud told that he was hacking something to pieces with an ax. Now and then he would strain mightily at a dark and bulky thing which lay on the floor, a thing that required considerable strength to lift. It seemed to be getting lighter after each spasm of frenzied chopping. For a second Kell's shadow wavered away from the thing, and the enervated newspaper man saw it plainly. His senses almost left him as he realized that he was witnessing the dismemberment of a human body.

As he hacked the fragments of tissue from the torso the fiend carefully deposited each in the huge cask. At such times a faint boiling sound was heard, and there arose an effluvium that bade fair to overcome even the monster engaged in the foul work. At last the limbs and head had been entirely removed. The Professor evidently decided that the trunk should be left whole, and he put his entire strength into the job of getting it into the cask. It was almost more than he could negotiate, but finally a dull splash told that he had succeeded.

At this moment Jimmie O'Hara came out of his trance. The horrible proceeding had left him faint and shaken, and he wished heartily that he could leave the disgusting place as fast as his legs could carry him. But there was still work to be done and he resolved to get it over.

The lantern! First he must put that out of commission. The maniac would then be at his mercy. Slowly, steadily he stole through the doorway, his eyes glued to the Professor's back. Now he was within a yard of the lantern, and he drew back his foot for the kick.

Next moment Jimmie found himself gazing into the glaring eyes of his intended victim. Instinctively he struck out with the clubbed automatic, but the blow must have fallen short, or else the Professor had developed an uncanny agility. Now to his horror he saw the flashing blade of the bloodstained ax raised on high. He had no time to dodge the blow. He pressed the trigger of the Colt from the position in which he held it.

The bullet grazed the upraised arm. The ax fell

toward O'Hara from fingers lacking strength to retain it, and he grasped it by the handle in midair. The next moment the assassin collected his wits and sprang at him. Silently, the breath of both coming in gasps, the two men strove, each clawing desperately at the other's throat. The reporter fought with the knowledge that should he lose he would never again see the light of day, the other with the fear of the justice that would deal with him.

The maniac hugged his arms tightly about Jimmie, pinioning him so tightly that the reporter could not use his gun. At length their convulsive movements brought the men close to the lantern, and the next instant the cellar was plunged in darkness. A second later the Professor tripped over some hidden obstruction and fell, dragging his opponent with him to the earthen floor. To Jimmie's surprise there was no further movement from the body beneath him. Could the old villain be playing possum? He cautiously shifted his hold and grasped the hidden throat. He pressed the Professor's windpipe for a moment, but there was no answering struggle. Slowly the truth

dawned upon him. The heavy fall to the floor had rendered the older man insensible.

He must work fast. Reaching into his pocket he brought out the ever handy electric torch and flashed it over the features of his prisoner. Kell was breathing heavily. With dexterous hands O'Hara swiftly went through the old man's pockets, removing all which might tend to make that worthy dangerous--an ugly looking pistol of large caliber, a blackjack similar to his own and a small bottle.

The latter item Jimmie examined curiously, finally uncorking it and inhaling the contents. He inhaled, not wisely but too well. The fumes from the vial were nigh overpowering, and he reeled back nauseated. The cork he hastily replaced. Just what the nature of the powerful stuff was he never attempted to discover. One acquaintance was enough.

He staggered to his feet and got the lantern lighted, then sat, gun in hand, waiting for his prisoner's return to his senses. This was becoming increasingly imminent, judging by certain changes in the

Professor's respiration. Finally there came a series of shuddering movements as the man attempted to raise his battered body.

"Get up, you damned butcher," ordered Jimmie, "and march upstairs. And just remember that I've got you covered; don't make any false moves." He prodded the prostrate form of the by now glaring fiend before him. The stench of the place was nearly overcoming him, and again he felt an overwhelming desire to dash madly from that den of evil, and once more breathe God's fresh air. Under the stimulus of several shoves the Professor finally won to his feet and stumbled up the stairs. Jimmie was taking no chances and kept the automatic sharply digging into the ribs of his prisoner. The fight, however, seemed temporarily to have been all taken out of the old man, and he made no resistance as the reporter drove him on up to the laboratory.

The room he found exactly as he left it. At a word from him Norma Manion came from her hiding place in the horrible room where she had been kept prisoner.

With an hysterical scream she fell limply to the floor. The sight of her father's murderer had proved too much for her. Forgetting his prisoner for the moment Jimmie sprang to the girl's side.

Kell chose this moment to make a dash for freedom. His footsteps, however, were not as noiseless as he had intended, and O'Hara whirled just in time to see his quarry about to throw open the hall door. Jimmie dove for his gun, only to encounter the Professor's mysterious vial, which, though forgotten, still lay in his pocket. With no time to think, he acted purely upon instinct. His arm drew back and the bottle flew straight for the Professor's head.

By a miracle the missile missed its mark. Came a shivering crash, as the bottle struck a stud in the massive door. Of a sudden recalling the terrific potency of the contents of that particular bottle, Jimmie gasped in dismay. Norma Manion's safety drove every other thought from his mind. At any cost he must remove her from the proximity of those lethal fumes.

Hastily and without a backward glance, he gathered the girl into his arms and dashed into the room where he had first found her. Ascertaining that she had but swooned he placed her gently on the bed. In some perplexity as to his next move he stared at the beautiful face now so wan and white. Queer that he hadn't noticed the fact before--she was beautiful. He even took a second look, then noting a continued absence of all sound from the laboratory decided to investigate.

Gingerly he pushed open the door, sniffing the air cautiously as he advanced. To his nostrils gradually came a slight scent, which though almost imperceptible made his senses reel. As he approached the hall door he found the atmosphere heavy with the soporific vapors from the broken vial, and he staggered drunkenly.

He gave a start of surprise. On the floor, lying in a grotesque huddle which suggested a most unpleasant possibility, was the inert body of Professor Kell.

Jimmie bent over the body and put an experienced ear

to the heart. Yes, there as a faint beat--very faint. Even as he listened he perceived a slight increase in the respiration. Now the breath began coming in great, choking gasps, only to die suddenly to next to nothing. At last with a rueful sigh Jimmie reached to his hip and produced the private O'Hara flagon. He stooped over the Professor's form once more and by dint of much prying at clenched jaws managed to force a sizeable charge of fiery liquid down the old man's throat. Jimmie had just begun to entertain a strong hope that this latter effort would bring the Professor to life, when his keen ear detected signs of a commotion below.

He sprang from his position over the slowly reviving Kell and leaped to a vantage point beside the door. A blackjack miraculously appeared from some hidden part of his anatomy and the ever-dependable Colt also became in evidence. Now came the banging of a door, muffled voices, a crash as of a chair overturned in the dark. Up rolled a horrible oath, and the same was rendered in a voice to Jimmie sweetly familiar. Came the sound of footsteps on the stairway and several

persons coming along the hall.

“Where in hell is Jimmie?” roared a wicked voice. “If he’s met with any monkey business in this hell-hole I’ll see that the damned place burns to the ground before I leave it!”

Delightedly Jimmie jerked open the door.

“Still alive, Chief,” he chirped as the Old Man strode into the laboratory. Bland was followed by Perry, who seemed to be in a sort of daze. Bringing up the rear were a pair of plainclothesmen whom Jimmie knew very well--almost too well. One of these gentlemen bore a lantern which reminded Jimmie strongly of some he had seen that night guarding an open ditch in the public highway.

The Professor had fully regained consciousness and was struggling to his feet. As for Norma Manion, she had suddenly appeared, leaning weakly against the door casing, and was surveying the group in great alarm.

After being assured by O'Hara that they were her friends she smiled wanly. To Bland and the others she was, of course, an unexpected factor in the weird night's doings, and for several moments they regarded her curiously.

At length Jimmie, sensing the question in the Old Man's eyes, elected to offer a few words of explanation.

"Miss Manion has just been through a terrible experience," he said. "She and her father have been for some time at the mercy of this monster"--indicating Kell--"and her nerves are completely shattered. We'd better get her out of this as quickly as we can."

"Mike!" Hard Boiled Bland glared at one of the officers. "Don't stand there with your teeth in your gums like that. Take this girl out to my car and let her lie down. She needs a stimulant, too. If you search my car and find any red liquor in the left back door pocket, I don't know a thing about it. And stay with her so she won't be afraid to go to sleep."

She smiled in silent gratitude and allowed the plainclothesman to lead her away from that chamber of horror.

The reporter lost no time in telling Bland of his failure to find Skip Handlon. He went on to acquaint his Chief with the facts of all that had occurred while he had been at the Professor's house.

The fiery old fellow listened grimly. When Jimmie came to the story of the corpse and the cask the editor breathed one word, "Manion!"

Jimmie nodded sadly. All eyes turned to the dejected huddle on the floor that was Professor Kell. Finally Bland could wait no longer, but fixed a terrible eye on the murderer and demanded harshly, "Where's Handlon?"

Now the Professor burst into a fit of insane laughter, laughter that curdled the blood of the listeners.

"You ask me that! It's almost too good. Hee-hee! You sent your two precious reporters out to my house to

pry into my secrets, and thought to display my name all over your yellow sheet; but you forgot that you were dealing with Professor Anton Kell, didn't you?" The last he fairly shrieked. "A lot of people have tried to intrude upon me before, but none ever escaped me!"

"We know that," cut in Jimmie, for he was getting impatient and the old man's boastings seemed out of place. "You are slated for the rope anyway, after what I discovered down cellar." He jerked his eyes in the direction of the door significantly. "Now we propose to find Handlon, and the better it will be for you if you tell us what you have done with him. Otherwise...."

"You can go to hell!" screamed the maniac. "If you are so clever, find out for yourselves. He isn't so far away that you couldn't touch him by reaching out your hand. In fact, he's been with you quite a while. Hee-hee-hee! Well, if you must know--there he is!" With an insane chuckle he pointed at Horace Perry. And Perry did a strange thing.

"Yes, you fiend, here I am!" Whose voice was that?

Was it Perry speaking, or was it Skip Handlon? Most assuredly Perry stood before them, but the voice, in a subtle manner, reminded the group strongly of poor old Skip.

As he spoke Perry had launched himself at the Professor's throat and had to be restrained by the others. Savagely he fought them but slowly and surely they overcame his struggles and placed him, writhing, in a chair.

Of a sudden Bland leaned forward and scrutinized Perry's face sharply. Had the reporter gone insane too? The pupils of the eyes had taken on a sort of queer contraction, a fixed quality that was almost ludicrous. He looked like a man under hypnosis. He had gone limp in their grasp, but now suddenly he stiffened. The eyes underwent another startling change, this time glowing undoubtedly with the look of reason. Bland was mystified and waited for Perry to explain his queer conduct. The latter seemed finally to come to. Simultaneously he realized that his peculiar lapse from consciousness had been observed by the others.

“Guess I may as well admit it,” he said with a wry smile. “Ever since I came back from my assignment with Kell I have had a hell of a time. Half the time I have been in a daze and have not had the least idea what I was doing. Funny part of it is that I have seemed to keep right on doing things even while I was out of my head.” He told briefly of the visions he had had in which he had seemed to contend with his brother reporter, the horrid sensations as he felt himself overcome, the black oblivion in which he then found himself, and the mysterious manner in which he had left Keegan on that ill-fated assignment.

“What have you done to Handlon?” Jimmie’s voice cut in. He was standing over the form of the maniac, rigid and menacing. “You have exactly two minutes to go.”

“Find out for yourself!” snarled the bruised and battered fiend.

“I will,” was the answer, and on the instant a horrible shriek rent the air. Jimmie had quickly grasped both of the Professor’s arms at the wrists and was slowly twisting them in a grip of iron. Kell’s face went white,

the lips writhed back over toothless gums, the eyes closed in the supreme effort to withstand the excruciating pain. Then--

“Enough, enough!” he screamed.

O’Hara eased the pressure slightly but retained his hold upon the clawlike hands. “Talk fast,” he ordered.

The old man struggled futilely in the grasp of the powerful reporter, finally glancing in the direction of the others. Would they show signs of pity? Surely not Hard Boiled Bland. The Chief was watching the struggles of the victim through a cloud of tobacco smoke which he was slowly exhaling through his nose. The plainclothesman displayed no sign of interest at all. The game was up!

“Very well,” he said sullenly. “Handlon and Perry are both occupying the same body.”

“Wh-a-a-t?” roared Bland. “Jimmie, I guess you’ll have to put the screws to him some more. He’s trying to make fools of us at the last minute!”

“No, no!” screamed the Professor. “What I say is true. I have been working for years on my system of de-astralization. This last year I at length perfected my electric de-astralizer, which amplifies and exerts the fifth influence of de-cohesion.”

The whole party began to look uneasy and gazed apprehensively at the huge Crookes tube which still stood in its supporting frame on the table.

“I have been forced to experiment on animals for the most part,” the Professor continued. “I succeeded in de-astralizing a dog and a bull and caused them to exchange bodies. The bodies continued to function. I was enthusiastic. Other experiments took place of which I will not tell you. Finally I began to long for a human subject on which to try my fifth influence.”

“Just get down to cases, if you don’t mind, Kell.” The Chief wanted action. “Suppose you tell us just what you did to Handlon and where we can find him. I may as well mention that your life depends upon it. If we find that you have done for him, something worse than death may happen to you.” The tone was

menacing. Although Handlon was a comparatively late acquisition to the old Chief's staff, still he had been loyal to the paper.

"When your two damned reporters entered my driveway," Kell resumed. "I saw them coming through a powerful glass which I always have on hand. I had no desire to see them, but they forced themselves upon me. At last I determined that they should furnish material for my experiments.

"If your men had looked into the grove behind the barn they would have found the automobile which furnished two more subjects I was keeping on hand in a room upstairs. Old Manion and his daughter gave me quite a bit of trouble, but I kept them drugged most of the time. He broke out of the room to-night though, and I had to kill him. It was self defense," he added slyly.

"Anyway, I found it was possible to make two astrals exchange bodies. But I also wanted to see if it were possible to cause two astrals to occupy the same body at the same time, and if so what the result would be. I

found out. It was rare sport to watch your star reporter leave my house. He was damned glad to leave, I believe....” Again came the insane cackle.

“Guess we have to believe him whether we want to or not.” The detective came to life. “How about making him release Handlon’s--what d’ye call it?--astral--from Perry’s body?”

“Just a moment.” The voice now was unmistakably Handlon’s, though it was issuing from the throat of Perry. “In the minute I have in consciousness let me suggest that before you do any more de-astralizing you *locate my body*. Until then, if I am released from this one I am a dead man.”

The words struck the group dumb. Where *was* Handlon’s body? Could the Professor produce it?

That worthy looked rather haunted at that moment, and they began to see the fear of death coming upon him.

“Mercy, mercy!” he begged as the four men started to

advance upon him. "As soon as I had de-astralized Handlon I destroyed his body in my pickling barrel down cellar. But there is another way..." He paused, uncertain as to how his next words would be received. "Go out and get the Manion girl. She can be de-astralized and friend Handlon can have her body."

At this suggestion, advanced so naïvely, the four men recoiled in horror. It was entirely too much even for Hard Boiled Bland, and he could hardly restrain himself from applying the editorial fist to the leering face before him. Undoubtedly Professor Kell was hopelessly insane, and for that reason he held himself in leash.

"Kell, you are slated to pull off one more stunt," Jimmie addressed the cringing heap. "You know what it is. Get busy. And just remember that I am standing over here"--he indicated a corner well separated from the rest--"with this cannon aimed in your direction. If things aren't just according to Hoyle, you get plugged. Get me?"

"What about it, men?" Bland spoke up. "Is it going to

be treating Handlon right to de-astralize him now? It will be his last chance to have a body on this earth."

"Unfortunately that body never belonged to Handlon," said O'Hara. "Hence I fail to see why Perry should be discommoded for the balance of his life with a companion astral. Perry is clearly entitled to his own body, free and unhampered. Friend Skip is out of luck, unless--Well, I don't mind telling you, Kell, that you just gave me an idea. Snap into it now!"

The Professor dragged himself to his feet and under the menace of the automatic fumbled under the table until he had located the intricate apparatus before mentioned.

"Now if Mr. Perry--or Handlon--will kindly recline at full length on this table," he said with an obscene leer, "the experiment will begin."

"Just remember, Kell, this is no experiment," advised Bland, fixing the Professor with an ugly eye. "You do as you're told."

The other made no reply, but threw a hidden switch. Perry, lying flat on his back on the ancient table, suddenly found himself being bathed by what seemed to be a ray of light, and yet was not a ray of light. What was it? It was surely not visible, yet it was tangible. A terrific force was emanating from that devilish globe above him, drawing him out of himself--or--no--was he expanding? Again his ears became filled with confused, horrible sounds, the outlines of the room faded from sight, he felt a strange sense of inflation ... of lightness.... Oblivion!



IMAGEDescription

From where the others sat a gasp of wonder went up. At the first contact of the switch there had been a momentary flash of greenish light within the bulb, and then a swift transition to a beautiful orange. It

had then faded altogether, leaving the glass apparently inert and inactive.

But it was not so! The form lying beneath the bulb was evidently being racked with untold tortures. The face became a thing of horror. Now it had twisted into a grotesque semblance of Handlon's--now it again resembled Perry's. The Professor quietly increased the pressure of the current. From the bulb emanated a steel gray exhalation of what must be termed light, and yet so real it was seemingly material. Assuredly it was not a ray of light as we understand light. It came in great beating throbs, in which the actual vibrations were entirely visible. Under each impact the body of Perry seemed to change, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. The body was now swelled to enormous size. Bland reached forward to touch it.

"This de-cohering influence," the Professor was murmuring, almost raptly, "causes the atoms that go to make a living body repel one another. When the body is sufficiently nebulized, the soul--Back! Back, you fool!" he suddenly shrieked, grasping Bland by the arm. "Do you want to kill him?"

Bland hurriedly retreated, convinced perforce that Kell's alarm was genuine. The editorial fingers had penetrated the subject's garments without resistance and sank into the body as easily as if it were so much soft soap!

The body continued to expand until at length even the hard-headed plainclothesman realized that it had been reduced to a mere vapor. Within this horrid vaporized body, which nearly filled the room and which had now lost all semblance to a man, could be discerned two faint shapes. Swiftly the Professor extinguished the lantern. The shapes, vague though they were, could be recognized as those of Horace Perry and Skip Handlon. And they were at strife!

All eyes were now focused on Professor Kell, who was evidently waiting for something to happen. The two apparitions within the body-cloud were at death grips. One had been overcome and was temporarily helpless. It was that of Handlon. And then again the astral of Perry forcibly ousted that of Handlon from the cloud-cyst. And at that instant Professor Kell shut off the influence-tube.

At once a terrific metamorphosis took place. There came a sharp sound almost like a clap of thunder, with the slight exception that this was occasioned by exactly the reverse effect. Instead of being an explosion it might more properly be termed an *inplosion*, for the mist-cloud suddenly vanished. The de-cohering influence having been removed, the cloud had condensed into the form of Perry. Apparently none the worse, he was even now beginning to recover consciousness. The astral of Handlon was no longer visible, though hovering in the vicinity.

Perry's body was again his own.

At this time Jimmie O'Hara elected to start something new by hitting the Professor a workmanlike blow on the back of the head with the butt of his automatic. The next thing Bland or anyone else present knew the unconscious body of the Professor was on the table and Jimmie was groping for the concealed switch. At length he found it, and the green flash of light appeared in the bulb, followed by the brilliant orange manifestation.

“What in hell are you doing?” gasped Bland.

“De-astralizing the Professor,” replied O’Hara cheerfully. “Don’t you get the idea yet? Watch!”

Fascinated, the four men saw the terrific emanation take its baleful effect. As before, the body commenced to expand and gradually took on a misty outline. Larger and larger it grew, until finally it had become a vast cloud of intangible nothingness which filled the room like some evil nebula.

A cry of consternation from the detective aroused Jimmie. Skip Handlon’s astral had appeared within the field of the nebula to fight for possession. There ensued what was perhaps the weirdest encounter ever witnessed. Though he was in poor physical shape, the Professor seemed to have an extremely powerful astral; and for some time the spectators despaired of Handlon’s victory. Once the latter, evidently realizing that the powerful influence tube had rendered him visible, glanced sharply in Jimmie’s direction. O’Hara was considerably puzzled at this, but watched the progress of the struggle tensely. At

length the moment seemed to arrive which the reporter's astral had been awaiting. It turned tail and fled away from the astral of the Professor, disappearing beyond the outer confines of the nebula.

Jimmie suddenly divined the other's purpose and dived for the hidden switch. As he had anticipated, Handlon had finally given up the attempt to overcome the astral of Kell by force and had made up his mind to accomplish his end by strategy. Almost on the instant that Jimmie's hand closed on the switch the reporter's astral again leaped into the field of the nebula. Fiercely it signalled to the former second story man to shut off the current, but the admonition was unnecessary, for Jimmie had already done so.

Swiftly the cloud-cyst faded. Even as the group caught a fleeting sight of Skip Handlon, the last that mortal eyes would ever see of him as he actually was, there came a violent disturbance at the edge of the shrinking nebula. Would the speed of condensation of the atoms which comprised the body of Professor Kell serve to shut out the pursuing astral of Kell?

Even Bland held his breath!

The cloud lost its luminous quality, the action of condensation increasing in speed. It was barely visible in the enshrouding gloom. An astral had long since been enveloped within the rapidly accumulating substance. Came a sudden clap of sound as before, and the final act of resolution had been accomplished. Whether the Professor had succeeded in regaining a position within the cloud-cyst before the crucial second none could say.

Jimmie relighted the lantern. Apparently the effect of the love tap administered by his automatic was more or less of a lasting character, and the men were put to some ado to restore the body of Kell to consciousness. At length their efforts began to bear fruit, however, and it became expedient to remove the patient to the softer couch in the sitting room below. As they moved forward to lay hold of the limp body a figure appeared in the doorway to the hall. It was the plainclothesman, Riley.

“How about getting under way for town,” he wanted

to know. "Is the old party croaked yet? Miss Manion has had a fierce time and says she won't stay near this house another minute. I don't like this place myself either. Do you know I just got kicked by a poll parrot? Let's get away from here."

"Hold on, Riley, what are you talking about?" growled Bland. "Kicked by a poll parrot! You're--"

"That's all right, Chief," broke in the now thoroughly cheerful Perry. "That jackass I shot could probably have told us all about it. I positively know the beast could talk."

"Humph!" snorted Bland, "Well, if a donkey can talk, and a bull can bite, and a hound can hook, why shouldn't a parrot--Judas Priest, I'm getting as crazy as the rest of you! Hurry up and get Kell downstairs so we can see who he is. There I go again! Oh, go lie down, Riley."

"But look, Bland, look!" Riley was pointing a demoralized finger at a cage in the corner. He tugged frantically at Bland's coat sleeve. "See what's in

there, won't you? I--well, I did find some liquor in your car, and Miss Manion made me take some. I--I didn't know it would do this to me. Look in there; please, Mr. Bland!"

Bland gave Riley a dark look, but nevertheless he reached for O'Hara's flashlight. In the cage two yellow eyes blinked sleepily out at him. Perry began to laugh.

"Why, there's nothing in there but a cat. Skip and I heard it purring when we first came in here this afternoon. Guess Riley--"

"Great God, Jimmie, give me your gun!" Hard Boiled Bland for the moment failed to merit his sobriquet. The torch in his hand threw a trembling beam full into the cage. "It's a snake! And--there! It's doing it again!"

A snake it was, indubitably, a huge black specimen with bright yellow stripes. Bland's frenzied yell seemed not to have excited it at all, for now the sleek fellow had arched its body neatly and was calmly

licking its sides with a long forked tongue. After a moment it halted the operation long enough to rub its jaw against a bar of its cage, and gave vent to a sociable mew!

Even this could not dash the spirits of Horace Perry. He laughed delightedly again as he laid Bland by the arm.

“That creature is perfectly harmless, Chief,” he told the editor. “Somewhere I suppose there’s a mighty dangerous kitty cat at large, but there’s no sense in taking it out on this poor reptile. Let’s live and let live.”

With a show of reluctance Bland returned Jimmie’s automatic, then strode over to where lay the form of Kell. Perry and O’Hara lingered by the cage long enough to arrange a plan to let the snake out doors as soon as opportunity offered, after which they joined their Chief. Riley went out to resume his vigil in Bland’s car, while his fellow sleuth prepared to light the way downstairs. Under his guidance the sick man was carried below without mishap.

Downstairs the now conscious form of the venerable Professor was laid out on the ancient sofa until his senses could clear a bit. Presently the eyelids fluttered open and a feeble voice asked, “Where the deuce am I, and how did all you guys get here?”

A joyous gasp went up. That voice! Although uttered in somewhat the same vocal quality as Kell’s the intonation and accents had strangely altered. O’Hara leaned eagerly over the figure on the couch. The question he asked was startling in its incongruity:

“How are you feeling, *Skip!*”

“Rotten,” was the reply from the lips of Kell. “What hit me such a crack on the dome? I feel as if I had been dragged through a knot-hole. Lemme up.”

“Stay still,” commanded O’Hara, kindly but firmly. “You aren’t fit to move yet. You are going on a long ride and will need your strength. Don’t talk, either.”

A half-hour later they left the house. In the front yard the editor called a hasty conclave which included the

entire party. Hard Boiled Bland has never been known to talk so much at a stretch, before or since.

“Before we start back,” he began, “we had better come to an understanding. In the first place--Skip, come over here a minute.”

Norma Manion uttered an involuntary cry of fear as the aged form of Kell passed by her. Skip’s instant response to his name had, of course, been perfectly natural to him. But it had an odd effect on the others.

“Miss Manion, and gentlemen,” Bland went on, with a bow of mock ceremony, “I want you to meet Mister--er, Mister--oh hell, call him Saunders. This is Mr. Kenneth Saunders, ladies and gentlemen. When he gets a shave and has his new face patched up I believe you will like his appearance much more than you do now.

“Seriously though, folks, I hope that with a little fixing up the gentleman will hardly resemble Professor Anton Kell. Kell is dead. Obviously, however, this gentleman can hardly continue his existence as Skip

Handlon. Hence--well, hence Mr. Saunders. And don't forget the name.

"Now another little matter. This house has proven a curse to humanity. What has transpired here need never be known. Would it not be the wiser to eliminate all traces of to-night's happenings? There is a way." He looked significantly at the others.

"You mean--" began Perry.

"That we destroy all traces of Professor Kell's villainy. Although he is no more, still someone might notice that *his body actively remains*. And no one wants to do any explaining."

"It's the only way we can protect Handlon," one of the sleuths ruminated, half to himself. "No judge would ever believe a word about this de-astralization business. The chances are we would all go to the booby hatch and Handlon would go to prison for Kell's crimes."

"There were four of us that witnessed the fact of the--

the soul transfusion, though,” Perry objected.

“Wouldn’t that be enough to clear Skip? Besides, wouldn’t it be possible for us to lead a jury out here and duplicate the experiment?”

“Too much undesirable publicity,” growled Bland, who for once in his life had found reason to keep something good out of the headlines. “What do you say, people?”

“I move we move,” from the detective who had had the uncomfortable job of attending to Norma Manion.

“Gentleman, I believe we understand each other,” said Jimmie quietly. “Now I am going into the barn”—significantly—“to see if everything’s all right. While I am there something *might* happen. You understand?”

The others nodded silent assent.

In the snug seat of Jimmie’s speedster Norma Manion shivered as she followed the direction indicated by her companion’s finger. It was that darkest hour which comes just before the dawn.

To the westward could be perceived a dull, red glow, which, even as they watched with fascinated eyes, developed into an intense glare. Gradually the fading stars became eclipsed in the greater glory.

Three cars, motors throbbing as if eager to be gone, stood a space apart on the main road. The car behind O'Hara's was the Manion machine, now occupied by Bland and Riley. The remaining one was a touring car and contained the balance of the party. Perry was at the wheel, and beside him sat the Handlon-Kell-Saunders combination.

"Thus passes a den of horror," whispered Jimmie to his companion.

"It is the funeral pyre of my father," the girl answered simply. She had long since recovered from her initial outburst of grief at her loss, and now watched the progress of the conflagration dry-eyed. At length Jimmie slipped an arm protectingly about the trembling shoulders.

"You have seen enough," he said. As the three cars

raced from the scene of the holocaust, faint streamers
in the east told of the rising orb of day.

“Good-by, Keegan, forever,” murmured Norma.

“Amen,” O’Hara devoutedly agreed.

**#18 From the Ocean's Depths, and the sequel,
Into the Ocean's Depths, by Sewell Peaslee
Wright:**

Man came from the sea. Mercer, by his thought-telegraph, learns from the weirdly beautiful ocean-maiden of a branch that returned there.

From the Ocean's Depths proximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

Into the Ocean's Depths, aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

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From somewhere out on the black, heaving Atlantic, the rapid, muffled popping of a speed-boat's exhaust drifted clearly through the night.

I dropped my book and stretched, leaning back more comfortably in my chair. There was real romance and adventure! Rum-runners, seeking out their hidden port with their cargo of contraband from Cuba.

Heading fearlessly through the darkness, fighting the high seas, still running after the storm of a day or so before, daring a thousand dangers for the sake of the straw-packed bottles they carried. Sea-bronzed men, with hard, flat muscles and fearless eyes; ready guns slapping their thighs as they--

Absorbed in my mental picture of these modern free-booters, the sudden alarm of the telephone startled me like an unexpected shot fired beside my ear.

Brushing the cigarette ashes from my smoking-jacket, I crossed the room and snatched up the receiver.

"Hello!" I snapped ungraciously into the mouthpiece. It was after eleven by the ship's clock on the mantel, and if--

"Taylor?" The voice--Warren Mercer's familiar voice--rattled on without waiting for a reply. "Get in your car and come down here as fast as possible.

Come just as you are, and--"

"What's the matter?" I managed to interrupt him.

"Burglars?" I had never heard Mercer speak in that high-pitched, excited voice before; his usual speech was slow and thoughtful, almost didactic.

"Please, Taylor, don't waste time questioning me. If it weren't urgent, I wouldn't be calling you, you know. Will you come?"

"You bet!" I said quickly, feeling rather a fool for ragging him when he was in such deadly earnest. "Have--"

The receiver snapped and crackled; Mercer had hung up the instant he had my assurance that I would come. Usually the very soul of courtesy and consideration, that act alone would have convinced me that there was an urgent need for my presence at The Monstrosity. That was Mercer's own name for the impressive pile that was at once his residence and his laboratory.

I threw off the smoking-jacket and pulled on a woolen golfing sweater, for the wind was brisk and sharpish. In two minutes I was backing the car out of the garage; a moment later I was off the gravelled drive and tearing down the concrete with the accelerator all the way down, and the black wind shrieking around the windshield of my little roadster.

My own shack was out of the city limits--a little place I keep to live in when the urge to go fishing seizes me, which is generally about twice a year. Mercer picked the place up for me at a song.

The Monstrosity was some four miles further out from town, and off the highway perhaps a half-mile more.

I made the four miles in just a shade over that many minutes, and clamped on the brakes as I saw the entrance to the little drive that led toward the sea, and Mercer's estate.

With gravel rattling on my fenders, I turned off the concrete and swept between the two massive, stuccoed pillars that guarded the drive. Both of them

bore corroded bronze plates, "The Billows," the name given The Monstrosity by the original owner, a newly-rich munitions manufacturer.

The structure itself loomed up before me in a few seconds, a rambling affair with square-shouldered balconies and a great deal of wrought-iron work, after the most flamboyant Spanish pattern. It was ablaze with light. Apparently every bulb in the place was burning.

Just a few yards beyond the surf boomed hollowly on the smooth, shady shore, littered now, I knew, by the pitiful spoils of the storm.

As I clamped on my brakes, a swift shadow passed two of the lower windows. Before I could leap from the car, the broad front door, with its rounded top and circular, grilled window, was flung wide, and Mercer came running to meet me.

He was wearing a bathrobe, hastily flung on over a damp bathing suit, his bare legs terminating in a pair of disreputable slippers.

“Fine, Taylor!” he greeted me. “I suppose you’re wondering what it’s all about. I don’t blame you. But come in, come in! Just wait till you see her!”

“Her?” I asked, startled. “You’re not in love, by any chance, and bringing me down here like this merely to back up your own opinion of them eyes and them lips, Mercer?”

He laughed excitedly.

“You’ll see, you’ll see! No, I’m not in love. And I want you to help, and not admire. There are only Carson and myself here, you know, and the job’s too big for the two of us.” He hurried me across the broad concrete porch and into the house. “Throw the cap anywhere and come on!”

Too much amazed to comment further, I followed my friend. This was a Warren Mercer I did not know. Usually his clean-cut, olive-tinted face was a polite mask that seldom showed even the slightest trace of emotion. His eyes, dark and large, smiled easily, and shone with interest, but his almost beautiful mouth,

beneath the long slim mustache, always closely cropped, seldom smiled with his eyes.

But it was his present excited speech that amazed me most. Mercer, during all the years I had known him, had never been moved before to such tempestuous outbursts of enthusiasm. It was his habit to speak slowly and thoughtfully, in his low, musical voice; even in the midst of our hottest arguments, and we had had many of them, his voice had never lost its calm, unhurried gentleness.

To my surprise, instead of leading the way to the really comfortable, although rather gaudy living room, Mercer turned to the left, towards what had been the billiard room, and was now his laboratory.

The laboratory, brilliantly illuminated, was littered, as usual, with apparatus of every description. Along one wall were the retorts, scales, racks, hoods and elaborate set-ups, like the articulated glass and rubber bones of some weird prehistoric monster, that demonstrated Mercer's taste for this branch of science. On the other side of the room a

corresponding workbench was littered with a tangle of coils, transformers, meters, tools and instruments, and at the end of the room, behind high black control panels, with gleaming bus-bars and staring, gaping meters, a pair of generators hummed softly. The other end of the room was nearly all glass, and opened onto the patio and the swimming pool.

Mercer paused a moment, with his hand on the knob of the door, a strange light in his dark eyes.

“Now you’ll see why I called you here,” he said tensely. “You can judge for yourself whether the trip was worth while. Here she is!”

With a gesture he flung open the door, and I stared, following his glance, down at the great tiled swimming pool.

It is difficult for me to describe the scene. The patio was not large, but it was beautifully done. Flowers and shrubs, even a few small palms, grew in profusion in the enclosure, while above, through the movable glass roof--made in sections to disappear in fine

weather--was the empty blackness of the sky.

None of the lights provided for the illumination of the covered patio was turned on, but all the windows surrounding the patio were aglow, and I could see the pool quite clearly.

The pool--and its occupant.

We were standing at one side of the pool, near the center. Directly opposite us, seated on the bottom of the pool, was a human figure, nude save for a great mass of tawny hair that fell about her like a silken mantle. The strangely graceful figure of a girl, one leg stretched out straight before her, the other drawn up and clasped by the interlocked fingers of her hands. Even in the soft light I could see her perfectly, through the clear water, her pale body outlined sharply against the jade green tiles.

I tore myself away from the staring, curious eyes of the figure.

"In God's name, Mercer, what is it? Porcelain?" I

asked hoarsely. The thing had an indescribably eery effect.

He laughed wildly.

“Porcelain? Watch ... *look!*”

My eyes followed his pointing finger. The figure was moving. Gracefully it arose to its full height. The great cloud of corn-colored hair floated down about it, falling below the knees. Slowly, with a grace of movement comparable only with the slow soaring of a gull, she came toward me, walking on the bottom of the pool through the clear water as though she floated in air.

Fascinated, I watched her. Her eyes, startlingly large and dark in the strangely white face, were fixed on mine. There was nothing sinister in the gaze, yet I felt my body shaking as though in the grip of a terrible fear. I tried to look away, and found myself unable to move. I felt Mercer’s tense, sudden grip upon my arm, but I did not, could not, look at him.

“She--she’s smiling!” I heard him exclaim. He laughed, an excited, high-pitched laugh that irritated me in some subtle way.

She was smiling, and looking up into my eyes. She was very close now, within a few feet of us. She came still closer, until she was at my very feet as I stood on the raised ledge that ran around the edge of the pool, her head thrown back, staring straight up at me through the water.

I could see her teeth, very white between her coral-pink lips, and her bosom rising and falling beneath the veil of pale gold hair. She was breathing *water*!

Mercer literally jerked me away from the edge of the pool.

“What do you think of her, Taylor?” he asked, his dark eyes dancing with excitement.

“Tell me about it,” I said, shaking my head dazedly.

“She is not human?”

“I don’t know. I think so. As human as you or I. I’ll tell you all I know, and then you can judge for yourself. I think we’ll know in a few minutes, if my plans work out. But first slip on a bathing suit.”

I didn’t argue the matter. I let Mercer lead me away without a word. And while I was changing, he told me all he knew of the strange creature in the pool.

“Late this afternoon I decided to go for a little walk along the beach,” Mercer began. “I had been working like the devil since early in the morning, running some tests on what you call my thought-telegraph. I felt the need of some fresh sea air.

“I walked along briskly for perhaps five minutes, keeping just out of reach of the rollers and the spray. The shore was littered with all sorts of flotsam and jetsam washed up by the big storm, and I was just thinking that I would have to have a man with a truck come and clean up the shore in front of the place, when, in a little sandy pool, I saw--*her*.

“She was laying face down in the water, motionless,

her head towards the sea, one arm stretched out before her, and her long hair wrapped around her like a half-transparent cloak.

“I ran up and lifted her from the water. Her body was cold, and deathly white, although her lips were faintly pink, and her heart was beating, faintly but steadily.

“Like most people in an emergency. I forgot all I ever knew about first aid. All I could think of was to give her a drink, and of course I didn’t have a flask on my person. So I picked her up in my arms and brought her to the house as quickly as I could. She seemed to be reviving, for she was struggling and gasping when I got here with her.

“I placed her on the bed in the guest room and poured her a stiff drink of Scotch--half a tumblerful, I believe. Lifting up her head, I placed the glass to her lips. She looked up me, blinking, and took the liquor in a single draught. She did not seem to drink it, but sucked it out of the glass in a single amazing gulp--that’s the only word for it. The next instant she was off the bed, her face a perfect mask of hate and agony.

“She came at me, hands clutching and clawing, making odd murmuring or mewling sounds in her throat. It was then that I noticed for the first time that her hands were webbed!”

“Webbed?” I asked, startled.

“Webbed,” nodded Mercer solemnly. “As are her feet. But listen, Taylor. I was amazed, and not a little rattled when she came for me. I ran through the French windows out into the patio. For a moment she ran after me, rather awkwardly and heavily, but swiftly, nevertheless. Then she saw the pool.

“Apparently forgetting that I existed, she leaped into the water, and as I approached a moment later I could see her breathing deeply and gratefully, a smile of relief upon her features, as she lay upon the bottom of the pool. Breathing, Taylor, on the bottom of the pool! Under eight feet of water!”

“And then what, Mercer?” I reminded him, as he paused, apparently lost in thought.

“I tried to find out more about her. I put on my bathing suit and dived into the pool. Well, she came at me like a shark, quick as a flash, her teeth showing, her hands tearing like claws through the water. I turned, but not quickly enough to entirely escape. See?” Mercer threw back the dressing robe, and I saw a ragged tear in his bathing suit on his left side, near the waist. Through the rent three deep, jagged scratches were clearly visible.

“She managed to claw me, just once,” Mercer resumed, wrapping the robe about him again. “Then I got out and called on Carson for help. I put him into a bathing suit, and we both endeavored to corner her. Carson got two bad scratches, and one rather serious bite that I have bandaged. I have a number of lacerations, but I didn’t fare so badly as Carson because I am faster in the water than he is.

“The harder we tried, the more determined I became. She would sit there, calm and placid, until one of us entered the water. Then she became a veritable fury. It was maddening.

“At last I thought of you. I phoned, and here we are!”

“But, Mercer, it’s a nightmare!” I protested. We moved out of the room. “Nothing human can live under water and breathe water, as she does!”

Mercer paused a moment, staring at me oddly.

“The human race,” he said gravely, “came up out of sea. The human race as we know it. Some may have gone back.” He turned and walked away again, and I hurried after him.

“What do you mean. Mercer? ‘Some may have gone back?’ I don’t get it.”

Mercer shook his head, but made no other reply until we stood again on the edge of the pool.

The girl was standing where we had left her, and as she looked up into my face, she smiled again, and made a quick gesture with one hand. It seemed to me that she invited me to join her.

“I believe she likes you, Taylor,” said Mercer thoughtfully. “You’re light, light skin, light hair. Carson and I are both very dark, almost swarthy. And in that white bathing suit--yes, I believe she’s taken a fancy to you!”

Mercer’s eyes were dancing.

“If she has,” he went on, “it’ll make our work very easy.”

“What work?” I asked suspiciously. Mercer, always an indefatigable experimenter, was never above using his friends in the benefit of science. And some of his experiments in the past had been rather trying, not to say exciting.

“I think I have what you call my thought-telegraph perfected, experimentally,” he explained rapidly. “I fell asleep working on it at three o’clock, or thereabouts, this morning, and some tests with Carson seem to indicate that it is a success. I should have called you to-morrow, for further test. Nearly five years of damned hard work to a successful

conclusion, Taylor, and then this mermaid comes along and makes my experiment appear about as important as one of those breakers rolling in out there!”

“And what do you plan to do now?” I asked eagerly, glancing down at the beautiful pale face that glimmered up at me through the clear water of the pool.

“Why, try it on her!” exclaimed Mercer with mounting enthusiasm. “Don’t you see, Taylor? If it will work on her, and we can direct her thoughts, we can find out her history, the history of her people! We’ll add a page to scientific history--a whole big chapter!--that will make us famous. Man this is so big it’s swept me off my feet! Look!” And he held out a thin, aristocratic brown hand before my eyes, a hand that shook with nervous excitement.

“I don’t blame you,” I said quickly. “I’m no savant, and still I see what an amazing thing this is. Let’s get

busy. What can I do?"

Mercer reached around the door into the laboratory and pressed a button.

"For Carson," he explained. "We'll need his help. In the meantime, we'll look over the set-up. The apparatus is strewn all over the place."

He had not exaggerated. The set-up consisted of a whole bank of tubes, each one in its own shielding copper box. On a much-drilled horizontal panel, propped up on insulators, were half a score of delicate meters of one kind and another, with thin black fingers that pulsed and trembled. Behind the panel was a tall cylinder wound with shining copper wire, and beside it another panel, upright, fairly bristling with knobs, contact points, potentiometers, rheostats and switches. On the end of the table nearest the door was still another panel, the smallest of the lot, bearing only a series of jacks along one side, and in the center a switch with four contact points. A heavy, snaky cable led from this panel to the maze of apparatus further on.

“This is the control panel,” explained Mercer. “The whole affair, you understand, is in laboratory form. Nothing assembled. Put the different antennae plug into these jacks. Like this.”

He picked up a weird, hastily built contrivance composed of two semi-circular pieces of spring brass, crossed at right angles. On all four ends were bright silvery electrodes, three of them circular in shape, one of them elongated and slightly curved. With a quick, nervous gesture, Mercer fitted the thing to his head, so that the elongated electrode pressed against the back of his neck, extending a few inches down his spine. The other three circular electrodes rested on his forehead and either side of his head. From the center of the contrivance ran a heavy insulated cord, some ten feet in length, ending in a simple switchboard plug, which Mercer fitted into the uppermost of the three jacks.

“Now,” he directed, “you put on this one”—he adjusted a second contrivance upon my head, smiling as I shrank from the contact of the cold metal on my skin—“and think!”

He moved the switch from the position marked "Off" to the second contact point, watching me intently, his dark eyes gleaming.

Carson entered, and Mercer gestured to him to wait. Very nice old chap, Carson, impressive even in his bathing suit. Mercer was mighty lucky to have a man like Carson....

Something seemed to tick suddenly, somewhere deep in my consciousness.

"Yes, that's very true: Carson is a most decent sort of chap." The words were not spoken. I did not *hear* them, I *knew* them. What--I glanced at Mercer, and he laughed aloud with pleasure and excitement.

"It worked!" he cried. "I received your thought regarding Carson, and then turned the switch so that you received my thought. And you did!"

Rather gingerly I removed the thing from my head and laid it on the table.

“It’s wizardry, Mercer! If it will work as well on *her....*”

“It will, I know it will!--if we can get her to wear one of these,” replied Mercer confidently. “I have only three of them; I had planned some three-cornered experiments with you, Carson, and myself. We’ll leave Carson out of to-night’s experiment, however, for we’ll need him to operate this switch. You see, as it is now wired only one person transmits thoughts at a time. The other two receive. When the switch is on the first contact, Number One sends, and Numbers Two and Three receive. When the switch is on Number Two, then he sends thoughts, and Numbers One and Three receive them. And so on. I’ll lengthen these leads so that we can run them out into the pool, and then we’ll be ready. Somehow we must induce her to wear one of these things, even if we have to use force. I’m sure the three of us can handle her.”

“We should be able to,” I smiled. She was such a slim, graceful, almost delicate little thing; the thought that three strong men might not be able to control her seemed almost amusing.

“You haven’t seen her in action yet,” said Mercer grimly, glancing up from his work of lengthening the cords that led from the antennae to the control panel. “And what’s more, I hope you don’t.”

I watched him in silence as he spliced and securely taped the last connection.

“All set,” he nodded. “Carson, will you operate the switch for us? I believe everything is functioning properly.” He surveyed the panel of instruments hastily, assuring himself that every reading was correct. Then, with all three of the devices he called antennae in his hand, their leads plugged into the control panel, he led the way to the side of the pool.

The girl was strolling around the edge of the pool, feeling the smooth tile sides with her hands as we came into view, but as soon as she saw us she shot through the water to where we were standing.

It was the first time I had seen her move in this fashion. She seemed to propel herself with a sudden mighty thrust of her feet against the bottom; she

darted through the water with the speed of an arrow, yet stopped as gently as though she had merely floated there.

As she looked up, her eyes unmistakably sought mine, and her smile seemed warm and inviting. She made again that strange little gesture of invitation.

With an effort I glanced at Mercer. There was something devilishly fascinating about the girl's great, dark, searching eyes.

"I'm going in," I said hoarsely. "Hand me one of your head-set things when I reach for it." Before he could protest, I dived into the pool.

I headed directly towards the heavy bronze ladder that led to the bottom of the pool. I had two reasons in mind. I would need something to keep me under water, with my lungs full of air, and I could get out quickly if it were necessary. I had not forgotten the livid, jagged furrows in Mercer's side.

Quickly as I shot to the ladder she was there before

me, a dim, wavering white shape, waiting.

I paused, holding to a rung of the ladder with one hand. She came closer, walking with the airy grace I had noted before, and my heart pounded against my ribs as she raised one long, slim arm towards me.

The hand dropped gently on my shoulder, pressed it as though in token of friendship. Perhaps, I thought quickly, this was, with her, a sign of greeting. I lifted my own arm and returned the salutation, if salutation it were, aware of a strange rising and falling sound, as of a distant humming, in my ears.

The sound ceased suddenly, on a rising note, as though of inquiry, and it dawned on me that I had heard the speech of this strange creature. Before I could think of a course of action, my aching lungs reminded me of the need of air, and I released my hold on the ladder and let my body rise to the surface.

As my head broke the water, a hand, cold and strong as steel, closed around my ankle. I looked down. The girl was watching me, and there was no smile on her

face now.

“All right!” I shouted across the pool to Mercer, who was watching anxiously. Then, filling my lungs with air again, I pulled myself, by means of the ladder, to the bottom of the pool. The restraining hand was removed instantly.

The strange creature thrust her face close to mine as my feet touched bottom, and for the first time I saw her features distinctly.

She was beautiful, but in a weird, unearthly sort of way. As I had already noticed, her eyes were of unusual size, and I saw now that they were an intense shade of blue, with a pupil of extraordinary proportion. Her nose was well shaped, but the nostrils were slightly flattened, and the orifices were rather more elongated than I had ever seen before. The mouth was utterly fascinating, and her teeth, revealed by her engaging smile, were as perfect as it would be possible to imagine.

The great mane of hair which enveloped her was, as I

have said, tawny in hue, and almost translucent, like the stems of some seaweeds I have seen. And as she raised one slim white hand to brush back some wisps that floated by her face, I saw distinctly the webs between her fingers. They were barely noticeable, for they were as transparent as the fins of a fish, but they were there, extending nearly to the last joint of each finger.

As her face came close to my own, I became aware of the humming, crooning sound I had heard before, louder this time. I could see, from the movement of her throat, that I had been correct in assuming that she was attempting to speak with me. I smiled back at her and shook my head. She seemed to understand, for the sound ceased, and she studied me with a little thoughtful frown, as though trying to figure out some other method of communication.

I pointed upward, for I was feeling the need for fresh air again, and slowly mounted the ladder. This time she did not grasp me, but watched me intently, as though understanding what I did, and the reasons for it.

“Bring one of your gadgets over here, Mercer,” I called across the pool. “I think I’m making progress.”

“Good boy!” he cried, and came running with two of the antennae, the long insulated cords trailing behind him. Through the water the girl watched him, evident dislike in her eyes. She glanced at me with sudden suspicion as Mercer handed me the two instruments, but made no hostile move.

“You won’t be able to stay in the water with her,” explained Mercer rapidly. “The salt water would short the antennae, you see. Try to get her to wear one, and then you get your head out of water, and don yours. And remember, she won’t be able to communicate with us by words--we’ll have to get her to convey her thoughts by means of mental pictures. I’ll try to impress that on her. Understand?”

I nodded, and picked up one of the instruments. “Fire when ready, Gridley,” I commented, and sank again to the bottom of the pool.

I touched the girl’s head with one finger, and then

pointed to my own head, trying to convey to her that she could get her thoughts to me. Then I held up the antennae and placed it on my own head to show that it could not harm her.

My next move was to offer her the instrument, moving slowly, and smiling reassuringly--no mean feat under water.

She hesitated a moment, and then, her eyes fixed on mine, she slowly fixed the instrument over her own head as she had seen me adjust it upon my own.

I smiled and nodded, and pressed her shoulder in token of friendly greeting. Then, gesturing toward my own head again, and pointing upward. I climbed the ladder.

"All right, Mercer," I shouted. "Start at once, before she grows restless!"

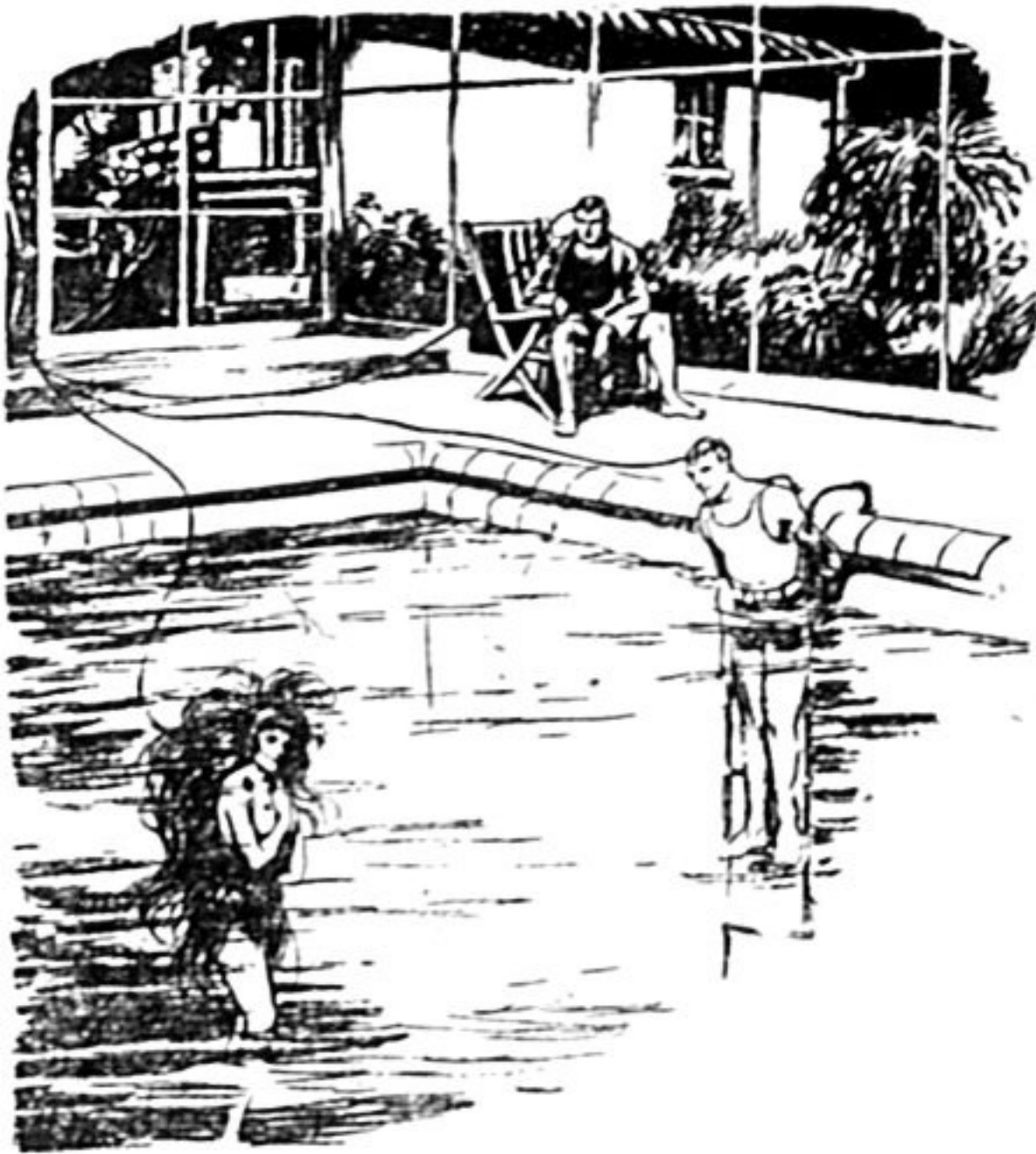
"I've already started!" he called back, and I hurriedly donned my own instrument.

Bearing in mind what Mercer had said, I descended the ladder but a few rungs, so that my head remained out of water, and smiled down at the girl, touching the instrument on my head, and then pointing to hers.

I could sense Mercer's thoughts now. He was picturing himself walking long the shore, with the stormy ocean in the background. Ahead of him I saw the white body lying face downward in the pool. I saw him run up to the pool and lift the slim, pale figure in his arms.

Let me make it clear, at this point, that when I say that I saw these things, I mean only that mental images of them penetrated my consciousness. I visualized them just as I could close my eyes and visualize, for example, the fireplace in the living room of my own home.

I looked down at the girl. She was frowning, and her eyes were very wide. Her head was a little on one side, in the attitude of one who listens intently.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing Mercer's large swimming pool, with a view from the far side. Taylor stands up to his waist in the water on the ladder, Mercer sits on a chair further back on the concrete, and the mermaid stands in the bottom of the pool, her hair dark around

her, tilting her head slightly to the side. Each of them is wearing a headset with a long wire leading to a machine coming from an open window behind Mercer.

End image description.]

Slowly and carefully Mercer thought out the whole story of his experiences with the girl until she had plunged into the pool. Then I saw again the beach, with the girl's figure in the pool. The picture grew hazy; I realized Mercer was trying to picture the bottom of the sea. Then he pictured again the girl lying in the pool, and once again the sea. I was aware of the soft little tick in the center of my brain that announced that the switch had been moved to another contact point.

I glanced down at her. She was staring up at me with her great, curious eyes, and I sensed, through the medium of the instrument I wore, that she was thinking of me. I saw my own features, idealized, glowing with a strange beauty that was certainly none of my own. I realized that I saw myself, in short, as she saw me. I smiled back at her, and shook my head.

A strange, dim whirl of pictures swept through my consciousness. I was on the bottom of the ocean. Shadowy shapes swept by silently, and from above, a dim bluish light filtered down on a scene such as mortal eyes have never seen.

All around were strange structures of jagged coral, roughly circular as to base, and rounded on top, resembling very much the igloos of the Eskimos. The structures varied greatly in size, and seemed to be arranged in some sort of regular order, like houses along a narrow street. Around many of them grew clusters of strange and colorful seaweeds that waved their banners gently, as though some imperceptible current dallied with them in passing.

Here and there figures moved, slim white figures that strolled along the narrow street, or at times shot overhead like veritable torpedoes.

There were both men and women moving there. The men were broader of shoulder, and their hair, which they wore to their knees, was somewhat darker in color than that of the women. Both sexes were slim,

and there was a remarkable uniformity of size and appearance.

None of the strange beings wore garments of any kind, nor were they necessary. The clinging tresses were cinctured at the waist with a sort of cord of twisted orange-colored material, and some of the younger women wore bands of the same material around their brows.

Nearest of all the figures was the girl who was visualizing all this for us. She was walking slowly away from the cluster of coral structures. Once or twice she paused, and seemed to hold conversation with others of the strange people, but each time she moved on.

The coral structures grew smaller and poorer. Finally the girl trod alone on the floor of the ocean, between great growths of kelp and seaweeds, with dim, looming masses of faintly tinted coral everywhere. Once she passed close to a tilted, ragged hulk of some ancient vessel, its naked ribs packed with drifted sand.

Sauntering dreamily, she moved away from the ancient derelict. Suddenly a dim shadow swept across the sand at her feet, and she arrowed from the spot like a white, slim meteor. But behind her darted a black and swifter shadow--a shark!

Like a flash she turned and faced the monster. Something she had drawn from her girdle shone palely in her hand. It was a knife of whetted stone or bone.

Darting swiftly downward her feet spurned the yellow sand, and she shot at her enemy with amazing speed. The long blade swept in an arc, ripped the pale belly of the monster just as he turned to dart away.

A great cloud of blood dyed the water. The white figure of the girl shot onward through the scarlet flood.

Blinded, she did not see that the jutting ribs of the ancient ship were in her path. I seemed to see her crash, head on, into one of the massive timbers, and I cried out involuntarily, and glanced down at the girl in

the water at my feet.

Her eyes were glowing. She knew that I had understood.

Hazily, then, I seemed to visualize her body floating limply in the water. It was all very vague and indistinct, and I understood that this was not what she had seen, but what she thought had happened. The impressions grew wilder, swirled, grew gray and indistinct. Then I had a view of Mercer's face, so terribly distorted it was barely recognizable. Then a kaleidoscopic maze of inchoate scenes, shot through with flashes of vivid, agonizing colors. The girl was thinking of her suffering, taken out of her native element. In trying to save her, Mercer had almost killed her. That, no doubt, was why she hated him.

My own face appeared next, almost godlike in its kindliness and its imagined beauty, and I noticed now that she was thinking of me with my yellow hair grown long, my nostrils elongated like her own--adjusted to her own ideas of what a man should be.

I flung the instrument from my head and dropped to the bottom of the pool. I gripped both her shoulders, gently, to express my thanks and friendship.

My heart was pounding. There was a strange fascination about this girl from the depths of the sea, a subtle appeal that was answered from some deep subterranean cavern of my being. I forgot, for the moment, who and what I was. I remembered only that a note had been sounded that awoke an echo of a long-forgotten instinct.

I think I kissed her. I know her arms were about me, and that I pressed her close, so that our faces almost met. Her great, weirdly blue eyes seemed to bore into my brain. I could feel them throbbing there....

I forgot time and space. I saw only that pale, smiling face and those great dark eyes. Then, strangling, I tore myself from her embrace and shot to the surface.

Coughing, I cleared my lungs of the water I had inhaled. I was weak and shaking when I finished, but my head was clear. The grip of the strange fantasy

that had gripped me was shaken off.

Mercer was bending over me; speaking softly.

“I was watching, old man,” he said gently. “I can imagine what happened. A momentary, psychic fusing of an ancient, long since broken link. You, together with all mankind, came up out of the sea. But there is no retracing the way.”

I nodded, my head bowed on my streaming chest.

“Sorry, Mercer,” I muttered. “Something got into me. Those big eyes of hers seemed to tug at threads of memory ... buried.... I can’t describe it....”

He slapped me on my naked shoulder, a blow that stung, as he had intended it to. It helped jerk me back to the normal.

“You’ve got your feet on the ground again, Taylor,” he commented soothingly. “I think there’s no danger of you losing your grip on terra firma again. Shall we carry on?”

“There’s more you’d like to learn? That you think she can give us?” I asked hesitantly.

“I believe,” replied Mercer, “that she can give us the history of her people, if we can only make her understand what we wish. God! If we only could!” The name of the Deity was a prayer as Mercer uttered it.

“We can try, old-timer,” I said, a bit shakenly.

Mercer hurried back to the other side of the pool, and I adjusted my head-set again, smiling down at the girl. If only Mercer could make her understand, and if only she knew what we wanted to learn!

I was conscious of the little click that told me the switch had been moved. Mercer was ready to get his message to her.

Fixing my eyes on the girl pleadingly, I settled myself by the edge of the pool to await the second and more momentous part of our experiment.

The vision was vague, for Mercer was picturing his

thoughts with difficulty. But I seemed to see again the floor of the ocean, with the vague light filtering down from above, and soft, monstrous growths waving their branches lazily in the flood.

From the left came a band of men and women, looking around as though in search of some particular spot. They stopped, and one of the older men pointed, the others gathering around him as though in council.

Then the band set to work. Coral growth were dragged to the spot. The foundation for one of the semi-circular houses was laid. The scene swirled and cleared again. The house was completed. Several other houses were in process of building.

Slowly and deliberately, the scene moved. The houses were left behind. Before my consciousness now was only a vague and shadowy expanse of ocean floor, and in the sand dim imprints that marked where the strange people had trod, the vague footprints disappearing in the gloom in the direction from which the little weary band had come. To me, at least, it was quite clear that Mercer was asking whence they

came. Would it be as clear to the girl? The switch clicked, and for a moment I was sure Mercer had not been able to make his question clear to her.

The scene was the interior of one of the coral houses. There were persons there, seated on stone or coral chairs, padded with marine growths. One of the occupants of the room was a very old man; his face was wrinkled, and his hair was silvery. With him were a man and a woman, and a little girl. Somehow I seemed to recognize the child as the girl in the pool.

The three of them were watching the old man. While his lips did not move, I could see his throat muscles twitching as the girl's had done when she made the murmuring sound I had guessed was her form of speech.

The scene faded. For perhaps thirty seconds I was aware of nothing more than a dim gray mist that seemed to swirl in stately circles. Then, gradually, it cleared somewhat. I sensed the fact that what I saw now was what the old man was telling, and that the majestic, swirling mist was the turning back of time.

Here was no ocean bottom, but land, rich tropical jungle. Strange exotic trees and dense growths of rank undergrowth choked the earth. The trees were oddly like undersea growths, which puzzled me for an instant. Then I recalled that the girl could interpret the old man's words only in terms of that which she had seen and understood. This was the way she visualized the scene.

There was a gray haze of mist everywhere. The leaves were glistening with condensed moisture; swift drops fell incessantly to the soaking ground below.

Into the scene roamed a pitiful band of people. Men with massive frames, sunken in with starvation, women tottering with weakness. The men carried great clubs, some tipped with rudely shaped stone heads, and both men and women clothed only in short kittles of skin.

They searched ceaselessly for something, and I guessed that something was food. Now and then one or the other of the little band tore up a root and bit at it, and those that did so soon doubled into a twitching

knot of suffering and dropped behind.

At last they came to the edge of the sea. A few yards away the water was lost in the dense steaming miasma that hemmed them in on all sides. With glad expressions on their faces, the party ran down to the edge of the water and gathered up great masses of clams and crabs. At first they ate the food raw, tearing the flesh from the shells. Then they made what I understood was a fire, although the girl was able to visualize it only as a bright red spot that flickered.

The scene faded, and there was only the slowly swirling mist that I understood indicated the passing of centuries. Then the scene cleared again.

I saw that same shore line, but the people had vanished. There was only the thick, steamy mist, the tropic jungle crowding down to the shore, and the waves rolling in monotonously from the waste of gray ocean beyond the curtain of fog.

Suddenly, from out of the sea, appeared a series of

human heads, and then a band of men and women that waded ashore and seated themselves upon the beach, gazing restlessly out across the sea.

This was not the same band I had seen at first. These were a slimmer race, and whereas the first band had been exceedingly swarthy, these were very fair.

They did not stay long on shore, for they were restless and ill at ease. It seemed to me they came there only from force of habit, as though they obeyed some inner urge they did not understand. In a few seconds they rose and ran into the water, plunged into it as though they welcomed its embrace, and disappeared. Then again the vision was swallowed up by the swirling mists of time.

When the scene cleared again, it showed the bottom of the sea. A group of perhaps a hundred pale creatures moved along the dim floor of the ocean. Ahead I could see the dim outlines of one of their strange cities. The band approached, seemed to talk with those there, and moved on.

I saw them capture and kill fish for food, saw them carve the thick, spongy hearts from certain giant growths and eat them. I saw a pair of killer sharks swoop down on the band, and the quick, deadly accuracy with which both men and woman met the attack. One man, older than the rest, was injured before the sharks were vanquished, and when their efforts to staunch his wounds proved unavailing, they left him there and moved on. And as they left I saw a dim, crawling shape move closer, throw out a long, whiplike tentacle, and wrap the body in a hungry embrace.

They came to and passed other communities of beings like themselves, and a city of their own, in much the way that Mercer had visualized it.

Fading, the scene changed to the interior of the coral house again. The old man finished his story, and moved off into a cubicle in the rear of the place. Dimly, I could see there a low couch, piled high with soft marine growths. Then the scene shifted once more.

A man and a woman hurried up and down the narrow streets of the strange city the girl had pictured when she showed us how she had met with the shark, and struck her head, so that for a long period she lost consciousness and was washed ashore.

Others, after a time, joined them in their search, which spread out to the floor of the ocean, away from the dwellings. One party came to the gaunt skeleton of the ancient wreck, and found the scattered, fresh-picked bones of the shark the girl had killed. The man and the woman came up, and I looked closely into their faces. The woman's features were torn with grief; the man's lips were set tight with suffering. Here, it was easy to guess, were the mother and the father of the girl.

A milling mass of white forms shot through the water in every direction, searching. It seemed that they were about to give up the search when suddenly, from out of the watery gloom, there shot a slim white figure--the girl!

Straight to the mother and father she came, gripping

the shoulder of each with frantic joy. They returned the caress, the crowd gathered around them, listening to her story as they moved slowly, happily, towards the distant city.

Instead of a picture, I was conscious then of a sound, like a single pleading word repeated softly, as though someone said "Please! Please! Please!" over and over again. The sound was not at all like the English word. It was a soft, musical beat, like the distant stroke of a mellow gong, but it had all the pleading quality of the word it seemed to bring to mind.

I looked down into the pool. The girl had mounted the ladder until her face was just below the surface of the water. Her eyes met mine and I knew that I had not misunderstood.

I threw off the instrument on my head, and dropped down beside her. With both hands I grasped her shoulders, and, smiling, I nodded my head vigorously.

She understood, I know she did. I read it in her face. When I climbed the ladder again, she looked after me,

smiling confidently.

Although I had not spoken to her, she had read and accepted the promise.

Mercer stared at me silently, grimly, as I told him what I wished. Whatever eloquence I may have, I used on him, and I saw his cold, scientific mind waver before the warmth of my appeal.

“We have no right to keep her from her people,” I concluded. “You saw her mother and father, saw their suffering, and the joy her return would bring. You will, Mercer--you will return her to the sea?”

For a long time, Mercer did not reply. Then he lifted his dark eyes to mine, and smiled, rather wearily.

“It is the only thing we can do, Taylor,” he said quietly. “She is not a scientific specimen; she is, in her way, as human as you or I. She would probably die, away from her own kind, living under conditions foreign to her. And you promised her, Taylor, whether you spoke your promise or not.” His smile deepened a

bit. "We cannot let her receive too bad an opinion of her cousins who live above the surface of the sea!"

And so, just as the dawn was breaking, we took her to the shore. I carried her, unresisting, trustful, in my arms, while Mercer bore a huge basin of water, in which her head was submerged, so that she might not suffer.

Still in our bathing suits we waded out into the ocean, until the waves splashed against our faces. Then I lowered her into the sea. Crouching there, so that the water was just above the tawny glory of her hair, she gazed up at us. Two slim white hands reached towards us, and with one accord, Mercer and I bent towards her. She gripped both our shoulders with a gentle pressure, smiling at us.

Then she did a strange thing. She pointed, under the water, out towards the depths and with a broad, sweeping motion of her arm, indicated the shore, as though to say that she intended to return. With a last swift, smiling glance up into my face, she turned. There was a flash of white through the water. She was

gone....

Silently, through the silence and beauty of the dawn, we made our way back to the house.

As we passed through the laboratory, Mercer glanced out at the empty pool.

“Man came up from the sea,” he said slowly, “and some men went back to it. They were forced back to the teeming source from whence they came, for lack of food. You saw that, Taylor--saw her forebears become amphibians, like the now extinct *Dipneusta* and *Ganoideii*, or the still existing *Neoceratodus*, *Polypterus* and *Amia*. Then their lungs became, in effect, gills, and they lost their power of breathing atmospheric air, and could use only air dissolved in water.

“A whole people there beneath the waves that land-man never dreamed of--except, perhaps, the sailors of olden days, with their tales of mermaids, which we are accustomed to laugh at in our wisdom!”

“But why were no bodies ever washed ashore?” I asked. “I would think--”

“You saw why,” interrupted Mercer grimly. “The ocean teems with hungry life. Death is the signal for a feast. It was little more than a miracle that her body came ashore, a miracle due perhaps to the storm which sent the hungry monsters to the greater depths. And even had a body come ashore it would have been buried as that of some unknown, unfortunate human. The differences between these people and ourselves would not be noticeable to a casual observer.

“No, Taylor, we have been party to what was close to a miracle. And we are the only witnesses to it, you and Carson and myself. And”--he sighed deeply--“it is over.”

I did not reply. I was thinking of the girl’s odd gesture, at parting, and I wondered if it were indeed a finished chapter.

Into the Ocean's Depths

I read the telegram for the second time. Then I folded it up, put it in my pocket, and pressed the little button on my desk. My mind was made up.

To save Imee's race of Men-Who-Returned-To-The-Sea, two Land-Men answer the challenge of the dreaded Rorn, corsairs of the under-seas.

"Miss Fentress, I'm leaving this afternoon on an extended trip. The Florida address will reach me after Thursday. Tell Wade and Bennett to carry on. I think you have everything in hand? Is everything clear to you?"

"Yes, Mr. Taylor." Miss Fentress was not in the least surprised. She was used to my sudden trips. The outfit got along perfectly without me; sometimes I think my frequent absences are good for the business. The boys work like the devil to make a fine showing while I'm away. And Miss Fentress is a perfect gem of a secretary. I had nothing to worry about there.

"Fine! Will you get my diggings on the phone?" I hurriedly put my few papers in place, and signed a couple of letters. Then Josef was on the wire.

"Josef? Pack my bags right away, will you? For Florida. The usual things.... Yes, right away. I'll be leaving by noon.... Yes, driving through."

That was that. There were a few more letters to sign, a few hasty instructions to be given regarding one or two matters that were hanging fire. Then, on my way to my bachelor apartments, I read the telegram through again:

THINK IT WORTH WHILE IF YOU FEEL
ADVENTUROUS AND HAVE NOTHING PRESSING
TO COME TO THE MONSTROSITY STOP MAKE
YOUR WILL FIRST STOP SHALL LOOK FOR YOU
ANY DAY AS I KNOW YOU ARE ALWAYS LOOKING
FOR EXCITEMENT AND NEVER HAVE ANYTHING
IMPORTANT TO DO SO DON'T BOTHER TO WIRE
STOP PERHAPS WE SHALL SEE HER AGAIN

MERCER

[Plain text: Think it worth while if you feel adventurous and have nothing pressing to come to The Monstrosity. Make your will first. Shall look for you any day as I know you are always looking for excitement and never have anything important to do so don't bother to wire. Perhaps we shall see her again -Mercer. End plain text.]

I smiled at Mercer's frank opinion of my disposition and my importance to my business. But I frowned over the admonition to make my will, and the last telling statement in the wire: "Perhaps we shall see her again." I knew whom he meant by "her."

Josef had my bags waiting for me. A few hurried instructions, most of them shouted over my shoulder, and I was purring down the main drag, my duffel in the rumble, and the roadster headed due south.

"Perhaps we shall see her again." Those words from the telegram kept coming before my eyes. Mercer knew what he was about, if he wanted my company, when he put that line in his wire.

I have already told the story of our first meeting with the strange being from the ocean's depths that, wounded and senseless, had been flung up on the beach near Warren Mercer's Florida estate. In all the history of civilization, no stranger bit of flotsam had ever been cast up by a storm.

Neither of us would ever forget that slim white creature, swathed in her veil of long, light golden hair, as she crouched on the bottom of Mercer's swimming pool, and pictured for us, by means of Mercer's thought-telegraph (my own name for the device; he has a long and scientific title for it with as many joints as a centipede), the story of her people.

They had lived in a country of steaming mist, when the world was very young. They had been forced into the sea to obtain food, and after many generations they had gone back to the sea as man once emerged from it. They had grown webs on their hands and feet, and they breathed oxygen dissolved in water, as fishes do, instead of taking it from the atmosphere. And under the mighty Atlantic, somewhere, were their villages.

The girl had pictured all these things for us, and then—nearly a year ago, now—she had pleaded with us to let her return to her people. And so we had put her back into the sea, and she had bade us farewell. But just before she disappeared, she had done a strange thing.

She had pointed, under the water, out towards the depth, and then, with a broad, sweeping motion of her arm, she had indicated the shore, as though to promise, it seemed to me, that she intended to return.

And now, Mercer said, we might see her again! How? Mercer, conservative and scientific, was not the man to make rash promises. But how...?

The best way to solve the riddle was to reach Mercer, and I broke the speed laws of five states three days running.

I did not even stop at my own little shack. It was only four miles from there to the huge, rather neglected estate, built in boom times by some newly-rich promoter, and dubbed by Mercer "The Monstrosity."

Hardly bothering to slow down, I turned off the concrete onto the long, weed-grown gravel drive, and shot between the two massive, stuccoed pillars that guarded the drive. Their corroded bronze plates, bearing the original title of the estate, "The Billows," were a promise that my long, hard drive was nearly at an end.

As soon as the huge, rambling structure was fairly in sight, I pressed the flat of my hand on the horn button. By the time I came to a locked-wheel halt, with the gravel rattling on my fenders, Mercer was there to greet me.

"It's ten o'clock," he grinned as he shook hands. "I'd set noon as the hour of your arrival. You certainly must have made time, Taylor!"

"I did!" I nodded rather grimly, recalling one or two narrow squeaks. "But who wouldn't, with a wire like this?" I produced the crumpled telegram rather dramatically. "You've got a lot to explain."

"I know it." Mercer was quite serious now. "Come on

in and we'll mix highballs with the story."

Locked arm in arm, we entered the house together, and settled ourselves in the huge living room.

Mercer, I could see at a glance, was thinner and browner than when we had parted, but otherwise, he was the same lithe, soft-mannered little scientist I had known for years; dark-eyed, with an almost beautiful mouth, outlined by a slim, closely cropped and very black moustache.

"Well, here's to our lady from the sea," proposed Mercer, when Carson, his man, had brought the drinks and departed. I nodded, and we both sipped our highballs.

"Briefly," said my friend, "this is the story. You and I know that somewhere beneath the Atlantic there are a people who went back to whence they came. We have seen one of those people. I propose that, since they cannot come to us, we go to them. I have made preparations to go to them, and I wanted you to have the opportunity of going with me, if you wish."

"But how, Mercer? And what—"

He interrupted with a quick, nervous gesture.

"I'll show you, presently. I believe it can be done. It will be a dangerous adventure, though; I was not joking when I advised you to make your will. An uncertain venture, too. But, I believe, most wonderfully worth while." His eyes were shining now with all the enthusiasm of the scientist, the dreamer.

"It sounds mighty appealing," I said. "But how...."

"Finish your drink and I'll show you."

I downed what was left of my highball in two mighty gulps.

"Lead me to it, Mercer!"

He smiled his quiet smile and led the way to what had been the billiard room of "The Billows," but which was the laboratory of "The Monstrosity." The first thing my eyes fell upon were two gleaming metal objects

suspended from chains let into the ceiling.

"Diving suits," explained Mercer. "Rather different from anything you've ever seen."

They were different. The body was a perfect globe, as was the head-piece. The legs were cylindrical, jointed at knee and thigh with huge discs. The feet were solid metal, curved rocker-like on the bottom, and at the ends of the arms were three hooked talons, the concave sides of two talons facing the concave side of the third. The arms were hinged at the elbow just as the legs were hinged, but there was a huge ball-and-socket joint at the shoulder.

"But Mercer!" I protested. "No human being could even stand up with that weight of metal on and around him!"

"You're mistaken, Taylor," smiled Mercer. "That is not solid metal, you see. And it is an aluminum alloy that is not nearly as heavy as it looks. There are two walls, slightly over an inch apart, braced by innumerable trusses. The fabric is nearly as strong as that much

solid metal, and infinitely lighter. They work all right, Taylor. I know, because I've tried them."

"And this hump on the back?" I asked, walking around the odd, dangling figures, hanging like bloated metal skeletons from their chains. I had thought the bodies were perfect globes; I could see now that at the rear there was a humplike excrescence across the shoulders.

"Air," explained Mercer. "There are two other tanks inside the globular body. That shape was adopted, by the way, because a globe can withstand more pressure than any other shape. And we may have to go where pressures are high."

"And so," I said, "we don these things and stroll out into the Atlantic looking for the girl and her friends?"

"Hardly. They're not quite the apparel for so long a stroll. You haven't seen all the marvels yet. Come along!"

He led the way through the patio, beside the pool in

which our strange visitor from the depths had lived during her brief stay with us, and out into the open again. As we neared the sea, I became aware, for the first time, of a faint, muffled hammering sound, and I glanced at Mercer inquiringly.

"Just a second," he smiled. "Then—there she is, Taylor!"

I stood still and stared. In a little cove, cradled in a cunning, spidery structure of wood, a submarine rested upon the ways.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "You're going into this right, Mercer!"

"Yes. Because I think it's immensely worth while. But come along and let me show you the *Santa Maria*—named after the flagship of Columbus' little fleet. Come on!"

Two men with army automatics strapped significantly to their belts nodded courteously as we came up. They were the only men in sight, but from the

hammering going on inside there must have been quite a sizeable crew busy in the interior. A couple of raw pine shacks, some little distance away, provided quarters for, I judged, twenty or thirty men.

"Had her shipped down in pieces," explained Mercer. "The boat that brought it lay to off shore and we lightered the parts ashore. A tremendous job. But she'll be ready for the water in a week; ten days at the latest."

"You're a wonder," I said, and I meant it.

Mercer patted the red-leaded side of the submarine affectionately. "Later," he said, "I'll take you inside, but they're busy as the devil in there, and the sound of the hammers fairly makes your head ring. You'll see it all later, anyway—if you feel you'd like to share the adventure with me?"

"Listen," I grinned as we turned back towards the house, "it'll take more than those two lads with the pop-guns to keep me out of the *Santa Maria* when she sails—or dives, or whatever it is she's supposed to

do!"

Mercer laughed softly, and we walked the rest of the way in silence. I imagine we were both pretty busy with our thoughts; I know that I was. And several times, as we walked along, I looked back over my shoulder towards the ungainly red monster straddling on her spindling wooden legs—and towards the smiling Atlantic, glistening serenely in the sun.

Mercer was so busy with a thousand and one details that I found myself very much in the way if I followed him around, so I decided to loaf.

For weeks after we had put our strange girl visitor back into the sea from whence Mercer had taken her, I had watched from a comfortable seat well above the high-water mark that commanded that section of shore. For I had felt sure by that last strange gesture of hers that she meant to return.

I located my old seat, and I found that it had been used a great deal since I had left it. There were whole winnows of cigarette butts, some of them quite fresh,

all around. Mercer, cold-blooded scientist as he was, had hoped against hope that she would return too.

It was a very comfortable seat, in the shade of a little cluster of palms, and for the next several days I spent most of my time there, reading and smoking—and watching. No matter how interesting the book, I found myself, every few seconds, lifting my eyes to search the beach and the sea.

I am not sure, but I think it was the eighth day after my arrival that I looked up and saw, for the first time, something besides the smiling beach and the ceaseless procession of incoming rollers. For an instant I doubted what I saw; then, with a cry that stuck in my throat, I dropped my book unheeded to the sand and raced towards the shore.

She was there! White and slim, her pale gold hair clinging to her body and gleaming like polished metal in the sun, she stood for a moment, while the spray frothed at her thighs. Behind her, crouching below the surface, I could distinguish two other forms. She had returned, and not alone!

One long, slim arm shot out toward me, held level with the shoulder: the well-remembered gesture of greeting. Then she too crouched below the surface that she might breathe.

As I ran out onto the wet sand, the waves splashing around my ankles all unheeded, she rose again, and now I could see her lovely smile, and her dark, glowing eyes. I was babbling—I do not know what. Before I could reach her, she smiled and sank again below the surface.

I waded on out, laughing excitedly, and as I came close to her, she bobbed up again out of the spray, and we greeted each other in the manner of her people, hands outstretched, each gripping the shoulder of the other.

She made a quick motion then, with both hands, as though she placed a cap upon the shining glory of her head, and I understood in an instant what she wished: the antenna of Mercer's thought-telegraph, by the aid of which she had told us the story of herself and her people.

I nodded and smiled, and pointed to the spot where she stood, trying to show her by my expression that I understood, and by my gesture, that she was to wait here for me. She smiled and nodded in return, and crouched again below the surface of the heaving sea.

As I turned toward the beach, I caught a momentary glimpse of the two who had come with her. They were a man and a woman, watching me with wide, half-curious, half-frightened eyes. I recognized them instantly from the picture she had impressed upon my mind nearly a year ago. She had brought with her on her journey her mother and her father.

Stumbling, my legs shaking with excitement, I ran through the water. With my wet trousers flapping against my ankles, I sprinted towards the house.

I found Mercer in the laboratory. He looked up as I came rushing in, wet from the shoulders down, and I saw his eyes grow suddenly wide.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I was breathless. And Mercer took the words from my mouth before I

could utter them.

"She's come back!" he cried. "She's come back! Taylor—she has?" He gripped me, his fingers like steel clamps, shaking me with his amazing strength.

"Yes." I found my breath and my voice at the same instant. "She's there, just where we put her into the sea, and there are two others with her—her mother and her father. Come on, Mercer, and bring your thought gadget!"

"I can't!" he groaned. "I've built an improvement on it into the diving armor, and a central instrument on the sub, but the old apparatus is strewn all over the table, here, just as it was when we used it the other time. We'll have to bring her here."

"Get a basin, then!" I said. "We'll carry her back to the pool just as we took her from it. Hurry!"

And we did just that. Mercer snatched up a huge glass basin used in his chemistry experiments, and we raced down to the shore. As well as we could we

explained our wishes, and she smiled her quick smile of understanding. Crouching beneath the water, she turned to her companions, and I could see her throat move as she spoke to them. They seemed to protest, dubious and frightened, but in the end she seemed to reassure them, and we picked her up, swathed in her hair as in a silken gown, and carried her, her head immersed in the basin of water, that she might breathe in comfort, to the pool.

It all took but a few minutes, but it seemed hours. Mercer's hands were shaking as he handed me the antenna for the girl and another for myself, and his teeth were chattering as he spoke.

"Hurry, Taylor!" he said. "I've set the switch so that she can do the sending, while we receive. Quickly, man!"

I leaped into the pool and adjusted the antenna on her head, making sure that the four electrodes of the crossed curved members pressed against the front and back and both sides of her head. Then, hastily, I climbed out of the pool, seated myself on its edge,

and put on my own antenna.

Perhaps I should say at this time that Mercer's device for conveying thought could do no more than convey what was in the mind of the person sending. Mercer and I could convey actual words and sentences, because we understood each other's language, and by thinking in words, we conveyed our thoughts in words. One received the impression, almost, of having heard actual speech.

We could not communicate with the girl in this fashion, however, for we did not understand her speech. She had to convey her thoughts to us by means of mental pictures which told her story. And this is the story of her pictures unfolded.

First, in sketchy, half-formed pictures, I saw her return to the village, of her people; her welcome there, with curious crowds around her, questioning her. Their incredulous expressions as she told them of her experience were ludicrous. Her meeting with her father and mother brought a little catch to my throat, and I looked across the pool at Mercer. I knew that

he, too, was glad that we had put her back into the sea when she wished to go.

These pictures faded hastily, and for a moment there was only the circular swirling as of gray mist; that was the symbol she adopted to denote the passing of time. Then, slowly, the picture cleared.

It was the same village I had seen before, with its ragged, warped, narrow streets, and its row of dome-shaped houses, for all the world like Eskimo igloos, but made of coral and various forms of vegetation. At the outskirts of the village I could see the gently moving, shadowy forms of weird submarine growths, and the quick darting shapes of innumerable fishes.

Some few people were moving along the streets, walking with oddly springy steps. Others, a larger number, darted here and there above the roofs, some hovering in the water as gulls hover in the air, lazily, but the majority apparently on business or work to be executed with dispatch.

Suddenly, into the midst of this peaceful scene, three

figures came darting. They were not like the people of the village, for they were smaller, and instead of being gracefully slim they were short and powerful in build. They were not white like the people of the girl's village, but swarthy, and they were dressed in a sort of tight-fitting shirt of gleaming leather—shark-skin, I learned later. They carried, tucked through a sort of belt made of twisted vegetation, two long, slim knives of pointed stone or bone.

But it was not until they seemed to come close to me that I saw the great point of difference. Their faces were scarcely human. The nose had become rudimentary, leaving a large, blank expanse in the middle of their faces that gave them a peculiarly hideous expression. Their eyes were almost perfectly round, and very fierce, and their mouths huge and fishlike. Beneath their sharp, jutting jaws, between the angle of the jaws and a spot beneath the ears, were huge, longitudinal slits, that intermittently showed blood-red, like fresh gashes cut in the sides of their throats. I could see even the hard, bony cover that protected these slits, and I realized that these

were gills! Here were representatives of a people that had gone back to the sea ages before the people of the girl's village.

Their coming caused a sort of panic in the village, and the three noseless creatures strode down the principal street grinning hugely, glancing from right to left, and showing their sharp pointed teeth. They looked more like sharks than like human beings.

A committee of five gray old men met the visitors, and conducted them into one of the larger houses. Insolently, the leader of the three shark-faced creatures made demands, and the scene changed swiftly to make clear the nature of those demands.

The village was to give a number of its finest young men and women to the shark-faced people; about fifty of each sex, I gathered, to be servants, slaves, to the noseless ones.

The scene shifted quickly to the interior of the house. The old men were shaking their heads, protesting, explaining. There was fear on their faces, but there

was determination, too.

One of the three envoys snarled and came closer to the five old men, lifting a knife threateningly. I thought for an instant that he was about to strike down one of the villagers; then the picture dissolved into another, and I saw that he was but threatening them with what he could cause to happen.

The fate of the village and the villagers, were the demands of the three refused, was a terrible one. Hordes of the noseless creatures came swarming. They tore the houses apart, and with their long, slim white weapons they killed the old men and women, and the children. The villagers fought desperately, but they were outnumbered. The shark-skin kirtles of the invaders turned their knives like armor, and the sea grew red with swirling blood that spread like scarlet smoke through the water. Then, this too faded, and I saw the old men cowering, pleading with the three terrible envoys.

The leader of the three shark-faced creatures spoke again. He would give them time—a short revolving

swirl of gray that indicated only a brief time, apparently—and return for an answer. Grinning evilly, the three turned away, left the dome-shaped house, and darted away over the roofs of the village into the dim darkness of the distant waters.

I saw the girl, then, talking to the elders. They smiled sadly, and shook their heads hopelessly. She argued with them earnestly, painting a picture for them: Mercer and myself, as she viewed us, tall and very strong and with great wisdom in our faces. We too walked along the streets of the village. The hordes of shark-faced ones came, like a swarm of monstrous sharks, and—the picture was very vague and nebulous, now—we put them to rout.

She wished us to help her, she had convinced the elders that we could. She, her mother and father, started out from the village. Three times they had fought with sharks, and each time they had killed them. They had found the shore, the very spot where we had put her back into the sea. Then there was a momentary flash of the picture she had called up, of Mercer and I putting the shark-faced hordes to rout,

and then, startlingly, I was conscious of that high, pleading sound—the sound that I had heard once before, when she had begged us to return her to her people.

The sound that I knew was her word for "*Please!*"

There was a little click. Mercer had turned the switch. He would transmit now; she and I would listen.

In the center of the village—how vaguely and clumsily he pictured it!—rested the *Santa Maria*. From a trap in the bottom two bulging, gleaming figures emerged. Rushing up, a glimpse through the face-plates revealed Mercer and myself. The shark-faced hordes descended, and Mercer waved something, something like a huge bottle, towards them. None of the villagers were in sight.

The noseless ones swooped down on us fearlessly, knives drawn, pointed teeth revealed in fiendish grins. But they did not reach us. By dozens, by scores, they went limp and floated slowly to the floor of the ocean. Their bodies covered the streets, they

sprawled across the roofs of the houses. And in a few seconds there was not one alive of all the hundreds who had come!

I looked down at the girl. She was smiling up at me through the clear water, and once again I felt the strange, strong tug at my heart-strings. Her great dark eyes glowed with a perfect confidence, a supreme faith.

We had made her a promise.

I wondered if it would be possible to keep it.

In the day following, the *Santa Maria* was launched. Two days later, trial trips and final adjustments completed, we submerged for the great adventure.

It sounds very simple when recorded thus in a few brief lines. It was not, however, such a simple matter. Those three days were full of hectic activity. Mercer and I did not sleep more than four hours any of those three nights.

We were too busy to talk. Mercer worked frantically in his laboratory, slaving feverishly beside the big hood. I overlooked the tests of the submarine and the loading of the necessary supplies.

The girl we had taken back to her parents, giving her to understand that she was to wait. They went away, but every few hours returned, as though to urge us to greater haste. And at last we were ready, and the girl and her two companions seated themselves on the tiny deck of the *Santa Maria*, just forward of the conning tower, holding themselves in place by the chains. We had already instructed the girl in her duties: we would move slowly, and she should guide us, by pointing either to the right or the left.

I will confess I gave a last long, lingering look at the shore before the hatch of the conning tower was clamped down. I was not exactly afraid, but I wondered if I would ever step foot on solid land again.

Standing in the conning tower beside Mercer, I watched the sea rise at an angle to meet us, and I dodged instinctively as the first green wave pelted

against the thick porthole through which I was looking. An instant later the water closed over the top of the conning tower, and at a gentle angle we nosed towards the bottom of the sea.

An account of the trip itself, perhaps, does not belong in this record. It was not a pleasant adventure in itself, for the *Santa Maria*, like every undersea craft, I suppose, was close, smelly, and cramped. We proceeded very slowly, for only by so doing could our guide keep her bearings, and how she found the way was a mystery to all of us. We could see but very little, despite the clearness of the water.

It was by no means a sight-seeing trip. For various reasons, Mercer had cut our crew to the minimum. We had two navigating officers, experienced submarine men both, and five sailors, also experienced in undersea work. With such a short crew, Mercer and I were both kept busy.

Bonnett, the captain, was a tall, dark chap, stooped from years in the low, cramped quarters of submarines. Duke, our second-officer, was a

youngster hardly out of his 'teens, and as clever as they come. And although both of them, and the crew as well, must have been agog with questions, neither by word nor look did they express their feelings. Mercer had paid for obedience without curiosity, and he got it.

We spent the first night on the bottom, for the simple reason that had we come to the surface, we might have come down into territory unfamiliar to our guide. As soon as the first faint light began to filter down, however, we proceeded, and Mercer and I crowded together into the conning tower.

"We're close," said Mercer. "See how excited they are, all three of them."

The three strange creatures were holding onto the chains and staring over the bulging side of the ship. Every few seconds the girl turned and looked back at us, smiling, her eyes shining with excitement. Suddenly she pointed straight down, and held out her arm in unmistakable gesture. We were to stop.

Mercer conveyed the order instantly to Bonnett at the controls, and all three of our guides dived gracefully off the ship and disappeared into the depths below.

"Let her settle to the bottom, Bonnett," ordered Mercer. "Slowly ... slowly...."

Bonnett handled the ship neatly, keeping her nicely trimmed. We came to rest on the bottom in four or five seconds, and as Mercer and I stared out eagerly through the round glass ports of the conning tower, we could see, very dimly, a cluster of dark, rounded projections cropping out from the bed of the ocean. We were only a few yards from the edge of the girl's village.

The scene was exactly as we had pictured it, save that it was not nearly as clear and well lighted. I realized that our eyes were not accustomed to the gloom, as were those of the girl and her people, but I could distinguish the vague outlines of the houses, and the slowly swaying shapes of monstrous growths.

"Well, Taylor," said Mercer, his voice shaking with

excitement, "here we are! And here"—peering out through the glass-covered port again—"are her people!"

The whole village was swarming around us. White bodies hovered around us as moths around a light. Faces pressed against the ports and stared in at us with great, amazed eyes.

Then, suddenly the crowd of curious creatures parted, and the girl came darting up with the five ancients she had showed us before. They were evidently the council responsible for the government of the village, or something of the sort, for the other villagers bowed their heads respectfully as they passed.

The girl came close to the port through which I was looking, and gestured earnestly. Her face was tense and anxious, and from time to time she glanced over her shoulder, as though she feared the coming of an enemy.

"Our time's short, I take it, if we are to be of service," said Mercer. "Come on, Taylor; into the diving suits!"

I signaled the girl that we understood, and would hurry. Then I followed Mercer into our tiny stateroom.

"Remember what I've told you," he said, as we slipped into the heavy woolen undergarments we were to wear inside the suits. "You understand how to handle your air, I believe, and you'll have no difficulty getting around in the suit if you'll just remember to go slowly. Your job is to get the whole village to get away when the enemy is sighted. Get them to come this way from the village, towards the ship, understand. The current comes from this direction; the way the vegetation bends shows that. And keep the girl's people away until I signal you to let them return. And remember to take your electric lantern. Don't burn it more than is necessary; the batteries are not large and the bulb draws a lot of current. Ready?"

I was, but I was shaking a little as the men helped me into the mighty armor that was to keep the pressure of several atmospheres from crushing my body. The helmet was the last piece to be donned; when it was screwed in place I stood there like a mummy, almost completely rigid.

Quickly we were put into the air lock, together with a large iron box containing a number of things Mercer needed. Darkness and water rushed in on us. The water closed over my head. I became aware of the soft, continuous popping sounds of the air-bubbles escaping from the relief valve of the head-piece.

For a moment I was dizzy and more than a little nauseated. I could feel the cold sweat pricking my forehead. Then there was a sudden glow of light from before me, and I started walking towards it. I found I could walk now; not easily, but, after I caught the trick of it, without much difficulty. I could move my arms, too, and the interlocking hooks that served me for fingers. When my real fingers closed upon a little cross-bar at the end of the armored arms, and pulled the bars towards me, the steel claws outside came together, like a thumb and two fingers.

In a moment we stood upon the bottom of the ocean. I turned my head inside the helmet, and there, beside me, was the sleek, smooth side of the *Santa Maria*. On my other side was Mercer, a huge, dim figure in his diving armor. He made an awkward gesture towards

his head, and I suddenly remembered something.

Before me, where I could operate it with a thrusting movement of my chin, was a toggle switch. I snapped it over, and heard Mercer's voice: "—n't forget everything I tell him."

"I know it," I said mentally to him. "I was rather rattled. O.K. now, however. Anything I can do?"

"Yes. Help me with this box, and then get the girl to put on the antenna you'll find there. Don't forget the knife and the light."

"Right!" I bent over the box with him, and we both came near falling. We opened the lid, however, and I hooked the knife and the light into their proper places outside my armor. Then, with the antenna for the girl, so that we could establish connections with her, and through her, with the villagers, I moved off.

This antenna was entirely different from the one used in previous experiments. The four cross-members that clasped the head were finer, and at their junction was

a flat black circular box, from which rose a black rod some six inches in height, and topped by a black sphere half the size of my fist.

These perfected thought-telegraphs (I shall continue to use my own designation for them, as clearer and more understandable than Mercer's) did not need connecting wires; they conveyed their impulses by Hertzian waves to a master receiver on the *Santa Maria*, which amplified them and re-broadcast them so that each of us could both send and receive at any time.

As I turned, I found the girl beside me, waiting anxiously. Behind her were the five ancients. I slipped the antenna over her head, and instantly she began telling me that danger was imminent.

To facilitate matters, I shall describe her messages as though she spoke; indeed, her pictures were as clear, almost, as speech in my native tongue. And at times she did use certain sound-words; it was in this way that I learned, by inference, that her name was *Imee*, that her people were called *Teemorn* (this may have

been the name of the community, or perhaps it was interchangeable—I am not sure) and that the shark-faced people were the *Rorn*.

"The Rorn come!" she said quickly. "Two days past, the three came again, and our old men refused to give up the slaves. Today they will return, these Rorn, and my people, the Teemorn will all be made dead!"

Then I told her what Mercer had said: that she and every one of her people must flee swiftly and hide, beyond the boat, a distance beyond the village. Mercer and I would wait here, and when the Rorn came, it was they who would be made dead, as we had promised. Although how, I admitted to myself, being careful to hide the thought that she might not sense it, I didn't know. We had been too busy since the girl's arrival to go into details.

She turned and spoke quickly to the old men. They looked at me doubtfully, and she urged them vehemently. They turned back towards the village, and in a moment the Teemorn were stalking by obediently, losing their slim white forms in the gloom

behind the dim bulk of the *Santa Maria*, resting so quietly on the sand.

They were hardly out of sight when suddenly Mercer spoke through the antenna fitted inside my helmet.

"They're coming!" he cried. "Look above and to your right! The Rorn, as Imee calls them, have arrived!"

I looked up and beheld a hundred—no, a thousand!—shadowy forms darting down on the village, upon us. They, too, were just as the girl had pictured them: short, swart beings with but the suggestion of a nose, and with pulsing gill-covers under the angles of their jaws. Each one gripped a long, slim white knife in either hand, and their tight-fitting shark-skin armor gleamed darkly as they swooped down upon us.

Eagerly I watched my friend. In the clasping talons of his left hand he held a long, slim flask that glinted even in that dim, confusing twilight. Two others, mates to the first, dangled at his waist. Lifting it high above his head, he swung his metal-clad right arm, and shattered the flask he held in his taloned left

hand.

For an instant nothing happened, save that flittering bits of broken glass shimmered their way to the sand. Then the horde of noseless ones seemed to dissolve, as hundreds of limp and sprawling bodies sank to the sand. Perhaps a half of that great multitude seemed struck dead.

"Hydrocyanic acid, Taylor!" cried Mercer exultantly. "Even diluted by the sea water, it kills almost instantly. Go back and make sure that none of the girl's people come back before the current has washed this away, or they'll go in the same fashion. Warn her to keep them back!"

I hurried toward the *Santa Maria*, thinking urgent warnings for Imee's benefit. "Stay back! Stay back, Imee! The Rorn are falling to the sand, we have made many of them dead, but the danger for you and your people is still here. Stay back!"

"Truly, do the Rorn become dead? I would like to see that with my own eyes. Be careful that they do not

make you dead also, and your friend, for they have large brains, these Rorn."

"Do not come to see with your own eyes, or you will be as the Rorn!" I hurried around the submarine, to keep her back by force, if that were necessary. "You must—"

"Help, Taylor!" cut in a voice—Mercer's. "These devils have got me!"

"Right with you!" I turned and hurried back as swiftly as I could, stumbling over the bodies of dead Rorn that had settled everywhere on the clean yellow sand.

I found Mercer in the grip of six of the shark-faced creatures. They were trying desperately to stab him, but their knives bent and broke against the metal of his armor. So busy were they with him that they did not notice me coming up, but finding their weapons useless, they suddenly snatched him up, one at either arm and either leg, and two grasping him by the head-piece, and darted away with him, carrying his bulging metal body between them like a battering

ram, while he kicked and struggled impotently.

"They are taking him to the Place of Darkness!" cried Imee suddenly, having read my impressions of the scene. "Oh, go quickly, quickly, toward the direction of your best hand—to your right! I shall follow!"

"No! No! Stay back!" I warned her frantically. All but these six Rorn had fallen victims of Mercer's hellish poison, and while they seemed to be suffering no ill effects, I thought it more than likely that some sly current might bring the deadly poison to the girl, did she come this way, and kill her as surely as it had killed these hundreds of Rorn.

To the right, she had said. Towards the Place of Darkness. I hurried out of the village in the direction she indicated, towards the distant gleam of Mercer's armor, rapidly being lost in the gloom.

"I'm coming, Mercer!" I called to him. "Delay them as much as you can. You're going faster than I can."

"I can't help myself much," replied Mercer. "Doing

what I can. Strong—they're devilish strong, Taylor. And, at close range, I can see you were right. They have true gill-covers; their noses are rudimentary and —"

"The devil take your scientific observations! Drag! Slow them down. I'm losing sight of you. For heaven's sake, drag!"

"I'm doing what I can. Damn you, if I could only get a hand free—" I realized that this last was directed at his captors, and plunged on.

Huge, monstrous growths swirled around me like living things. My feet crunched on shelled things, and sank into soft and slimy creeping things on the bottom. I cursed the water that held me back so gently yet so firmly; I cursed the armor that made it so hard for me to move my legs. But I kept on, and at last I began to gain on them; I could see them quite distinctly, bending over Mercer, working on him....

"Do your best, Taylor," urged Mercer desperately.

"We're on the edge of a sort of cliff; a fault in the

structure of the ocean bed. They're tying me with strong cords of leather. Tying a huge stone to my body. I think they—" I had a momentary flash of the scene as Mercer saw it at that instant: the horrid noseless face close to his, the swart bodies moving with amazing agility. And at his very feet, a yawning precipice, holding nothing but darkness, leading down and down into nothingness.

"Run quickly!" It was Imee. She, too, had seen what I had seen. "That is the Place of Darkness, where we take those whom the Five deem worthy of the Last Punishment. They will tie the stone to him, and bear him out above the Blackness, and then they will let him go! Quickly! Quickly!"

I was almost upon them now, and one of the six turned and saw me. Three of them darted towards me, while the others held Mercer flat upon the edge of the precipice. If they had only realized that by rolling his armored body a foot or two, he would sink ... without the stone.... But they did not. Their brains had little reasoning power, apparently. The attaching of a stone was necessary, in their

experience; it was necessary now.

With my left hand I unhooked my light; I already gripped my knife in my right hand. Swinging the light sharply against my leg, I struck the toggle-switch, and a beam of intense brilliancy shot through the gloom. It aided me, as I had thought it would; it blinded these large-eyed denizens of the deep.

Swiftly I struck out with the knife. It hacked harmlessly into the shark-skin garment of one of the men, and I stabbed out again. Two of the men leaped for my right arm, but the knife found, this time, the throat of the third. My beam of light showed palely red, for a moment, and the body of the Rorn toppled slowly to the bed of the ocean.

The two shark-faced creatures were hammering at me with their fists, dragging at my arms and legs, but I plunged on desperately towards Mercer. Myriads of fish, all shapes and colors and sizes, attracted by the light, swarmed around us.

"Good boy!" Mercer commended. "See if you can

break this last flask of acid, here at my waist. See—"

With a last desperate plunge, fairly dragging the two Rorn who tugged at me, I fell forward. With the clenched steel talons of my right hand, I struck at the silvery flask I could see dangling from Mercer's waist. I hit it, but only a glancing blow; the flask did not shatter.

"Again!" commanded Mercer. "It's heavy annealed glass—hydrocyanic acid—terrible stuff—even the fumes—"

I paid but slight heed. The two Rorn dragged me back, but I managed to crawl forward on my knees, and with all my strength, I struck at the flask again.

This time it shattered, and I lay where I fell, sobbing with weakness, looking out through the side window of my head-piece.

The five Rorn seemed to suddenly lose their strength. They struggled limply for a moment, and then floated down to the waiting sand beneath us.

"Finish," remarked Mercer coolly. "And just in time. Let's see if we can find our way back to the *Santa Maria*."

We were weary, and we plodded along slowly, twin trails of air-bubbles like plumes waving behind us, rushing upwards to the surface. I felt strangely alone at the moment, isolated, cut off from all mankind, on the bottom of the Atlantic.

"Coming to meet you, all of us," Imee signaled us. "Be careful where you step, so that you do not walk in a circle and find again the Place of Darkness. It is very large."

"Probably some uncharted deep," threw in Mercer. "Only the larger ones have been located."

For my part, I was too weary to think. I just staggered on.

A crowd of slim, darting white shapes surrounded us. They swam before us, showing the way. The five patriarchs walked majestically before us; and

between us, smiling at us through the thick lenses of our headpieces, walked Imee. Oh, it was a triumphal procession, and had I been less weary, I presume I would have felt quite the hero.

Imee pictured for us, as we went along, the happiness, the gratefulness of her people. Already, she informed us, great numbers of young men were clearing away the bodies of the dead Rorn. She was so happy she could hardly restrain herself.

A dim skeleton shape bulked up at my left. I turned to look at it, and Imee, watching me through the lights of my head-piece, nodded and smiled.

Yes, this was the very hulk by which she had been swimming when the shark had attacked her, the shark which had been the cause of the accident. She darted on to show me the very rib upon which her head had struck, stunning her so that she had drifted, unconscious and storm-tossed, to the shore of Mercer's estate.

I studied the wreck. It was battered and tilted on its

beam ends, but I could still make out the high poop that marked it as a very old ship.

"A Spanish galleon, Mercer," I conjectured.

"I believe so." And then, in pictured form, for Imee's benefit, "It has been here while much time passed?"

"Yes." Imee came darting back to us, smiling. "Since before the Teemorn, my people were here. A Rorn we made prisoner once told us his people discovered it first. They went into this strange skeleton, and inside were many blocks of very bright stone." She pictured quite clearly bars of dully-glinting bullion. Evidently the captive had told his story well.

"These stones, which were so bright, the Rorn took to their city, which is three swims distant." How far that might be, I could not even guess. A swim, it seemed, was the distance a Teemorn could travel before the need for rest became imperative. "There were many Rorn, and they each took one stone. And of them, they made a house for their leader." The leader, as she pictured him, being the most hideous travesty of a

thing in semi-human form that the mind could imagine: incredibly old and wrinkled and ugly and gray, his noseless face seamed with cunning, his eyes red rimmed and terrible, his teeth gleaming, white and sharp, like fangs.

"A whole house, except the roof," she went on. "It is there now, and it is gazed at with much admiration by all the Rorn. All this our prisoner told us before we took him, with a rock made fast to him, out over the Place of Darkness. He, too, was very proud of their leader's house."

"Treasure!" I commented to Mercer. "If we could find the city of the Rorn, we might make the trip pay for itself!"

I could sense his wave of amusement.

"I think," he replied, "I'd rather stand it myself. These Rorn don't appeal to me."

It was over half an hour before we were at last free of our diving suits.

The first thing Captain Bonnett said:

"We've got to get to the surface, and that quickly. Our air supply is running damnably low. By the time we blow out the tanks we'll be just about out. And foul air will keep us here until we rot. I'm sorry, sir, but that's the way matters stand."

Mercer, white-faced and ill, stared at him dazedly.

"Air?" he repeated groggily—I knew just how he felt —"We should have lots of air. The specifications—"

"But we're dealing with facts, not specifications, sir," said Captain Bonnett. "Another two hours here and we won't leave ever."

"Then it can't be helped, Captain," muttered Mercer. "We'll go up. And back. For more compressed air. We must remember to plot our course exactly. You kept the record on the way out as I instructed you?"

"Yes, sir," said Captain Bonnett.

"Just a minute, then," said Mercer.

Weakly he made his way forward to the little cubbyhole in which was housed the central station of his thought-telegraph. I didn't even inspect the gleaming maze of apparatus. I merely watched him dully as he plugged in an antenna similar to the one we had left with Imee, and adjusted the things on his head.

His eyes brightened instantly. "She's still wearing her antenna," he said swiftly over his shoulder. "I'll tell her that something's happened; we must leave, but that we will return."

He sat there, frowning intently for a moment, and then dragged the antenna wearily from his head. He touched a switch somewhere, and several softly glowing bulbs turned slowly red and then dark.

"You and I," he groaned, "had better go to bed. We overdid it. She understands, I think. Terribly sorry, terribly disappointed. Some sort of celebration planned, I gather. Captain Bonnett!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You may proceed now as you think best," said Mercer. "We're retiring. Be sure and chart the course back, so we may locate this spot again."

"Yes, sir!" said Captain Bonnett.

When I awoke we were at anchor, our deck barely awash, before the deserted beach of Mercer's estate. Still feeling none too well, Mercer and I made our way to the narrow deck.

Captain Bonnett was waiting for us, spruce in his blue uniform, his shoulders bowed as always.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he offered, smiling crisply. "The open air seems good, doesn't it?"

It did. There was a fresh breeze blowing in from the Atlantic, and I filled my lungs gratefully. I had not realized until that instant just how foul the air below had been.

"Very fine, Captain," said Mercer, nodding. "You have signaled the men on shore to send out a boat to take us off?"

"Yes, sir; I believe they're launching her now."

"And the chart of our course—did the return trip check with the other?"

"Perfectly, sir." Captain Bonnett reached in an inner pocket of his double-breasted coat, extracted two folded pages, and extended them, with a little bow, to Mercer.

Just as Mercer's eager fingers touched the precious papers, however, the wind whisked them from Bonnett's grasp and whirled them into the water.

Bonnett gasped and gazed after them for a split second; then, barely pausing to tear off his coat, he plunged over the side.

He tried desperately, but before he could reach either one of the tossing white specks, they were washed

beneath the surface and disappeared. Ten minutes later, his uniform bedraggled and shapeless, he pulled himself on deck.

"I'm sorry, sir," he gasped, out of breath. "Sorrier than I can say. I tried—"

Mercer, white-faced and struggling with his emotions, looked down and turned away.

"You don't remember the bearings, I suppose?" he ventured tonelessly.

"I'm sorry—no."

"Thank you, Captain, for trying so hard to recover the papers," said Mercer. "You'd better change at once; the wind is sharp."

The captain bowed and disappeared down the conning tower. Then Mercer turned to me, and a smile struggled for life.

"Well, Taylor, we helped her out, anyway," he said

slowly. "I'm sorry that—that Imee will misunderstand when we don't come back."

"But, Mercer," I said swiftly, "perhaps we'll be able to find our way back to her. You thought before, you know, that—"

"But I can see now what an utterly wild-goose chase it would have been." Mercer shook his head slowly. "No, old friend, it would be impossible. And—Imee will not come again to guide us; she will think we have deserted her. And"—he smiled slowly up into my eyes—"perhaps it is as well. After all, the photographs and the data I wanted would do the world no practical good. We did Imee and her people a good turn; let's content ourselves with that. I, for one, am satisfied."

"And I, old timer," I said, placing my hand affectionately upon his shoulder. "Here's the boat. Shall we go ashore?"

We did go ashore, silently. And as we got out of the boat, and set foot again upon the sand, we both turned and looked out across the smiling Atlantic,

dancing brightly in the sun.

The mighty, mysterious Atlantic—home of Imee and her people!

#19 Vandals of the Stars, by A. T. Locke:

A livid flame flares across space--and over Manhattan hovers Teuxical, vassal of Malfero, Lord of the Universe, who comes with ten thousand warriors to ravage and subjugate one more planet for his master.

Aproximate word count: 17,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

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Vandals of the Stars By A. T. Locke

It came suddenly, without warning, and it brought consternation to the people of the world.

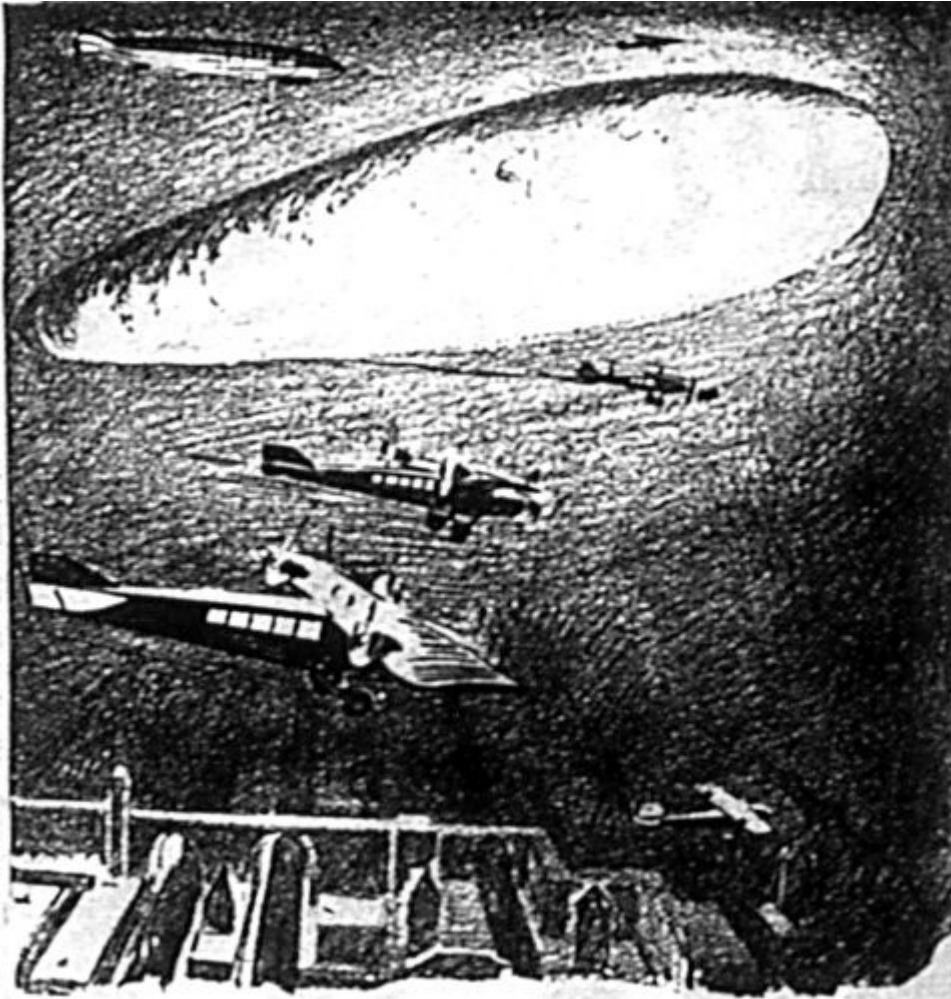
A livid flame flares across Space--and over Manhattan hovers Teuxical, vassal of Malfero, Lord of the Universe, who comes with ten thousand warriors to ravage and subjugate one more planet for his master.

A filament of flame darted down the dark skies one moonless night and those who saw it believed, at first, that it was a meteor. Instead of streaking away into oblivion, however, it became larger and larger, until it seemed as though some vagrant, blazing star was about to plunge into the earth and annihilate the planet and every vestige of life upon it. But then it drew slowly to a stop high up in the atmosphere, where it remained motionless, glowing white and incandescent against the Stygian background of the overcast skies.

In shape it resembled a Zeppelin, but its dimensions very apparently exceeded by far those of any flying craft that ever had been fabricated by the hand of man.

As it hung poised high up in the air it gradually lost its dazzling glow and became scarlet instead of white. Then, as it continued to cool, the color swiftly drained from it and, in a few minutes, it shone only with the dull and ugly crimson of an expiring ember. In a half-hour after it first had appeared its effulgence had vanished completely and it was barely visible to the

millions who were staring up toward it from the earth.



It seemed to be suspended directly above Manhattan, and the inhabitants of New York were thrown into a feverish excitement by the strange and unprecedented phenomenon.

For it scarcely had come to a stop, and certainly it

had not been poised aloft for more than a few minutes, when most of those who had not actually witnessed its sensational appearance were apprised of the inexplicable occurrence by the radiovision, which were scattered throughout the vast metropolis. In theaters and restaurants and other gathering places, as well as in millions of homes, a voice from the Worldwide Broadcasting Tower announced the weird visitant. And its image, as it glowed in the night, was everywhere transmitted to the public.

Only a short time after it first had been observed people were thronging roof-tops, terraces, and streets, and gazing with awe and wonder at the great luminous object that was floating high above them.

There were those who thought that the world was coming to an end, and they either were dumb with fright or strident with hysteria. People with more judgment, and a smattering of scientific knowledge, dismissed the thing as some harmless meteorological manifestation that, while interesting, was not necessarily dangerous. And there were many, inclined to incredulity and skepticism, who believed that they

were witnessing a hoax or an advertising scheme of some new sort.

But as the moments went by the world commenced to become stirred and alarmed by the reports which came over the radiovisors.

For powerful planes and metal-shelled Zeppelins had climbed swiftly aloft to investigate the incomprehensible Thing that was poised high above Manhattan, and almost unbelievable reports were being sent earthward.

Dirk Vanderpool had been sitting alone on the broad terrace of his apartment that occupied the upper stories of the great Gotham Gardens Building when he saw that streak of fire slip down against the darkness of the night.

For a moment he, too, had believed that he was watching a meteor, but, when he saw it come to a slow stop and hang stationary in the heavens, he rose to his feet with an exclamation of surprise.

For a while he gazed upward with an expression of astonishment on his face and then he turned as he heard someone walking softly in his direction. It was Barstowe, his valet, and the eyes of the man were alive with fear.

“What is that thing, Mr. Vanderpool?” he asked in a voice that trembled with alarm. Barstowe was a man of middle age, diminutive in size, and he had the appearance of being nearly petrified with terror. “They are saying over the televisor that--”

“What are they saying about it?” asked Dirk somewhat impatiently.

“That no one can explain what it is,” continued Barstowe. “It must be something terrible, Mr. Vanderpool.”

“Wheel out the luciscope,” ordered Dirk.

Barstowe disappeared into the apartment and returned with a cabinet that was mounted on small, rubber-tired wheels. The top of it was formed of a

metallic frame in which a heavy, circular, concave glass was fitted. The frame was hinged in front so that it could be raised from the rear and adjusted to any angle necessary to catch the light rays from any distant object. Within the cabinet the rays passed through an electrical device that amplified them millions of times, thus giving a clear, telescopic vision of the object on which the luciscope was focused.

This instrument, years before, had supplanted entirely the old-fashioned telescopes which not only had been immense and unwieldy but which also had a very limited range of vision.

Dirk adjusted the light-converger so that it caught the rays that were being emanated by the weird and shimmering mass that was suspended almost directly above the lofty terrace on which he was standing.

Then he switched on the current and glanced into the eye-piece of the apparatus. For several moments he remained silent, studying the image that was etched so vividly on the ground-glass within the luciscope.

“It is a queer thing, there is no doubt about that,” he confessed when finally he raised his head. “It resembles a gigantic Zeppelin in shape but it does not seem to have any undercarriage or, as far as I can see, any indication of propellers or portholes. I would say, though, Barstowe, that it might be a ship from some other planet if it wasn’t for the fact that it seems to be in an almost molten state.”

Dirk again looked into the luciscope and then he made a few adjustments with a thumb-screw that projected from the side of the apparatus.

“It is up about forty thousand feet,” he told Barstowe, “and it must be more than a half-mile in length. Probably,” he added, “it is a planetary fragment of some odd composition that is less responsive to gravitation than the materials with which we are familiar. You will find, Barstowe, that there is nothing about it that science will not be able to explain. That will be all now,” he concluded.

Barstowe walked over the terrace and disappeared into the apartment. Dirk, left alone, wheeled the

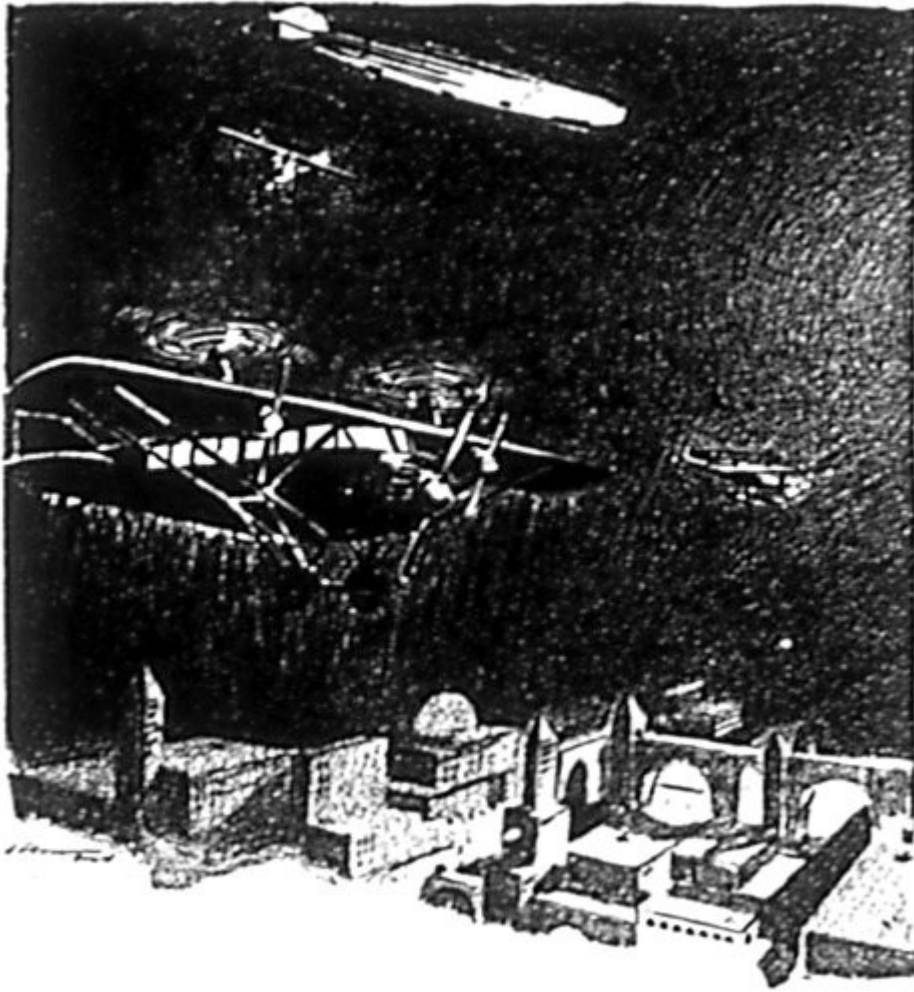
luciscope over by the chair in which he had been sitting and near which a radiovisor was standing.

He switched on the latter and listened to the low but very distinct voice of the news-dispatcher.

“--and planes and Zeppelins now are starting up to investigate the strange phenomenon--”

Again Dirk placed an eye to the lens of the luciscope and once more the Thing leaped into his vision. The powerful machine brought it so close to him that he could see the heat waves quiver up from it.

The light that it radiated illuminated the night for thousands of feet and Dirk could see, by means of that crimson glare, that many planes and Zeppelins were circling around the mysterious visitant. None of them, however, approached the alien freak, the heat apparently being too intense to permit close inspection.



[Image description start. A black and white illustration done in mostly black, showing airplanes flying over a city with the sky dark. Image description end.]

Dirk himself was tempted for a moment to jump into a plane and go up and take a look at the fiery mass.

But, after a moment's consideration, he decided, that

it would be far more interesting and comfortable to remain right where he was and listen to the reports which were being sent down from above.

“--thus far there seems to be no cause for alarm, and people are advised to remain calm--careful observations of the luminous monster are being made and further reports concerning it will be broadcast--”

Dirk Vanderpool rose to his feet, walked to the coping of the terrace and peered into the magnascope that was set into the wall.

He saw that the street, far below him, was jammed with struggling people and the device through which he was looking brought their faces before him in strong relief. Dirk was deeply interested and, at the same time, gravely concerned as he studied the upturned countenances in the mob.

Fear, despair, reckless abandon, mirth, doubt, religious ecstasy and all the other nuances in the gamut of human emotions and passions were reflected in those distorted visages which were

gazing skyward.

The silvery humming of a bell diverted his attention from the scene of congestion below him and, turning away, he walked across the terrace and into the great living room of his luxurious abode.

Stepping to the televisor, he turned a tiny switch, and the face of a girl appeared in the glass panel that was framed above the sound-box. He smiled as he lifted the receiver and placed it to his ear.

“What is the matter, Inga?” he asked. “You look as if you were expecting--well, almost anything disastrous.”

“Oh, Dirk, what is that thing?” the girl asked. “I really am frightened!”

He could see by the expression in her blue eyes that she, too, was becoming a victim of the hysteria that was taking possession of many people.

“I wouldn’t be alarmed, Inga,” he replied reassuringly.

“I don’t know what it is, and no one else seems to be able to explain it.”

“But it is frightful and uncanny, Dirk,” the girl insisted, “and I am sure that something terrible is going to happen. I wish,” she pleaded, “that you would come over and stay with me for a little while. I am all alone and--”

“All right, Inga,” he told her. “I will be with you in a few minutes.”

He hung up the receiver of the televisor and clicked off the switch. The image of the golden-haired girl to whom he had been speaking slowly faded from the glass.

Attiring himself for a short sixty-mile hop down Long Island, Dirk passed out to the landing stage and, stepping into the cabin of his plane, he threw in the helicopter lever. The machine rose straight into the air for a couple of hundred feet and then Dirk headed it westward to where the nearest ascension beam sent its red light towering toward the stars. It marked

a vertical air-lane that led upward to the horizontal lanes of flight.

Northbound ships flew between two and four thousand feet; southbound planes between five and seven thousand feet; those eastbound confined themselves to the level between nine and eleven thousand feet, while the westbound flyers monopolized the air between twelve and fourteen thousand feet.

All planes flying parallel to the earth were careful to avoid those red beacons which marked ascension routes, and the shafts of green light down which descending planes dropped to the earth or into lower levels of travel.

When Dirk's altimeter indicated seventy-five hundred feet he turned the nose of his ship eastward and adjusted his rheostat until his motors, fed by wireless current, were revolving at top speed.

The great canyons of Manhattan, linked by arches and highways which joined and passed through

various levels of the stupendous structures of steelite and quartzite, passed swiftly beneath him; and, after passing for a few minutes over the deserted surface of Long Island, he completed his sixty-mile flight and brought his ship to a rest on a landing stage that was far up on the side of a vast pile that rose up close to the shore of the Sound.

As soon as he stepped from the door of the cabin he was joined by a girl who, apparently, had been lingering there, awaiting his arrival.

She was perhaps twenty years old, and she had the golden hair, the light complexion, and the blue eyes which still were characteristic of the women of northern Europe.

The slender lines of her exquisite figure and the supple grace which she displayed when she moved toward Dirk were evidence, however, of the Latin blood which was in her veins.

For Inga Fragoni, the daughter and heiress of Orlando Fragoni, seemed to be a culmination of all of

the desirable qualities of the women of the south and those of the north.

The terrace on which Dirk had landed was illuminated by lights which simulated sunshine, and their soft bright glow revealed the violet hue of her eyes and the shimmering gloss of her silken hair. She wore a sleeveless, light blue tunic which was gathered around her waist with a bejeweled girdle.

On her tiny feet she wore sandals which were spun of webby filaments of gold and platinum.

“Dirk, I am so glad that you are here!” she exclaimed. “I felt so much alone when I called you up. Dad is locked in the observatory with Professor Nachbaren and three or four other men and the servants--well, they all are so terrified that it simply alarms me to have them around.”

“But that is Stanton’s plane there, isn’t it?” asked Dirk, indicating a powerful looking machine that stood on the terrace.

“Yes, Dirk,” the girl replied. “He arrived here three or four minutes before you did. I thought, at first, that it was you coming. And Dirk,” she continued, with a note of excitement in her voice, “he flew up to look at that thing, and I know that he is as frightened about it as I am.”

Dirk grunted, but he gave no expression of the dislike and distrust that Stanton aroused in him. The latter, he knew, was very much inclined to look with favor on Inga, and his presumption annoyed Dirk because, while he and the girl had not declared their intention of living together, they were very much in love with each other.

“You will want to hear him tell about it, I know, Dirk,” the girl said. “I left Stanton up on the garden terrace when I saw you coming down. Come; we will go and join him.”

Dirk and Inga strolled slowly along paths which were lined with exotic shrubbery and plants. Here and there a fountain tossed its glittering spray high into the air while birds, invisible in the feathery foliage,

warbled and thrilled entrancingly. Soft music, transmitted from the auditoriums below, blended so harmoniously with the atmosphere of the terraces that it seemed to mingle with and be a part of the drifting, subtle scents of the abundant flowers which bloomed on every side.

For these upper terraces of Fragoni's palace were enclosed, during inclement weather, with great glass plates which, at the touch of a button, automatically appeared or disappeared.

Winding their way easily upward, Dirk and Inga came finally to a secluded terrace which overlooked the Sound. Here they saw Stanton, who was unaware of their approach, looking skyward at the dim and sinister shape which was outlined against the sky. Stanton's brow was contracted and his expression was filled with apprehension. He started suddenly when he became conscious of the presence of Dirk and the lovely daughter of Fragoni.

He rose to his feet, a short man in his forties, stocky in build and somewhat swarthy in complexion. He

contrasted very unfavorably with Dirk, who was tall and well-built and who had abundant blond hair and steady steel-blue eyes.

“What do you make of that thing, Vanderpool?” he asked, almost ignoring the presence of Inga.

“I don’t know enough about it yet to be able to express an opinion,” Dirk replied. “We will find out about it soon enough,” he added, “so why worry about it in the meantime?”

“It is well enough to affect such an attitude,” said Stanton, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice, “but let me tell you, Vanderpool, that there is good reason to worry about it.”

Dirk frowned at the statement as he saw a shadow pass over the fair face of Inga.

“That thing up there,” continued Stanton, with conviction in his voice, “is not a natural phenomenon. I flew fairly close to it in my plane and I know what I am speaking about. That thing is some sort of a

monster, Vanderpool, that is made of metal or of some composition that is an unearthly equivalent of metal. It is a diabolical creation of some sort that has come from out of the fathomless depths of the universe." He shuddered at the fantasy that his feverish imagination was creating. "It is metal, I tell you," he continued, "but it is metal that is endowed with some sort of intelligence. I was up there," he breathed swiftly, "and I saw it hanging there in the sky, quivering with heat and life."

"You are nervous, Stanton," said Vanderpool coolly. "Get a grip on yourself, man, and look at the thing reasonably. If that thing has intelligence," he added, "we will find some way to slay it."

"Slay it!" exclaimed Stanton. "How can you expect to slay a mad creation that can leap through space, from world to world, like a wasp goes darting from flower to flower? How can you kill a thing which not only defies absolute zero but also the immeasurable heat which its friction with the atmosphere generated when it plunged toward the earth? How can you kill a thing that seems to have brains and nerves and bones

and flesh of some strange substance that is harder and tougher than any earthly compound we have discovered?”

He stopped speaking for a moment. They listened to the voice that was broadcasting from the Worldwide Tower.

“--our planes have approached to within a few thousand feet of it and are playing their searchlights over the surface of the leviathan. It is not a meteorite of any kind that scientists have heretofore examined--its surface is smooth and unpitted and shows no apparent effect of the tremendous heat to which it was subjected during its drop through the atmosphere. It seems to be immune to gravity--its weight must be tremendous, and it is fully three-quarters of a mile long and between seven and eight hundred feet in diameter at its widest part, but it lies motionless--motionless--at about forty thousand feet.”

“It doesn’t appear now as if it would prove very dangerous,” remarked Dirk.

“--and people are warned again to maintain their composure and to go to their homes and remain there for their own protection and the protection of others. Riots and serious disturbances are reported from cities in all parts of the world--mobs are swarming the streets of Manhattan and the other boroughs of New York, and the police are finding it difficult to restrain the frenzied populations in other centers....”

There was a pause, then, of some moments, and then the voice of the broadcaster, vibrant with excitement, was heard again.

“--a plane has made a landing on the surface of the monstrosity, which, it seems, has not only lost its heat but is becoming decidedly cold--”

A servant appeared from among the shrubbery and paused before Dirk.

“There is a call for you, Mr. Vanderpool,” he said respectfully.

Dirk excused himself and, entering the sumptuous

apartment that opened from the terrace, went to the televisor. He saw the face of Sears, the chief secretary of Fragoni, in the glass panel.

“There will be a meeting of the council at nine o’clock in the morning, Mr. Vanderpool,” came the voice over the wire.

“Thank you, Sears,” replied Dirk. “It happens that Stanton is here at the present time. Shall I notify him of the conclave?”

“If you will, please,” Sears responded. “By the way, Mr. Vanderpool, is there anything wrong at your apartment? I tried to call you there before I located you here and I failed to get any response.”

“I guess that all of my servants have run out from under cover because of their fear of that thing in the sky,” Dirk responded. “Do you know anything about it, Sears?” he asked.

“It will be discussed at the meeting to-morrow morning,” replied Sears shortly. “Good night, Mr.

Vanderpool.”

Dirk, upon returning to the terrace, saw that both Stanton and Inga were silently and fearfully looking up into the night.

“A meeting of the council at nine o’clock in the morning, Stanton,” Dirk said abruptly. “I told Sears I would notify you.”

“I thought that we would be called together very soon,” said Stanton. “It’s concerning that damn thing up there.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Dirk carelessly. “Well,” he added, “I believe that I will hop home and get some sleep.”

“Sleep!” exclaimed Stanton. “Sleep? On a night like this?”

“Oh, Dirk,” pleaded Inga, “stay here with me, won’t you? I am not going to bed because I just know that I wouldn’t be able to close my eyes.”

“Let him go, Inga, if he wants to sleep,” urged Stanton. “I will stay here and keep watch with you.”

“--and if order is not restored in the streets of Manhattan within the course of a short time, the authorities will resort to morphite gas to quell the turbulence and rioting--”

“The streets must be frightfully congested,” said Inga. “It is the first occasion in a long time that the police have had to threaten the use of morphite.”

“--we do not want to alarm people unnecessarily but we have to report,” came the hurried voice of the broadcaster, “that the monstrous mass that has been hanging above the city just made a sudden drop of five thousand feet and again came to a stop. It is now a little more than six miles over Manhattan and-- again it has dropped. This time it fell like a plummet for twelve thousand feet. It is now about twenty thousand feet, some four miles, above Manhattan and--”

A cry of alarm came from the lips of Inga as she gazed

upward and saw that gigantic, ominous-appearing object loom dim and vast in the darkness above them.

She went to Dirk and threw her arms around him, as if she were clinging to him for protection.

“Don’t leave me, Dirk,” she whispered. “I can just feel that something terrible is going to happen, and I want you with me!”

“I’ll stay with you, of course,” whispered Dirk. Something of that feeling of dread and apprehension which so fully possessed his two companions entered into his mind. “Don’t tremble so, Inga,” he pleaded. “It is a strange thing, but we will know more about it in the morning. Be calm until then, my dear, if you can.”

He looked over the shoulder of the girl, whose face was buried against his breast, and he saw a hundred great red and green shafts of light shooting up into the air. Fleeting shadows seemed to pass swiftly up and down them, and he knew that thousands of planes were abroad, some of them seeking the

heights and others dropping down.

The great towers of Long Island were all aglow, and it was apparent that few people were sleeping that night. The scarlet sky over Manhattan indicated that the center of the metropolis, too, was alive to the menace of the weird visitant that now was so plainly visible.

All night long they remained on the terrace. Dirk and Inga seated close together and Stanton, at a distance, brooding alone over the disaster which he felt was impending.

The illuminated dial of the great clock that was a part of the beacon-tower on the Metropole Landing Field told of the slow passing of the hours.

All night long they listened to the reports that came through the radiovisor and watched that immobile, threatening monster of metal.

But it remained static during the rest of the night. And, with the coming of a gray and sunless dawn, it

still hung there, motionless, silent and sinister.

The next morning the President of the United States of the World, from the capitol at The Hague, issued a proclamation of martial law, to become effective at once in all parts of the world.

The edict forbade people to leave their homes, and it was vigorously executed, wherever the police themselves were not in a state of demoralization.

At about the same time a special meeting of the Supreme Congress was called, the body to remain in session until some solution of the mystery had been arrived at.

At the same time that martial law was declared, however, and the special assemblage of lawmakers convened, a statement was issued in which an attempt was made to eliminate from the minds of the people the idea that the undefinable object above the metropolis was at all dangerous.

It was, indeed, suggested that it very probably was

some sort of new device which had been constructed on the earth and which was being introduced to the people of the world in a somewhat sensational manner by the person or persons who were responsible for it.

The fears of the populace were, to some extent, allayed by this means, and some degree of order restored.

At nine o'clock Dirk Vanderpool was shown into the council chamber in the palace of Orlando Fragoni, and he was closely followed by Stanton. Fragoni was already there, and he greeted the two men with a countenance that was serene but that, nevertheless, revealed indications of concern. He was a man past middle age, tall and strikingly handsome in appearance. His eyes were dark and penetrating and his forehead, high and wide, was crowned by an abundance of snow-white hair. His voice, while pleasing to the ear, was vibrant with life and energy, and he spoke with the incisive directness of one accustomed to command.

For Orlando Fragoni, as nearly as any one man might be, was the ruler of the world.

It was in the early part of the twentieth century that wealth had commenced to concentrate into a relatively few hands. This was followed by a period in which vast mergers and consolidations had been effected as a result of the financial power and genius for organization which a few men possessed. A confederation of the countries of the world was brought about by industrial kings who had learned, in one devastating war, that militarism, while it might bring riches to a few, was, in the final analysis, destructive and wasteful.

Mankind the world over, relieved of the menace of war, made more progress in a decade than they had made in any previous century, but all the time the invisible concentration of power and money continued.

And, in 1975, the affairs of the world were controlled by five men, of whom Orlando Fragoni was the most powerful and most important.

His grandfather had been a small banker, and out of his obscure transactions the great House of Fragoni had arisen. The money power of the world was now controlled by Orlando Fragoni. Dirk Vanderpool, partly as a result of a vast inheritance and partly through his own ability and untiring industry, dominated the transportation facilities of the world. Planes and Zeppelins, railroad equipment and ships, were built in his plants and operated by the many organizations which he controlled.

Stanton had inherited the agricultural activities of the world and, in addition to this, he was the sovereign of distribution. He owned immense acreages in all of the continents; he not only cultivated every known variety of produce, but also handled the sale of his products through his own great chains of stores. His father had been one of the great geniuses of the preceding generation, but Stanton, while inheriting the commercial empire which he had ruled, had not inherited much of the ability which had gone into the establishment of it.

There were two other members of that invisible

council of Five, the very existence of which was not even suspected by the general populace of the world.

Sigmund Lazarre was the world's mightiest builder, and millions of great structures, which were built of material from his own mines, were under his control. It was Lazarre, too, who owned the theaters and other amusement centers in which millions upon millions of people sought relaxation every day. The creation and application of electrical power made up the domain of Wilhelm Steinholt, who also owned the factories that made the machinery of the world.

Absolute control of all of the necessities and luxuries of life, in fact, were in the hands of the five men, who used their vast power wisely and beneficently.

Ostensibly the peoples of the world ruled themselves by means of a democratic form of government.

In reality their lives were directed by a few men whose power and wealth were entirely unsuspected by any but those who were close to them.

The council room in which Fragoni had received Dirk and Stanton was lofty and sumptuously appointed.

The rugs which covered the floor were soft to the tread, and the walls and ceiling were adorned with a series of murals which represented the various heavenly constellations.

At the far end of the chamber there was a staircase, and Dirk was among those who knew that it led up to the great observatory in which Fragoni and certain of his scientific associates spent so much of their time at night.

For men had commenced to talk about the conquest of the stars, and it was generally believed that it would not be many years more before a way would be found to traverse the interplanetary spaces.

“We are rather fortunate, my friends,” Fragoni said to his two associates, “to have been the witnesses of the event that transpired last night.”

“Fortunate!” exclaimed Stanton. “Then you know that

the thing is harmless?”

A little smile lit the benign and scholarly countenance of Fragoni as he calmly regarded Stanton.

“We know very little about it,” he replied after a brief pause, “and, if our surmises are correct, it may be very far from harmless. It is intensely interesting, nevertheless,” he continued, “because that thing, as you term it, unquestionably is directed by intelligence. Without the slightest doubt the people of the earth are about to behold a form of life from some far-away planet. What that form will be,” he added, with an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders, “it is impossible to forecast.”

“But it was so hot,” commenced Stanton, “that--”

“True,” agreed Fragoni, “but it also is large and it may be that only the outer shell of it was affected by friction with the atmosphere that surrounds the earth. Nachbaren,” he continued, “is certain that there is intelligent life within it; and Nachbaren,” he added dryly, “is usually right.”

While Fragoni had been speaking, two more men had quietly joined them.

“Good morning, Lazarre,” Fragoni said, addressing a short, swarthy man who, very apparently, was of Jewish extraction.

“Good morning,” the other replied in a soft and mellifluous voice. “It seems,” he continued, with a twinkle in his eyes, “as if some of my pretty buildings may be toppled over soon.”

“Maybe,” agreed Fragoni. “And maybe,” he added more seriously, “much more than your buildings will be toppled over, Lazarre.”

“That thing, then, is...?” questioned the heavy-set, slow-speaking, blue-eyed Teuton who had come into the room with Lazarre.

“We do not know, Steinholt,” admitted Fragoni, “but our knowledge undoubtedly will be increased considerably within the next few hours. And now,” he said, “we will consider the problem at hand.”

“--the object which has created such unrest is slowly rising. It is now some twenty-five thousand feet above Manhattan. It is--”

The voice from the radiovisor attracted the attention of the five men, and, with one accord, they rushed to the terrace and looked toward Manhattan. They saw the great leviathan high in the air for a moment, and then, suddenly, it seemed to vanish from sight.

“It’s gone!” exclaimed Stanton, with a sigh of relief. “It must have been some odd atmospheric freak, that’s all.”

They searched the skies through the luciscope that was on the terrace, but failed to detect any trace of the monster.

“That seems to simplify matters,” remarked Fragoni as they again walked back into the great conference room. But here, once more, they heard the voice from the Worldwide Tower.

“--we are advised by Chicago that the thing, dull-red

with heat, is hovering only a couple of thousand feet over the city. Thousands in the streets are being killed by the heat it is radiating--panic reigns, despite a rigorous enforcement of martial law. The strange object just rose suddenly to a high altitude and disappeared--"

"It's another one of those damned things," asserted Stanton. "That couldn't go a thousand miles a minute!"

"It can go faster than that, if I am not mistaken," said Fragoni. And it presently appeared that he was right, for in a couple of minutes the radiovisor transmitted the news that it was over San Francisco, where it remained for only a few seconds. It was not more than a minute later that word came from Shanghai that it had passed slowly over that city. Then again it was poised high over Manhattan, crimson with heat.

"Is there any possible defense against it, Steinholt?" Fragoni asked. The Teuton shook his head with an air of finality.

“None,” he said, “as far as I can determine now. We can create and direct artificial lightning that would reduce this building to a mass of powdered stone and fused metal in a fraction of a second. But I am certain that it wouldn’t leave as much as a scratch on that monster up there. We might try the Z-Rays on it, but an intelligence that could devise such a craft would undoubtedly have the wisdom to protect it against such an elementary menace as rays. Even the mightiest explosives that we have wouldn’t send a tremor through that mighty mass.”

“Why not await developments?” asked Dirk. “We do not even know the nature of the thing we are trying to combat.”

“It’s solid metal,” insisted Stanton tenaciously. “It’s a metal body with a metal brain.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Steinholt. “It seems quite apparent that the craft has come from another planet, and, if I am not greatly mistaken, there are intelligent creatures inside it.”

“In any event,” said Dirk, “it seems impractical to make any plans until we know more about it. I suggest that we empower Fragoni to act for the rest of us in this matter.”

“That is very agreeable to me,” said Steinholt. “A crisis very possibly may arise in which the quick judgment of one man may be necessary to avert the danger that always is inherent in delay.”

“You hold my proxy,” Lazarre said to Fragoni, “and I assume that Stanton is agreeable to this procedure.”

“--the thing is moving very slowly eastward in the direction of Long Island Sound. It is, at the same time, losing altitude. Its movements are being carefully watched. As yet we see no cause for immediate alarm--people are advised to remain calm--”

“Yes, I am agreeable,” said Stanton nervously and hastily. “If there are things in it with which we can compromise, I would suggest that we do not offend them.”

“I am, then, empowered to act for all of you,” said Fragoni, ignoring the suggestion of Stanton.

He rose from his chair and walked out on the terrace. The others followed after him.

Looking westward, they saw the mammoth craft descending slowly in their direction.

Its vast dimensions became more and more apparent as, spellbound, they watched it approach closer and closer to them.

The thing in the sky was now not more than three thousand feet above them and only a few miles to the westward.

The observers on the terrace regarded it for a moment in silence as it drifted forward and downward.

“It’s colossal!” Steinholt then exclaimed, lost in scientific admiration of the mammoth craft.

“Magnificent! Superb!”

“But it’s coming right toward us!” cried Stanton.

“What makes it move, I wonder?” asked Dirk. “And how in the world is it controlled?”

“It surely is not of this world,” said Fragoni quietly.

“That gigantic thing has come to us from somewhere out of the infinite and terrible depths of space.”

Another minute elapsed while they watched it, speechless with wonder.

“Do you know,” Lazarre then said calmly, “I believe that it is going to land in the waters of the Sound. It appears so to me, anyway.”

It was nearly opposite them by this time, and not more than a thousand feet above the water. A few planes which, very apparently, were being flown by intrepid and fearless flyers, were hovering close around it.

Then finally it came to rest, as Lazarre had predicted, in the water some two miles off shore, and it was

obscured by a great cloud of vapor for several minutes.

“Steam,” asserted Steinholt. “That trip around the world, which it made in a few minutes, generated considerable frictional heat in the shell.”

“Come,” said Fragoni, “we’ll fly out and look the thing over.”

Around the corner of the building, on the level of the terrace, there was a landing stage which was occupied by a number of planes of various sizes.

Dirk entered the door of a small twenty passenger speedster, and the others filed in after him.

“Ready?” he asked, after he had seated himself at the controls.

“Ready!” replied Fragoni.

The plane rose straight up into the air and then darted gracefully out over the Sound.

Dirk swooped straight down at the leviathan which lay so quietly on the surface of the Sound and then slowly circled around it. No sign of an aperture of any sort could be seen in the craft. Then he dropped the plane lightly on the water, close to the metallic monster, which towered fully four hundred feet above them, despite the fact that more than half of it was submerged.

“It must be hollow,” remarked Steinholt, “or it wouldn’t be so far out of the water. In fact, it most certainly would sink, if it was solid.”

At the touch of a lever which lay under one of Dirk’s hands the plane rose straight out of the water, and he maneuvered it directly over the top of the strange enigma. Then he touched a button and the pontoons were drawn up into the undercarriage of the craft.

“Shall I make a landing on it?” he asked, turning his head and addressing Fragoni.

The latter nodded his head, and Dirk dropped the ship gently onto the smooth surface of the monster, the

pneumatic gearing completely absorbing the shock of the landing.

Dirk relinquished the controls and, opening the door of the cabin, he stepped out onto the rough and pitted substance of which the leviathan was compounded. He stood there while the others came out after him.

A large area on the top of the monster was perfectly flat and, within a very few moments, Dirk discovered that it was decidedly warm. He had brought the plane down close to the middle of the length of the strange craft in the belief that there, if anywhere, some indication of an entrance might be found.

The voice of Steinholt, tense with suppressed excitement, appraised him that his surmise had been correct.

“There is a manhole of some sort,” the electrical wizard exclaimed. “And look, it is turning!”

They saw, not far ahead of them, a circular twelve-foot section of the deck slowly revolving, and, even as

they watched, it commenced to rise slowly upward as the threads with which it was provided turned gradually around.

Almost involuntarily they retreated a few feet and stood there, spellbound, as they stared at the massive, revolving section of the deck.

It continued to turn until fully ten feet of the mobile cylinder had been exposed. Then the bottom of it appeared. Even then it continued to revolve and rise on a comparatively small shaft which supported it and, at the same time, thrust it upward. Dirk and his companions kept their eyes on the rim of the well which had been exposed, and awaited the appearance of something, they knew not what. When the top of the great cylinder was fully twelve feet above the deck of the craft it slowly ceased to revolve.

Moment succeeded moment as the members of the little group rigidly and almost breathlessly awaited developments.

Then Dirk, with an impatient ejaculation, stepped

forward toward the yawning hole and cautiously peered over the edge of it.

He stood there for a moment, as if transfixed, and then, with an exclamation of horror, retreated swiftly to where his friends were standing.

“What is it?” gasped Steinholt. “What did you see when--”

But the words died on his lips for, swarming swiftly over every side of the well, there poured an array of erect, piercing-eyed beings, who had all the characteristics of humans. They were clad in tight-fitting attire of thin and pliant metal which, with the exception of their faces, shielded them from head to foot. On their heads they wore close-fitting helmets, apparently equipped with visors which could be drawn down to cover their unprepossessing features.

Each one of them carried a tube which bore a striking resemblance to a portable electric flashlight.

Swiftly they advanced, in ranks of eight, toward Dirk

and his companions who, gripped with amazement, held their positions.

The first line came to a halt not more than four feet from the little group on the deck. The other lines halted, too, and formed a great platoon. Then a shrill whistle sounded and the formation parted in the middle, leaving an open path that led backward to the entrance, to the well.

A moment later the watchers saw the regal figure of a man emerge from the orifice and, after a moment's pause, advance slowly in their direction with a stately stride.

He was tall and muscular and blond and his attire, golden in texture, glittered with sparkling gems.

As he approached them he raised his right hand and, inasmuch as his countenance was calm and benign, his gesture appeared to be one of peace and goodwill.

Following close behind him there was a younger man

who, very apparently, was of the same lineage. His expression, however, was petulant and haughty and it contained more than a suggestion of rapacity and evil.

Behind him there were others of the same fair type, all of them sumptuously and ornately attired.

Fragoni stepped forward, himself a dignified and striking figure, as the leader of the strange adventurers came forth from the lane that had been formed by his immobile guard of warriors.

The two men confronted each other, one whose power and wealth gave him a dominate position on earth, and the other a personage from some domain that was remote in the abyss of space.

Fragoni bowed and spoke a few friendly words of welcome and the stranger, to the utter amazement of the banker and his associates, responded in an English that was rather peculiar in accent but that they could understand without any difficulty.

“From what part of the world do you come,” asked

the astounded Fragoni, "that you speak our language?"

"We come from no part of this world," replied the stranger. "The empire of my ruler is infinitely far away. But language, my friend, is not a thing of accident. Life grows out of the substance of the universe and language comes out of life. The speech of mankind, in your state of development, varies but little throughout all space and I have heard your English, as you call it, spoken among those who dwell in many, many worlds."

"And your world?" asked Steinholt with avid curiosity. "Tell us of the planet from which you come."

But Fragoni, smiling at the eagerness of Steinholt, interposed with a kindly but arresting gesture.

"My name is Fragoni," he said to the stranger, "and I would have you partake, of my hospitality and refresh yourself after your long journey. These," he added, "are my friends, Steinholt, Vanderpool and Lazarre."

“I am Teuxical, vassal of his Supreme Highness, Malfero of Lodore,” the other replied. “This is my son, Zitlan,” he continued, indicating the young man behind him, “and the others are my high captains, Anteucan, Orzitza and Huazibar. More of my officers are below together with ten thousand armed and armored men such as you see before you.”

If the last part of the statement was intended as a threat or a warning, the expression on Fragoni’s face gave no indication that he was aware of it.

“You carry a large crew, sir,” Fragoni replied, “but we gladly will make provisions for all of your men. As for yourself, your son, and your captains, if you will come with me....”

He nodded in the direction of the plane which rested on the great interplanetary vessel and started to walk slowly in the direction of it. The leader of the skymen walked by his side and the other men from Lodore followed close after them.

Dirk, Steinholt and Lazarre brought up the rear, while

the soldiers remained motionless in their serried array.

Innumerable planes were circling overhead and hundreds of them had landed on the water in the vicinity. Dirk saw that the wanderers from the stars regarded them curiously as if they never before had seen aircraft of that particular type.

When the cabin door of the plane was thrown open, Teuxical turned to one of his captains.

“Remain here, Anteucan, with the soldiers,” he commanded, “and await our return.”

Teuxical then entered the plane with his men and Fragoni, Steinholt and Lazarre followed after them. Then Dirk took his seat at the controls.

“These are strange craft you use,” he heard Teuxical say. “I have seen them in only one of the multitude of other worlds on which I have set my feet, worlds which all pay tribute to Malfero of Lodore. It is safer and swifter to ride the magnetic currents than it is to

ride the unstable currents of the air.”

Dirk caught the significance of the reference to tribute and he admired the clever diplomacy of Teuxical while, at the same time, he wondered if the earth and all of those who dwelt upon it were doomed to fall under the sway of some remote and unseen despot.

He also realized that the Lodorians had, in some way, devised a craft that rode the great magnetic streams which flowed through the universe in much the same way that men, in ships, navigated the streams of the earth.

He threw on the helicopter switch and the plane rose swiftly into the air, the myriad other flying craft which were circling nearby keeping at a safe distance from it.

“Land on the grand terrace,” Fragoni directed. The flight was short and rapid and it was only a matter of seconds before Dirk brought the plane down on the landing stage which they had left only a scant half-

hour before.

He opened the cabin door and stepped out of the plane and the others filed out after him.

Fragoni led the way along the stage, walking and chatting with Teuxical, and Dirk, following after the others, was the last to turn a corner that brought him a sweeping view of the magnificent terrace that fronted the private apartments of the banker and his daughter.

And, when he did, he saw that Inga was standing there, superbly beautiful, with Stanton a few paces behind her.

Her lovely eyes were alive with awe and wonder and her slender white hands were crossed over her heart.

And Dirk saw, too, that Zitlan, son of Teuxical, had paused and was standing quite still, with his unwavering and insolent eyes fixed on the girl.

Resentment, and a touch of apprehension, agitated Dirk when he saw the expression on the face of the

young Lodian.

There was admiration in that disagreeable countenance, but it was blended with arrogance, haughtiness and ill-concealed desire.

Dirk went quickly to Inga, standing between the girl and the one from Lodore who was staring at her so brazenly.

“What does it all mean, Dirk?” she asked in a low voice. “Those strange people, where are they from?”

Stanton had come quickly forward and had joined Inga and Dirk.

“They are from some far-off world, Inga,” he explained, “that we know nothing about as yet.”

“But what do they want?” she persisted. “What do they intend to do? I saw those horrible creatures through the magnascope when they came swarming out of the inside of that thing on the water and I thought, at first, that they were going to kill you all.”

“No, they seem to come in peace,” Dirk replied.
“Teuxical, their leader, seems to be gracious and kindly.”

“We are all doomed,” asserted Stanton, “unless something happens. They can crumble our cities with heat and bury us under the ruins of them.”

“Keep your silence!” breathed Dirk, quietly but tensely. “We will find a way to destroy those creatures if it becomes necessary.”

“That man who keeps staring at me, who is he?” asked Inga in a voice that betrayed her nervousness.

Dirk turned and saw that Zitlan was still standing where he had paused and that he still was looking with searching eyes in the direction of the girl.

He returned the insolent gaze of the young Lodian with an impatient and threatening stare and the countenance of Zitlan at once became stern and menacing. He came striding in the direction of Inga,

Dirk and Stanton and paused within a few feet of them, his rapacious eyes still fixed on the girl.

“My lady,” he said, “your beauty pleases me. I have walked on many worlds but never before have I seen one as lovely as yourself. Of the spoils of this world, all that I crave possession of is you. When we return to Lodore,” he added with an air of finality, “I will take you with me and place you with my other women in the Seraglio of the Stars.”

Dirk swiftly stepped close to Zitlan and the latter quickly clasped a tube that hung at his side, a tube of the sort that the soldiers had carried.

“Your words and your manner are insolent,” asserted Dirk angrily, “and I warn you now to cease making yourself offensive.”

“Dog!” exclaimed Zitlan fiercely, leveling the metal tube, “I’ll--”

But the left fist of Dirk cut short his threat as it made a sudden impact with his chin, and the Lodorian went

crashing backward into some exotic shrubbery with a look of surprise on his countenance.

Then Dirk heard an odd hissing and crackling sound, and he felt himself becoming dizzy and weak.

Darkness seemed to sweep in upon him; he felt that he was dropping swiftly through space, and then he lost consciousness.

A vague and shadowy figure was standing close by his side and peering down into his face. After a while he realized that it was Steinholt.

“Steinholt!” he gasped. “Why--why am I here--in Fragoni’s? I must have had a dream--and yet....”

He furrowed his brow in thought and, gradually, he commenced to remember what had happened.

“It was no dream,” said the scientist softly. “Do you remember the trouble that you had with Zitlan?”

“Yes,” replied Dirk. “I remember that he was insolent

to Inga and that I lost my temper and struck him. But what happened to me? I don't recall that anybody hit me. I did hear sort of a peculiar sound just before I started to pass out, but--"

"Teuxical took a shot at you," said Steinholt, "and you have been unconscious for over thirty-six hours."

"Took a shot at me!" exclaimed Dirk. "What did he shoot me with?"

"That is what we all would like to know," said Steinholt. "He leveled one of those damn tubes at you and pressed a button on it. There was a hissing sound, a flash of light, and you got groggy, and went out. He potted Zitlan, too," continued Steinholt, "and he apologized for the trouble that his son was responsible for. Do you know," he added, "I sort of like the old man."

Lazarre, with a sympathetic smile on his face, entered the room at that moment and overheard the conversation.

“Old man is right,” he remarked, with a little note of awe in his voice. “Teuxical admits that he is three thousand years old and that he has at least two thousand more ahead of him. That Lodore must be a queer world,” he commented, shaking his grizzly head.

“It is not so queer when you take everything into consideration,” said Steinholt. “It seems quite natural when Teuxical explains it. Lodore it seems, is something like a hundred thousand times as big as this miniature world we live on. It took Lodore infinitely longer to solidify from a gaseous state than it took this world, and its entire evolution has been relatively slower than ours. Therefore, according to Teuxical, the people up there live longer and, incidentally, know infinitely more than we do.”

“What time is it now?” asked Dirk, after a moment of thought.

“It is just about twelve o’clock at night,” Steinholt informed him.

“Have these Lodorians made any demands yet?” Dirk asked. “Does anybody know what they are going to do or what they want?”

“They are liable to do almost anything,” said Lazarre, “and it looks as though they will be able to get anything that they want. Teuxical, as I understand it, just gave you a slight shock with his death-ray device. If he had pulled the trigger all the way you would have become just a little pile of dust that the first breeze would have blown away.”

“Our own death-rays are somewhat similar,” said Steinholt, “but they are not a hundredth as powerful. And they won’t work on the Lodorians, either,” he added, “because those metal sheaths that they wear make them immune to all kinds of destructive rays.”

“It appears,” remarked Lazarre morosely, “as if this little world of ours is going to be taken for a ride. And it’s too bad, considering that it’s the only world we’ve got. There has been no formal presentation of demands yet, but it seems to be sort of understood that the earth is going to become a tributary of

Lodore. It is a good thing," he added, "that Teuxical, and not Zitlan, is the boss of that outfit. I don't like the looks of that young fellow. He's only twelve hundred years old and he is sort of hot-blooded, I guess."

"I was talking with Anteucan," said Steinholt, "and he told me that the Lodorians usually make heavy levies on worlds which they discover and dominate. As soon as Teuxical returns to Lodore and announces a new discovery a fleet of those damned monsters is sent out to mop up the new planet. That Malfero, who is the emperor of Lodore, is considerable of a monarch, and it seems that he has a passion for piling up wealth. Gold and platinum are as precious on Lodore as they are here and he also likes pretty stones."

"And what is worse," added Steinholt, "is his practice of enslaving entire populations and making toilers or warriors out of them. Those soldiers on the ship are not Lodorians. Millions of them were seized on some planet and converted into troops. It was a strange conversion, too," said Steinholt with a shudder. "Their brains were operated on and most of their faculties

removed. They have no sense of fear, no consciences, no power of reasoning. They respond only to certain signals on a whistle and their only definite and active impulse is that of murder and destruction.”

“There is nothing to do,” said Dirk positively, “but to kill all of these interlopers, if we hope to save our world from being desolated.”

The three men looked at each other in silence for a moment and then Dirk, somewhat weakly, rose into a sitting position in the bed which he had been occupying.

“But how,” asked Steinholt, “can we kill them? We might, of course, get rid of a few of them, but that simply would lead to our destruction by those who were left.”

“There must be some way,” asserted Dirk, “and it is up to us to think of it without delay. If we let those Lodorians get a foothold on the world all will be lost.”

“The old man seems to be reasonable enough,” said

Lazarre. "He doesn't seem inclined to be destructive."

"We must not trust him or any of the others," said Dirk imperatively. "We must rid the earth of every one of them. And the sooner we strike the better!"

"It had best be soon if it is to be at all," said Steinholt. "Fragoni has arranged to have Teuxical appear before the Congress, and the meeting has been called for to-night when, I imagine, certain specific demands will be made upon us. We all will go to The Hague together on the ship of the Lodorians."

"And we leave?" questioned Dirk.

"The meeting is set for ten P. M., New York time," said Lazarre. "We will start east at about four o'clock in the morning, I guess, because it will only take a minute or so to arrive at our destination."

"Is Fragoni going?" asked Dirk.

"Naturally," replied Lazarre.

“And Inga?”

“I believe so,” Lazarre told him. “Fragoni was both afraid to take her and to leave her behind, but finally he decided that he wanted her with him in case of trouble.”

“And are they--the Lodorians--still here?” queried Dirk.

“Yes,” responded Lazarre. “Teuxical returned to his ship last night with Zitlan and his other followers, but they came back late this afternoon, and they are still here. Zitlan seemed to be all right this afternoon, too. They must have used some means of bringing him out of the daze that he was in. We did everything we could to revive you, but none of our measures were effective.”

“I’m all right now,” asserted Dirk, as he finished attiring himself. “I want to see Fragoni at once.”

“We’ll go out on the terrace then,” said Steinholt. “They are all out there.”

Dirk, with his two companions, strolled out through the maze of rooms and corridors that led to the garden which hung so high above the city and the Sound below it.

The first thing that Dirk saw, when he passed out onto the terrace, was the white tunic of Inga, who was leaning against a coping and talking with Zitlan.

The latter was pointing skyward and, very apparently, he was telling her of worlds which circled high among the stars.

As if she were suddenly aware of his presence, Inga turned and saw Dirk and he realized, by the expression on her face, that she was distraught and nervous. She came toward him quickly, after a few words to Zitlan, and the face of the latter darkened. There was hatred in his expression as he stared malevolently at Dirk.

Steinholt and Lazarre passed along and joined Fragoni and Teuxical, who were the center of a group that had formed in another part of the terrace.

“Oh, Dirk,” said Inga, “I am so afraid of that frightful Zitlan. He has been telling me again that he is going to take me back to his own world with him and it makes me shudder to think of it. He is so strange and queer and his eyes are so terrible. He can’t be as young as he looks, because he speaks of years like we speak of minutes. I will die if I ever find myself in that monster’s power! He has been telling me of all the creatures he has slain on the worlds on which he has landed, and I tell you, Dirk, that he is cruel and ruthless and horrible.”

“He will never have you!” swore Dirk. “And if I hear of any more of his insolence, I will throw him headlong from this terrace.”

“Please, Dirk,” she begged, “don’t do anything--not yet. He is utterly unscrupulous, Dirk. He told me that, even now, he is plotting against some Malfero who rules Lodore like a god, and that he is planning to seize the throne of the planet. He wants to make me the queen of that fearful world when he becomes king. He boasted that, if I were on the throne, millions of people from other worlds would be sacrificed in my

honor in the temples of Lodore.” Her voice trembled and her eyes were terror-stricken as she continued. “They tear out the hearts of living victims,” she whispered, “and burn them on their high and mammoth pyramids.”

Rage took possession of Dirk and, casting a glance at Zitlan, he saw that the Lodorian was smiling insolently at him.

“I’ll kill that beast, if it’s the last thing that I do!” he exclaimed to Inga.

“Dirk, Dirk,” she implored, “don’t even look at him. He is proud and impetuous, and he will kill you in defiance of his own father.”

“We will find some way to rid the world of the scourge that has descended upon it,” asserted Dirk confidently, “and he will die with the rest of that monstrous crew.”

“I am going in, Dirk,” Inga said. “Please,” she begged, “don’t do anything rash. If--something--should

happen to you, I would lose all the hope that I have and I would, I think, kill myself.”

“Don’t lose hope, my dear,” said Dirk reassuringly. “I believe that I know of a way to destroy the plague that menaces us.”

He pressed her hand and, after she left him, he walked over and joined the other men on the terrace. Zitlan, coming from the terrace wall, stretched out in a chair not far from Dirk.

Teuxical regarded the latter with a countenance that was calm and amicable. “I am sorry, my young friend,” he apologized, “that I had to intervene between you and my son.” He paused a moment and sat in silence, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Ah,” he then said, “what disasters have arisen out of the desire of men for women. In my wanderings over the starlit worlds, I have seen....” He ceased speaking, brooded for a moment, and then shook his head slowly. “But you cannot say that I was not just,” he continued, addressing Dirk. “I punished Zitlan for his presumption. Fragoni tells me that the woman has

pledged herself to you. Let her pledge be kept!" he exclaimed sternly, looking straight at Zitlan.

"We are the conquerors," asserted the latter boldly, "and to us should belong the spoils of our daring!"

"Silence!" thundered Teuxical. "My own son, above all others, shall be obedient to my commands! Or, like others have done, he shall die because of insubordination!"

Zitlan, a defiant expression on his face, ceased to speak, but Dirk could see that he was livid with suppressed rage.

"As I was saying," Teuxical remarked, turning to Fragoni, "I am getting old and long have I been weary of conquest. I have seen your world and it pleases me. It is a tiny and peaceful place, far removed from the strife and turbulence of the restless centers of the universe. So it is my will to leave you unscathed and return to Lodore for a brief time to ask of the mighty Malfero the grant of this little provincial land. And then, with his permission, I will return here and rule

it with wisdom and benevolence.

“I will bring to you much knowledge, and peace will be to the people of this earth and peace will be to me.”

“It is well,” replied Fragoni. “No world, I am certain, could hope for a wiser and more just ruler than yourself, and our Congress surely will receive you with acclaim.”

Teuxical bowed in recognition of the compliment, and his countenance indicated that he was gratified.

“We will go, now, back to our vessel,” he said, addressing the other Lodorians. “We will return for you at the appointed hour and conduct you to our ship,” he added, speaking to Fragoni.

“We will be ready,” Fragoni replied.

Zitlan had arisen with the rest of them and Dirk, with a look of contempt and amusement in his eyes, regarded him casually.

“May I have the honor of conducting our guests back to their ship in a plane?” Stanton requested of Fragoni.

The latter nodded and Stanton walked across the terrace in the direction of the landing stage.

Zitlan, as he followed after the others, passed close to Dirk and, pausing for a moment, fixed his hateful eyes on him.

“You dog,” he whispered malignantly, “remember what I tell you! The time will come when I will cast you to the carnaphlocti in the dark and icy caverns of sunless Tiganda. You will die,” he swore, “the death of a million agonies!”

For a moment Dirk felt an almost irresistible impulse to hurl himself on the Lodian and slay him.

He managed to maintain his control, however, and only regarded Zitlan with disdain as the latter turned and went on his way.

In another moment the plane, containing Stanton and the Lodorians, was high up in the darkness.

Dirk glanced at the great clock that gleamed atop of the beacon-tower on the Metropole Landing Field.

The hour was close to twelve-thirty A. M.

A moment of silence on the terrace followed the departure of the plane that bore the Lodorians back to their craft.

For an hour the clouds had been gathering in the sky and now a fine, cold rain commenced to fall.

A peal of thunder echoed above them after a sharp flash of lightning had streaked across the black night above them.

A servant appeared from the entrance to the apartment and pressed a button close to the door.

Protective plates of glass noiselessly enveloped the terrace, sheltering those upon it from the inclement

weather.

“It is well,” remarked Fragoni, breaking the silence, “that we were found by a leader like Teuxical. Our tribute will not be unbearable, and he will bestow many benefits upon us.”

“But surely,” protested Dirk, “you do not intend to surrender without a struggle! Nothing but disaster,” he asserted earnestly, “will come upon the earth if you do. Teuxical may be honest and just but, after all, he neither is immortal nor all-powerful, and something may happen to him at any moment. And there are those like Zitlan who would turn the world over to ravage and rape, and then convert it into a blazing pyre, if they had their way. These vandals,” he insisted, “must be slain one and all, or, mark my words, our world will be laid waste.”

Dirk spoke with such a sense of conviction that his words held his listeners spellbound.

“Who is Teuxical,” he asked, “but the vassal of a monarch whose corsairs, very apparently, are

carrying on a war of conquest in the universe? It will be disastrous, I say, to place any dependence in the good will of this one Lodian. If he, or any of his men, return to that far-off planet where they dwell word will be carried there of the existence of our world. But who can say that Teuxical ever will return here again? It may be the whim of his ruler to refuse his request, or any one of a thousand other events might arise to thwart his desire to live among us. No," concluded Dirk passionately, "it never will do to let that great engine of destruction rise into the skies again!"

"He is right!" asserted Steinholt positively. "It will be far better to annihilate these raiders, if such a thing can be accomplished!"

Lazarre was rather inclined to take sides with Fragoni.

"But how," he demanded, "can such destruction be brought about? We know nothing of the capabilities of that monster that is lying down there in the Sound. It is undoubtedly equipped with the deadliest of devices

and they all will be turned upon us if we fail in an effort to destroy the thing and those who have come from space upon it. If there was a way to smite them suddenly, to bring death to the Lodorians and to those swarming, mindless, murderous minions who act in obedience to them, I would favor doing it.

“But, as it is,” he concluded, “it seems like inviting disaster even to think of such an attempt, much less to try it.”

“It can be done, though,” asserted Dirk, “or there is at least a fighting chance of accomplishing it. The electrosceotan--” He paused, and looked questioningly at Steinholt. “The top of that monster is open and....”

The Teuton furrowed his brow and considered the proposition for a moment.

“Yes,” he said, nodding his head, “it might be done.” Again he silently gave the subject his thought. “It is well worth trying,” he asserted with an air of decision. “But we will have to make haste,” he

warned, "if the thing is to be done before the flight to The Hague."

"So be it," said Fragoni. "We will apply ourselves to the task at hand. I, too," he confessed, "had rather see these vandals destroyed like so much vermin rather than have them carry the news of the existence of this earth back into those strange worlds in the depth of space. I will only regret the passing of Teuxical, who could have taught us much wisdom. And now," he continued briskly, "I will place myself under your orders, Dirk. You are the one who suggested this plan and upon you will fall the responsibility of executing it. And, if it succeeds," he added, "the glory will be yours."

"I care little for the glory," replied Dirk, "but I gladly accept the duties and the responsibilities. These," he said to Fragoni, "are my instructions to you.

Inasmuch as Teuxical and his captains will return here at about four o'clock in the morning to convey us back to their craft, it will be necessary to have this building emptied of its inhabitants by that time. Let all of those who dwell here depart from it, a few at a

time, so as not to excite suspicion. Inga, above all others, must leave and retreat to a place of safety. Then, as the hour approaches for the arrival of the Lodorians, we will escape by plane from one of the rear terraces. They will land in search of us and--well, then they will feel the force of our power."

"I will follow your orders explicitly," promised Fragoni. "I wonder," he added, "where Stanton is? He should be advised of what we are going to attempt."

"He will return in due time," replied Dirk. "And, if not, it will be the worse for him. Lazarre will remain here with you," he then told Fragoni, "and Steinholt and I will now go about our part of the task at hand."

Dirk, followed by Steinholt, hurried across the terrace and, leaving the shelter of its quartzite plates, sought the landing stage.

The rain still was falling and the heavens were congested with dark and heavy clouds.

Dirk, selecting one of the smaller planes, entered the

cabin and Steinholt, following after him, closed the door and threw on the lights.

Swiftly they shot straight up into the air, Dirk ignoring all of the rules of flight in his haste to be under way. Once in the westbound lane, he headed his plane toward Manhattan and threw his rheostat wide open. In a few minutes they were skimming over the great city and past the three-thousand-foot steel tower of the Worldwide Broadcasting Station.

For fifteen minutes more he kept the plane on a straight course and then, bringing it to a quick stop, he let it drop like a plummet toward the earth.

It landed, among many other planes, on the transparent, quartzite roof of a vast building and, looking down into the interior, they could see several rows of great dynamos. Some of them were turning, and the humming that they made could be heard plainly.

Dirk and Steinholt ran rapidly across the roof until they came to a superstructure, which they entered.

There was a shaft inside. Dirk pressed a button, and an elevator shot up and stopped at the door, which automatically flashed open.

He closed it after he and his companion had entered the cage and, dropping rapidly downward, they came to a stop in a lighted chamber that was far below the surface of the ground.

A stoop-shouldered old man greeted them, an expression of surprise on his face.

“Gentlemen!” he exclaimed. “What is--”

“Power, Gaeble!” commanded Steinholt tensely.

“Power! Let every dynamo run its swiftest. To-night we have to use for the electrosceotan!”

“But I thought it was peace that those from the stars desired,” said the old electrician. “Through my radiovisor I heard--”

“That was sent out,” explained Steinholt, “to relieve the fears of the people and to keep them in order.”

Swiftly the distorted figure of the old man sped to a great switchboard, where he pressed button after button.

The very ground commenced to vibrate around them and the massive structure seemed to be alive with straining power.

Then Steinholt, going to a corner of the intricate board, adjusted a few levers, while his gnomelike companion watched him carefully.

“And now, Gaeble,” the scientist said impressively, “these are your orders. At precisely the hour of four o’clock in the morning make one connection with this switch.”

He indicated, with a stubby finger, the lever to be operated.

“Keep the circuit closed for just four seconds,” he added slowly, “and then break it. Do you understand, Gaeble?” he demanded.

“I do,” replied the old man.

“Then,” continued Steinholt, “after you break that connection you quickly will close this next circuit. Keep it closed for four seconds and then, after opening it for one second, close it again for four seconds. Repeat the procedure twice more, Gaeble, after that, and then await my further instructions. Is everything clear?” he asked.

“It is, sir,” the old man replied. “I will follow your orders implicitly.”

“There is one thing more,” Steinholt said. “Get the Worldwide Tower on the televisor and warn them of what is to happen.”

“I will do that immediately,” Gaeble replied.

Dirk and Steinholt shot up to the roof again and the building over which they walked seemed to be quivering with life.

They could see that all of the mammoth dynamos

beneath them were revolving and the humming which they had heard before had changed into an ugly, vibrant roar.

Again they took flight and, reaching Manhattan, they continued north and east to the shore of Long Island Sound.

Long before the old East River had been filled in and the space which it had occupied reclaimed for building purposes. All indications of its former bed had been obliterated by mammoth terraced structures.

When they reached their destination on the shore of the Sound a small submarine, which Dirk had ordered by radio, was awaiting them.

“Submerge and proceed up the Sound,” Dirk ordered the officer, “and take us directly under the craft of the Lodorians.”

In a few minutes they were skimming over the surface of the water and, when a sufficient depth had been

gained, the tiny boat disappeared beneath the rain-rippled sea.

Dirk sat at a port and watched the aquatic life as it was illuminated by the powerful aquamarine searchlights.

Progress under the water was comparatively slow, as mankind had made but little progress in underwater navigation. Air liners long before had almost superseded travel by land and sea and the abolition of warfare had swept all of the old navies from the ocean.

It was more than an hour before the officer in charge of the boat announced that the mammoth hull of the monster that was lying on the Sound was visible directly above them.

Both Dirk and Steinholt donned diving apparatus, and the former carefully adjusted the mechanism that was contained in a metallic box about two feet square.

Then they stepped up into a chamber in the conning

tower of the boat and, after a door slipped shut beneath them, water slowly commenced to pour into the compartment.

When it was full a sliding door that was in front of them slowly opened and they passed out onto the deck of the underwater craft.

Steinholt had been provided with some welding apparatus and, in a few minutes, the box which Dirk had carried was attached securely to the bottom of the craft of the Lodorians.

They then reentered the submarine by reversing the process which had attended their exit. Very soon they were in the cabin of the boat again.

“If everything goes well,” said Dirk, “those damned Lodorians will never know what struck them.”

“I only hope,” said Steinholt, “that we don’t destroy that leviathan altogether. We might solve the secret of it and then we, too, could ride out into the heart of the universe.”

“It is impossible to imagine what will happen,” Dirk replied, “until after we launch our attack.”

Both of the men were silent during the return trip of the small undersea craft, which emerged at its dock a little before three-thirty in the morning.

“We’ll have to hurry,” urged Dirk nervously, “because we will need a little time to make preparations after we get back to Fragoni’s.”

They entered their plane and Dirk shot it swiftly up into the night, following the red shaft of light that rose almost directly from the point at which they had made their landing.

Then, having reached the eastbound level, he headed straight in the direction of the palace of Fragoni.

Dirk cast a glance at the great city that lay far beneath him. High up into the heavens it tossed the fulgurant fires that betokened its wealth and power. And, down among those myriad lights, millions and millions of people were restless under the danger that

menaced them. It was only a matter of moments now before their fate, and the fate of their great metropolis, would be decided. By dawn they would be free forever from the threat of subjugation and slavery or else they, and all that they had toiled and striven for, would be the veriest dust of dying embers.

And whatever befell them likewise would befall the rest of the world and every living thing that moved upon it.

Dirk was high above Fragoni's when he stopped the forward flight of the plane and, dropping it rapidly through the misty night, brought up easily on the landing stage. The other planes which had been there when he and Steinholt had taken their departure were gone and Dirk felt a sense of relief when he observed this. Inga, then, must have departed with the other occupants of the colossal structure. Things were going according to the plan that he had conceived. He stepped out of the cabin, followed by Steinholt, and proceeded hastily along the terrace and turned the corner into the garden.

Then he came to an abrupt halt because there, before him, was Zitlan, with one of the deadly ray-tubes of the Lodorians in his hand.

Dirk knew immediately that something unexpected had happened and that he was in the power of one who not only hated him but who had an unholy desire for Inga.

He realized, too, that any show of resistance would be nothing short of suicide, for he was well aware of the deadliness of the strange weapon with which he and Steinholt were being menaced by the gloating Lodian.

“One false move and you die!” warned Zitlan. “Come forward, now, and join those two others over whom Anteucan and Huazibar are watching.”

Dirk and Steinholt promptly obeyed the command of Zitlan and walked over to where Fragoni and Lazarre were being guarded by two of the conquerors.

The rain had ceased to fall, but the skies were dark

and overcast with heavy clouds. There was an occasional flash of lightning, and thunder rolled and echoed through the night.

The terrace, however, was brightly illuminated and every detail of the scene around him was visible to Dirk.

He saw Stanton, on another part of the terrace, standing among some Lodorians he had not seen before. Stanton, apparently, was not being treated as a prisoner and Dirk wondered, rather vaguely, why this was.

“What happened?” Dirk asked Fragoni quietly.

“According to what I have heard,” the latter replied, “Zitlan murdered his father in a fit of rage, and has taken over the command of the ship. Many of the Lodorians are his adherents and even those who do not favor him are so terrified that they will be obedient to his wishes.”

“And Inga?” questioned Dirk.

“She is inside the apartment,” said Fragoni, a note of desperation in his voice. “Zitlan surprised us completely and he and his men had us covered before we realized that Teuxical was not among them.”

Zitlan, in the meantime, had entered the suite of Fragoni and he now came out, Inga walking before him.

She was silent and proudly erect but there was a pallor in her face that indicated her realization of the danger that she was threatened with.

When Dirk saw her she gave him a brave smile, which he answered with a glance of reassurance.

He could see the great clock in the Metropole Tower, and he noticed, with a feeling of grave apprehension, that it was twenty minutes to four o'clock.

There were only a few minutes more in which to make a desperate and apparently a hopeless effort to save Inga, his friends and himself from a catastrophe which he had been instrumental in contriving.

Then Zitlan stood before him, haughty and arrogant, his lowering countenance ugly with hatred.

“So, dog,” he said, “you who dared to defy Zitlan now stand before him a captive!”

Neither Dirk nor any one of the three others who were guarded with him replied to the utterance.

“You and that woman of yours,” continued the Lodorian insolently, “both are my prisoners to do with as I please. Your fate,” he continued, “I already have planned for you and I assure you that it will not be as pleasurable as the one to which she is destined. You will find that Tigana, on which you and those with you will be cast, is a world of terror such as you never could dream of. Even the monsters which crawl through the deliriums of the mind are not as horrible as those which infest the mad and haunted world of which I speak.”

He paused a moment, a cruel smile on his face, as if he wished the full import of his words to sear themselves into the minds of the doomed men.

“But the woman,” he added, “will return to Lodore with me and be the queen of all women. And soon,” he said savagely, “she may be queen of all Lodore, of the worlds which pay tribute to Lodore, and of other worlds which I will conquer and ravage. My father stood in my way and he died at my own hands. So will others perish who thwart my ambition, and I will become supreme in the universe!”

A feeling of reckless fury possessed Dirk as he listened to the words of Zitlan and he felt an almost irresistible desire to drive a fist square between the mad, glittering eyes of the Lodian.

He glanced at the great clock, however, and he saw that the time to act had not yet come. At the last moment he would make one desperate attempt to frustrate the evil designs of Zitlan. If it failed--well, all would be lost. But it was a far better thing to die resisting the despicable Zitlan and his minions than it would be to live and to know that, without a struggle, he had abandoned to degradation the girl he loved.

“This world of yours will be my world,” he heard

Zitlan boast, "and the spoils from it will add to my riches. This one here," he continued, indicating Stanton, "has offered to show me where all of the treasures of the earth may be found. And, as a reward, he will return to Lodore with me and there be elevated to a high position."

That, then, was why Stanton was not under guard like the rest of them.

"Our good friend, Stanton," said Lazarre, "seems to have become something of a Judas."

"And let his name be forever cursed, like the name of Judas," said Dirk.

"Silence!" thundered the Lodian. "I, Zitlan, am speaking." He paused a moment. "When I garner up the treasures of this world in the way of precious stones and metals I also shall gather more priceless loot in the way of women. And then, having taken all that I desire, I will lay waste to this earth so that those who survive will fear the name of Zitlan and will grovel before him like a god when once again he

appears to them.”

While Zitlan had been speaking, Dirk had been studying the opponents with whom he soon had to clash.

The two Lodorians who were standing guard over himself and his companions were close to his left side. Zitlan was directly in front of him, and there were seven of his minions clustered behind him.

Again Dirk glanced at the great dial of the clock, and he saw that it was seven minutes of four.

The moment had come to act if action was to prove of any avail.

“I will--”

But the words of Zitlan were interrupted by Dirk, who suddenly made a mighty sweep with his left arm and knocked the deadly tubes from the hands of Anteucan and Huazibar. Startled by the assault, they went reeling backward. At almost the same instant Dirk

leaped forward and, seizing Zitlan, hurled him among those Lodorians who had been massed behind him. Then he threw himself violently into the tangled mass, his fists driving in and out with deadly strength!

Out of the corner of one eye he saw Inga pass the melee and dart swiftly to the corner of the terrace. Instead of passing around to the landing stage, however, she lingered there and watched the combat.

Dirk, as he fought, became conscious that Steinholt and Fragoni were at his side, battling with him against his enemies. He saw, too, that Stanton had retired to the far end of the terrace and that he was watching the struggle with frightened eyes.

“We must reach the plane and get away,” gasped Dirk. “In another three minutes--”

He felled a Lodian who, having lost his tube, was about to grapple with him. He saw Steinholt send another one of their opponents reeling backward.

“Fragoni!” he exclaimed. “The plane! Get in with

Inga! We will come!”

Even as he spoke his fists were flailing back and forth between each one of his staccato commands.

He saw beneath him a hand reaching toward a tube, and he kicked the instrument of death. It hurtled over in the direction of Stanton and landed close to his feet. Stanton might have picked it up and been in possession of the means of aiding his old friends or his new allies. But he shrunk away, panic-stricken, from the thing that lay so close to his reach.

A Lodian leaped upon Dirk’s back in an effort to bring him to the ground, but he stooped swiftly forward and his assailant was catapulted over his head into those who were in front of him.

He caught a flash of the contorted face of Zitlan flying through the air, and saw him land with a crash on the terrace, and lie there writhing in pain.

“Steinholt, Lazarre!” he said convulsively. “We’ve got to strike once more! And then--run!”

He plunged into their enemies with every bit of energy that he had left, and saw two of them toppling down. Then, like a flash, he turned to Lazarre, who was trying to fight off three of the Lodorians. Seizing one of them by the waist, Dirk hurled him backward and he disposed of another one in the same manner. His sheer desperation seemed to have given him unbounded strength and power.

Lazarre sent his third opponent down with a blow under the chin and then, with Dirk at his side, they turned to the assistance of Steinholt.

With one mad rush they crashed into a group of Lodorians and sent them reeling away like so many nine-pins.

“Now! To the plane!” exclaimed Dirk, taking to his heels across the terrace. Steinholt and Lazarre followed after him and, turning the corner, they saw that the ship was in place and that Fragoni was anxiously waiting by the door of the cabin. Inga, Dirk knew, already was inside and safe. He stood aside while Steinholt and Lazarre leaped in. During the

momentary wait he caught a glimpse of the great clock. It was one minute to four. Dirk jumping into the plane and switched on the helicopter without even waiting to close the cabin door.

The ship shot skyward like a rocket. When it reached an altitude of thirty-five hundred feet, he turned it north and raced at top speed in that direction.

It was miles away from the palace of Fragoni in less than thirty seconds. Dirk then stopped the plane and held it poised in the air with the helicopter.

The skies were turgid and black and the massed clouds, reflecting the lights of the great city below them, were permeated with an ugly, feverish, red glow.

From where they were hanging in midair, the occupants of the plane could plainly see the sparkling palace of Fragoni towering high up into the darkness of the night.

The lights of the magnificent mansion were reflected

far out into the Sound where, looming in the golden ripples, lay the sinister monster from the terrible depths of unfathomable space.

Dirk took a watch from his pocket and, after glancing at it, he hastily replaced it.

“Two seconds more,” he said, “and--”

A sharp and dazzling bolt of greenish fire came hurling suddenly out of the west and, with a thunderous concussion, seemed to fasten itself on the crest of Fragoni's palace.

It trembled and quivered, as if endowed with some uncanny life and power, as it remained there against the darkness, throwing a weird, green tinge over the water and up into the skies.

Blue waves of light could be seen pulsing and racing along the terrible beam and there, where it had fastened itself, they seemed to disappear in the vast and crumbling structure.

For four seconds that destructive streak of light, one end of which was lost back in the mists that concealed Manhattan, tore at the proud pile.

And, as the stone crumbled and the steelite fused under the mighty assault, an ominous roar swept through the night. The air was so violently agitated that the plane, miles away, tossed up and down like a tiny boat on a stormy sea.

Then suddenly the bolt was gone, but its livid image still burned in the eyes of those who had been watching it.

Once more, it came hurling out of the west and, like the fang of some great and deadly serpent, darted into the monster that lay in the waters of the Sound.

Dirk and his companions could see plainly, by the light of the bolt itself, that it had crashed into the well from which the Lodorians first had appeared, and that it was beating and hammering its way into the very vitals of the craft.

Dazzling, blinding fire seemed to pour from the aperture through which the bolt had passed. The clamor that arose was deafening.

Then again the streak of fires was withdrawn, leaving the night intensely black until, in a moment more, it came thundering out of the west again and, with an impact that made the land and the sea and the very heavens tremble, hurled its way into the depths of the doomed leviathan.

Twice again it fell, a fiery scimitar out of the darkness, and twice again it careened at the vitals of the stricken monster.

Then, after the assault was over, the ship still floated on the surface of the Sound and its shell, as far as Dirk and the others could judge, still was unscathed.

“We will soon know our fate,” remarked Steinholt calmly. “If that didn’t kill those beasts we might as well give up our ghosts.”

“I’ll drop the plane a little lower and a little nearer to

the ship,” said Dirk. “I don’t believe that any life is surviving in that thing.”

“My beautiful palace is nothing but dust,” sighed Fragoni, mournfully. “And all my beautiful treasures, too.”

“And that beautiful Zitlan,” Lazarre reminded him, “and his beautiful boy friends, they are all dust too, thank God!”

“It was a queer fate that Stanton met,” suggested Dirk. “He thought that he would save his life by going over to our enemies, and, instead of that, he lost it.”

“Poor Stanton,” said Steinholt. “He was born that way, I suppose, and I, for one, am ready to forgive and forget him. And now,” continued the Teuton, “I hope that we didn’t do too much damage to that little boat of the Lodorians. If we could get just a little peep at the inside of it we might learn the secret of its contrivance. And then, my friends, we could do a little journeying ourselves.”

“Have you any theory regarding it?” asked Fragoni.

“Teuxical intimated that it rode the magnetic currents which, of course, flow through all the suns and planets in the universe,” replied Steinholt. “We have been working along that line ourselves, of course, and it probably won’t be very long anyway before we have the solution of interplanetary travel.”

“Those Lodorians would have solved it for us if it hadn’t been for that artificial lightning,” said Lazarre. “That’s powerful stuff, Steinholt.”

“Yes, with that three-thousand-foot Worldwide Tower to hurl it from,” agreed Steinholt, “we can get fair range with it. If the Lodorians hadn’t left the well of their ship open, though, the lightning wouldn’t have done us much good. I was afraid, too, for a time, that we might have trouble in welding that automatic wireless circuit box to the bottom of the ship.”

Dirk, in the meantime, had brought the plane down to within a half-mile of the leviathan, and he was holding it poised there.

“It seems to me,” he said, after scrutinizing the monster for a couple of minutes, “that it is moving in the water. It is!” he exclaimed. “Steinholt! Look!”

Only a comparatively short time had elapsed since the last bolt of lightning had vanished back into the darkness.

“It is still rocking with the force of the shock that we gave it,” asserted Steinholt. “You would be rocking, too, if you had been tickled by a bolt like that one.”

“It is rising, I tell you!” said Dirk. “The front end of it is slowly getting higher in the water!”

“You’re right, Dirk,” said Fragoni, excitement straining his voice. “Look! It just dropped back into the water!”

Then, as they watched, the movements of the leviathan became more and more agitated, until it was churning up the waves around it like a wounded and agonized monster of the sea.

Suddenly the front end tilted upward and the monster rose clear of the water. It shot straight up into the air at a speed so terrific that they could scarcely follow it.

“It’s gone!” gasped Fragoni. “Those brainless, mindless automatons must have survived!”

“No,” remarked Steinholt thoughtfully. “I don’t believe that there is any life left on that thing. No one had closed the well when it rose, and it would mean death to go out into space with the ship in that condition.”

“Then what made it go up?” demanded Lazarre. “Can the damn thing run itself, Steinholt?”

“I imagine,” recalled the Teuton, “that our bolts killed every living thing that was on the craft but that, at the same time, they set the mechanism of the monster into action. Ah,” he moaned, “but that is too bad. We could have learned much by an examination of the interior of that liner of the air.”

A cry from Inga startled them and they saw that she

was looking skyward, with terror in her eyes.

They followed her gaze and there, streaking through the black clouds, they saw a long trail of white fire.

“It’s that thing!” exclaimed Fragoni. “I tell you that those upon it still live and that they are about to wreak vengeance upon us.”

“No,” said Steinholt positively. “You are wrong, Fragoni. What is happening may be almost as disastrous, though,” he admitted. “That leviathan is in its death agonies; it is a metal monster gone mad, and none can say what will happen before it expires.”

“The place for us,” asserted Dirk hurriedly, “is in the Worldwide Tower. here we can keep track of what is transpiring and try to decide what to do.”

The others agreed with him and, seeking the westward level of flight, he sped the plane in the direction of the mammoth pyramid from which the news of the world was broadcast.

They reached the vast structure in a few minutes, and, after dropping the plane on a landing stage, they went into the operating room.

Here they learned quickly that the craft of the Lodorians was doing incalculable damage, and that it was throwing the population of the world into an unprecedented panic.

It was, apparently, following an erratic, uncertain orbit that took it far out into space and then back quite close to the surface of the earth again.

It had passed through the very heart of Chicago within a few yards of the ground, and it had cut and burned a swath more than a mile wide through the buildings of that metropolis.

Other cities in America had felt the devastating effects of its irresistible and molten heat and, within a short time, thousands of people had been slain by it.

Time and again, from the terrace of the great tower, Dirk and his companions saw the skies above them

light up as that terrible, blazing, projectile which, uncontrolled, went hurtling on its way through the night.

For three hours it careened on its mad course and hysteria reigned throughout the cities of the whole civilized world.

But then a report came from a rocket-liner that had left Berlin en route for San Francisco.

“Either a great meteor or that leviathan of the Lodorians just swept down past us in mid-Atlantic and plunged into the sea. Apparently it has exploded, for it has thrown a great column of water for miles up into the air. We are stopping and standing by, although the heat is intense and clouds of steam are rising from the sea.”

As the minutes passed by after the report from the rocket-ship had been received, the disappearance from the sky of the flaming craft from space seemed to confirm the belief that it had been swallowed by the ocean. This was accepted as a certainty by eight

o'clock in the morning.

"Ah," sighed Steinholt, "if only it had crashed on land somewhere. If there only was enough of it left for us to--"

"Enough of any damn contraption of that kind," swore Lazarre fervently, "is altogether too much. I hope, for one, that its fragments are scattered so far that we never can put them together again."

Dirk and Inga leaned against one of the parapets that evening on a gardened terrace of his own great mansion in Manhattan.

Their little party had gone there after leaving the Worldwide Tower in the morning.

After resting during the day, Lazarre and Fragoni were somewhere together, discussing the plans for a new palace to take the place of the one that was destroyed so that Zitlan and his minions might die in its ruins.

Steinholt, elsewhere, was delving into oceanography and submarine engineering, in an attempt to learn whether or not it would be feasible to fish for the remains of the lost ship of Lodore.

“It seems like a dream, doesn’t it, Dirk?” the girl remarked. “It is difficult to believe that we actually have seen and talked with people from some far-away world.”

Together they looked up into the crystalline skies, where mazes of shining stars gave testimony to the countless worlds which were wheeling around them.

“And just to think, Dirk,” Inga continued proudly, “that it was you who saved this world and all of its people from that horrible Zitlan and his horde.”

“I saved you,” he told her gravely and tenderly, “and that somehow means more to me than saving all of this world and all of the other worlds which are rolling through the uncharted ways of time and space.”

April 1930

#20 The Man Who Was Dead, By Thomas Holt Knight:

As Jerry's eyes fell on the creature's head, he shuddered—for the face was nothing but bone, with dull-brown skin stretched taut over it. A skeleton that was alive!

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was a wicked night, the night I met the man who had died. A bitter, heart-numbing night of weird, shrieking wind and flying snow. A few black hours I will never forget.

"Well, Jerry, lad!" my mother said to me as I pushed

back from the table and started for my sheepskin coat and the lantern in the corner of the room. "Surely you're not going out a night like this? Goodness gracious, Jerry, it's not fit!"

"Can't help it, Mother," I replied. "Got to go. You've never seen me miss a Saturday night yet, have you now?"

"No. But then I've never seen a night like this for years either. Jerry, I'm really afraid. You may freeze before you even get as far as—"

"Ah, come now, Mother," I argued. "They'd guy me to death if I didn't sit in with the gang to-night. They'd chaff me because it was too cold for me to get out. But I'm no pampered sissy, you know, and I want to see—"

"Yes," she retorted bitingly, "I know. You want to go and bask in that elegant company. Our stove's just as good as the one down at that dirty old store," continued my persistent and anxious parent, "and it's certainly not very flattering to think that you leave us

on a night like this to—Who'll be there, anyway?"

"Oh, the usual five or six I suppose," I answered as I adjusted the wick of my lantern, hearing as I did the snarl and cut of the wind through the evergreens in the yard.

"That black-whiskered sphinx, Hammersly, will he be there?"

"Yes, he'll be there, I'm pretty sure."

"Hm-m!" she exclaimed, her expression now carrying all the contempt for my judgment and taste she intended it should. "Button your coat up good around your neck, then, if you must go to see your precious Hammersly and the rest of them. Have you ever heard that man say anything yet? Does he speak at all, Jerry?" Then her gentle mind, not at all accustomed to hard thoughts or contemptuous remarks, quickly changed. "Funny thing about that fellow," she mused. "He's got something on his mind. Don't you think so, Jerry?"

"Y-es, yes I do. And I've often wondered what it could be. He certainly's a queer stick. Got to admit that. Always brooding. Good fellow all right, and, for a 'sphinx' as you call him, likable. But I wonder what is eating him?"

"What do you suppose it could be, Jerry boy?" questioned Mother following me to the door, the woman of her now completely forgetting her recent criticisms and, perhaps, the rough night her son was about to step into. "Do you suppose the poor chap has a—a—broken heart, or something like that? A girl somewhere who jilted him? Or maybe he loves someone he has no right to!" she finished excitedly, the plates in her hand rattling.

"Maybe it's worse than that," I ventured. "P'r'aps—I've no right to say it—but p'r'aps, and I've often thought it, there's a killing he wants to forget, and can't!"

I heard my mother's sharp little "Oh!" as I shut the door behind me and the warmth and comfort of the room away. Outside it was worse than the whistle of

the wind through the trees had led me to expect. Black as pitch it was, and as cold as blazes. For the first moment or two, though, I liked the feel of the challenge of the night and the racing elements, was even a little glad I had added to the dare of the blackness the thought of Hammersly and his "killing." But I had not gone far before I was wishing I did not have to save my face by putting in an appearance at the store that night.

Every Saturday night, with the cows comfortable in their warm barn, and my own supper over, I was in the habit of taking my place on the keg or box behind the red-hot stove in Pruett's store. To-night all the snow was being hurled clear of the fields to block the roads full between the old, zigzag fences. The wind met me in great pushing gusts, and while it flung itself at me I would hang against it, snow to my knees, until the blow had gone along, when I could plunge forward again. I was glad when I saw the lights of the store, glad when I was inside.

They met me with mock applause for my pluck in facing the night, but for all their sham flattery I was

pleased I had come, proud, I must admit, that I had been able to plough my heavy way through the drifts to reach them. I saw at a glance that my friends were all there, and I saw too that there was a strange man present.

A very tall man he was, gaunt and awkward as he leaned into the angle of the two counters, his back to a dusty show-case. He attracted my attention at once. Not merely because he appeared so long and pointed and skinny, but because, of all ridiculous things in that frozen country, he wore a hard derby hat! If he had not been such a queer character it would have been laughable, but as it was it was—creepy. For the man beneath that hard hat was about as queer a looking character as I have ever seen. I supposed he was a visitor at the store, or a friend of one of my friends, and that in a little while I would be introduced. But I was not.

I took my place in behind the stove, feeling at once, though I am far from being unsociable usually, that the man was an intruder and would spoil the evening. But despite his cold, dampening presence we were

soon at it, hammer and tongs, discussing the things that are discussed behind hospitable stoves in country stores on bad nights. But I could never lose sight of the fact that the stranger standing there, silent as the grave, was, to say the least, a queer one. Before long I was sure he was no friend or guest of anyone there, and that he not only cast a pall over me but over all of us. I did not like it, nor did I like him. Perhaps it would have been just as well after all, I thought, had I heeded my mother and stayed home.

Jed Counsell was the one who, innocently enough, started the thing that changed the evening, that had begun so badly, into a nightmare.

"Jerry," he said, leaning across to me, "thinkin' of you s'afternoon. Readin' an article about reincarnation. Remember we were arguin' it last week? Well, this guy, whoever he was I've forgot, believes in it. Says it's so. That people *do* come back." With this opening shot Jed sat back to await my answer. I liked these arguments and I liked to bear my share in them, but now, instead of immediately answering the challenge, I looked around to see if any other of our circle were

going to answer Jed. Then, deciding it was up to me, I shrugged off the strange feeling the man in the corner had cast over me, and prepared to view my opinions.

"That's just that fellow's belief, Jed," I said. "And just as he's got his so have I mine. And on this subject at least I claim my opinion is as good as anybody's." I was just getting nicely started, and a little forgetting my distaste for the man in the corner, when the fellow himself interrupted. He left his leaning place, and came creaking across the floor to our circle around the store. I say he came "creaking" for as he came he did creak. "Shoes," I naturally, almost unconsciously decided, though the crazy notion was in my mind that the cracking I heard did sound like bones and joints and sinews badly in need of oil. The stranger sat his groaning self down among us, on a board lying across a nail keg and an old chair. Only from the corner of my eye did I see his movement, being friendly enough, despite my dislike, not to allow too marked notice of his attempt to be sociable seem inhospitable on my part. I was about to start again with my

argument when Seth Spears, sitting closest to the newcomer, deliberately got up from the bench and went to the counter, telling Pruett as he went that he had to have some sugar. It was all a farce, a pretext, I knew. I've known Seth for years and had never known him before to take upon himself the buying for his wife's kitchen. Seth simply would not sit beside the man.

At that I could keep my eyes from the stranger no longer, and the next moment I felt my heart turn over within me, then lie still. I have seen "walking skeletons" in circuses, but never such a man as the one who was then sitting at my right hand. Those side-show men were just lean in comparison to the fellow who had invaded our Saturday night club. His thighs and his legs and his knees, sticking sharply into his trousers, looked like pieces of inch board. His shoulders and his chest seemed as flat and as sharp as his legs. The sight of the man shocked me. I sprang to my feet thoroughly frightened. I could not see much of his face, sitting there in the dark as he was with his back to the yellow light, but I could make out

enough of it to know that it was in keeping with the rest of him.

In a moment or two, realizing my childishness, I had fought down my fear and, pretending that a scorching of my leg had caused my hurried movement, I sat down again. None of the others said a word, each waiting for me to continue and to break the embarrassing silence. Hammersly, black-whiskered, the "sphinx" as my mother had called him, watched me closely. Hating myself not a little bit for actually being the sissy I had boasted I was not, I spoke hurriedly, loudly, to cover my confusion.

"No sir, Jed!" I said, taking up my argument. "When a man's dead, he's dead! There's no bringing him back like that highbrow claimed. The old heart may be only hitting about once in every hundred times, and if they catch it right at the last stroke they may bring it back then, but once she's stopped, Jed, she's stopped for good. Once the pulse has gone, and life has flickered out, it's out. And it doesn't come back in any form at all, not in this world!"

I was glad when I had said it, thereby asserting myself and downing my foolish fear of the man whose eyes I felt burning into me. I did not turn to look at him but all the while I felt his gimlety eyes digging into my brain.

Then he spoke. And though he sat right next to me his voice sounded like a moan from afar off. It was the first time we had heard this thing that once may have been a voice and that now sounded like a groan from a closely nailed coffin. He reached a hand toward my knee to enforce his words, but I jerked away.

"So you don't believe a man can come back from the grave, eh?" he grated. "Believe that once a man's heart is stilled it's stopped for good, eh? Well, you're all wrong, sonny. All wrong! You believe these things. I *know* them!"

His interference, his condescension, his whole hatefulness angered me. I could now no longer control my feeling. "Oh! You *know*, do you?" I sneered. "On such a subject as this you're entitled to *know*, are you? Don't make me laugh!" I finished

insultingly. I was aroused. And I'm a big fellow, with no reason to fear ordinary men.

"Yes, I know!" came back his echoing, scratching voice.

"How do you know? Maybe you've been—?"

"Yes, I have!" he answered, his voice breaking to a squeak. "Take a good look at me, gentlemen. A good look." He knew now that he held the center of the stage, that the moment was his. Slowly he raised an arm to remove that ridiculous hat. Again I jumped to my feet. For as his coat sleeve slipped down his forearm I saw nothing but bone supporting his hand. And the hand that then bared his head was a skeleton hand! Slowly the hat was lifted, but as quickly as light six able-bodied men were on their feet and half way to the door before we realized the cowardliness of it. We forced ourselves back inside the store very slowly, all of us rather ashamed of our ridiculous and childlike fear.

But it was all enough to make the blood curdle, with

that live, dead thing sitting there by our fire. His face and skull were nothing but bone, the eyes deeply sunk into their sockets, the dull-brown skin like parchment in its tautness, drawn and shriveled down onto the nose and jaw. There were no cheeks. Just hollows. The mouth was a sharp slit beneath the flat nose. He was hideous.

"Come back and I'll tell you my yarn," he mocked, the slit that was his mouth opening a little to show us the empty, blackened gums. "I've been dead once," he went on, getting a lot of satisfaction from the weirdness of the lie and from our fear, "and *I* came back. Come and sit down and I'll explain why I'm this living skeleton."

We came back slowly, and as I did I slipped my hand into my outside pocket where I had a revolver. I put my finger in on the trigger and got ready to use the vicious little thing. I was on edge and torn to pieces completely by the sight of the man, and I doubt not that had he made a move towards me my frayed nerves would have plugged him full of lead. I eyed my friends. They were in no better way than was I. Fright

and horror stood on each face. Hammersly was worst. His hands were twitching, his eyes were like bright glass, his face bleached and drawn.

"I've quite a yarn to tell," went on the skeleton in his awful voice. "I've had quite a life. A full life. I've taken my fun and my pleasure wherever I could. Maybe you'll call me selfish and greedy, but I always used to believe that a man only passed this way once. Just like you believe," he nodded to me, his neck muscles and jaws creaking. "Six years ago I came up into this country and got a job on a farm," he went on, settling into his story. "Just an ordinary job. But I liked it because the farmer had a pretty little daughter of about sixteen or seventeen and as easy as could be. You may not believe it, but you can still find dames green enough to fall for the right story.

"This one did. I told her I was only out there for a time for my health. That I was rich back in the city, with a fine home and everything. She believed me. Little fool!" He chuckled as he said it, and my anger, mounting with his every devilish word, made the finger on the trigger in my pocket take a tighter crook

to itself. "I asked her to skip with me," the droning went on, "made her a lot of great promises, and she fell for it." His dry jaw bones clanked and chattered as if he enjoyed the beastly recital of his achievement, while we sat gaping at him, believing either that the man must be mad, or that we were the mad ones, or dreaming.

"We slipped away one night," continued the beast. "Went to the city. To a punk hotel. For three weeks we stayed there. Then one morning I told her I was going out for a shave. I was. I got the shave. But I hadn't thought it worth while to tell her I wouldn't be back. Well, she got back to the farm some way, though I don't know—"

"What!" I shouted, springing before him. "What! You mean you left her there! After you'd taken her, you left her! And here you sit crowing over it! Gloating! Boasting! Why you—!" I lived in a rough country. Associated with rough men, heard their vicious language, but seldom used a strong word myself. But as I stood over that monster, utterly hating the beastly thing, all the vile oaths and prickly language

of the countryside, no doubt buried in some unused cell in my brain, spilled from my tongue upon him. When I had lashed him as fiercely as I was able I cried: "Why don't you come at me? Didn't you hear what I called you? You beast! I'd like to riddle you!" I shouted, drawing my gun.

"Aw, sit down!" he jeered, waving his rattling hand at me. "You ain't heard a thing yet. Let me finish. Well, she got back to the farm some way or another, and something over a year later I wandered into this country again too. I never could explain just why I came back. It was not altogether to see the girl. Her father was a little bit of a man and I began to remember what a meek and weak sheep he was. I got it into my head that it'd be fun to go back to his farm and rub it in. So I came.

"Her father was trying out a new corn planter right at the back door when I rounded the house and walked towards him. Then I saw, at once, that I had made a mistake. When he put his eyes on me his face went white and hard. He came down from the seat of that machine like a flash, and took hurried steps in the

direction of a doublebarrelled gun leaning against the woodshed. They always were troubled with hawks and kept a gun handy. But there was an ax nearer to me than the gun was to him. I had to work fast but I made it all right. I grabbed that ax, jumped at him as he reached for the gun, and swung—once. His wife, and the girl too, saw it. Then I turned and ran."

The gaunt brute before us slowly crossed one groaning knee above the other. We were all sitting again now. The perspiration rolled down my face. I held my gun trained upon him, and, though I now believed he was totally mad, because of a certain ring of truth in that empty voice, I sat fascinated. I looked at Seth. His jaw was hanging loose, his eyes bulging. Hammersly's mouth was set in a tight clenched line, his eyes like fire in his blue, drawn face. I could not see the others.

"The telephone caught me," continued our ghastly story-teller, "and in no time at all I was convicted and the date set for the hanging. When my time was pretty close a doctor or scientist fellow came to see me who said, 'Blaggett, you're slated to die. How

much will you sell me your body for?' If he didn't say it that way he meant just that. And I said, 'Nothing. I've no one to leave money to. What do you want with my body?' And he told me, 'I believe I can bring you back to life and health, provided they don't snap your neck when they drop you.' 'Oh, you're one of *those* guys, are you?' I said then. 'All right, hop to it. If you can do it I'll be much obliged. Then I can go back on that farm and do a little more ax swinging!'" Again came his horrible chuckle, again I mopped my brow.

"So we made our plans," he went on, pleased with our discomfiture and our despising of him. "Next day some chap came to see me, pretending he was my brother. And I carried out my part of it by cursing him at first and then begging him to give me decent burial. So he went away, and, I suppose, received permission to get me right after I was cut down.

"There was a fence built around the scaffold they had ready for me and the party I was about to fling, and they had some militia there, too. The crowd seemed quiet enough till they led me out. Then their buzzing sounded like a hive of bees getting all stirred up.

Then a few loud voices, then shouts. Some rocks came flying at me after that, and it looked to me as though the hanging would not be so gentle a party after all. I tell you I was afraid. I wished it was over.

"The mob pushed against the fence and flattened it out, coming over it like waves over a beach. The soldiers fired into the air, but still they came, and I, I ran—up, onto the scaffold. It was safer!" As he said this he chuckled loudly. "I'll bet," he laughed, "that's the first time a guy ever ran into the noose for the safety of it! The mob came only to the foot of the scaffold though, from where they seemed satisfied to see the law take its course. The sheriff was nervous. So cut up that he only made a fling at tying my ankles, just dropped a rope around my wrists. He was like me, he wanted to get it over, and the crowd on its way. Then he put the rope around my neck, stepped back and shot the trap. Zamm! No time for a prayer—or for me to laugh at the offer!—or a last word or anything.

"I felt the floor give, felt myself shoot through. Smack! My weight on the end of the rope hit me

behind the ears like a mallet. Everything went black. Of course it would have been just my luck to get a broken neck out of it and give the scientist no chance to revive me. But after a second or two, or a minute, or it could have been an hour, the blackness went away enough to allow me to know I was hanging on the end of the rope, kicking, fighting, choking to death. My tongue swelled, my face and head and heart and body seemed ready to burst. Slowly I went into a deep mist that I knew then was *the* mist, then—then—I was off floating in the air over the heads of the crowd, watching my own hanging!

"I saw them give that slowly swinging carcass on the end of its rope time enough to thoroughly die, then, from my aerial, unseen watching place, I saw them cut it—me—down. They tried the pulse of the body that had been mine, they examined my staring eyes. Then I heard them pronounce me dead. The fools! I had known I was dead for a minute or two by that time, else how could my spirit have been gone from the shell and be out floating around over their heads?"

He paused here as he asked his question, his head turning on its dry and creaking neck to include us all in his query. But none of us spoke. We were dreaming it all, of course, or were mad, we thought.

"In just a short while," went on the skeleton, "my 'brother' came driving slowly in for my body. With no special hurry he loaded me onto his little truck and drove easily away. But once clear of the crowd he pushed his foot down on the gas and in five more minutes—with me hovering all the while alongside of him, mind you—floating along as though I had been a bird all my life—we turned into the driveway of a summer home. The scientific guy met him. They carried me into the house, into a fine-fitted laboratory. My dead body was placed on a table, a huge knife ripped my clothes from me.

"Quickly the loads from ten or a dozen hypodermic syringes were shot into different parts of my naked body. Then it was carried across the room to what looked like a large glass bottle, or vase, with an opening in the top. Through this door I was lowered, my body being held upright by straps in there for that

purpose. The door to the opening was then placed in position, and by means of an acetylene torch and some easily melting glass, the door was sealed tight.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing a dead man, clothed only with a small loincloth, suspended in the air by a harness inside a large glass container shaped like a lightbulb, while two scientists wearing lab coats and safety goggles look on. Image description end.]

"So there stood my poor old body. Ready for the experiment to bring it back to life. And as my new self floated around above the scientist and his helper I smiled to myself, for I was sure the experiment would prove a failure, even though I now knew that the sheriff's haste had kept him from placing the rope right at my throat and had saved me a broken neck. I was dead. All that was left of me now was my spirit, or soul. And that was swimming and floating about above their heads with not an inclination in the world to have a thing to do with the husk of the man I could clearly see through the glass of the bell.

"They turned on a huge battery of ultra-violet rays then," continued the hollow droning of the man who had been hanged, "which, as the scientist had explained to me while in prison, acting upon the

contents of the syringes, by that time scattered through my whole body, was to renew the spark of life within the dead thing hanging there. Through a tube, and by means of a valve entering the glass vase in the top, the scientist then admitted a dense white gas. So thick was it that in a moment or two my body's transparent coffin appeared to be full of a liquid as white as milk. Electricity then revolved my cage around so that my body was insured a complete and even exposure to the rays of the green and violet lamps. And while all this silly stuff was going on, around and around the laboratory I floated, confident of the complete failure of the whole thing, yet determined to see it through if for no other reason than to see the discomfiture and disappointment that this mere man was bound to experience. You see, I was already looking back upon earthly mortals as being inferior, and now as I waited for this proof I was all the while fighting off a new urge to be going elsewhere. Something was calling me, beckoning me to be coming into the full spirit world. But I wanted to see this wise earth guy fail.

"For a little while conditions stayed the same within that glass. So thick was the liquid gas in there at first that I could see nothing. Then it began to clear, and I saw to my surprise that the milky gas was disappearing because it was being forced in by the rays from the lights in through the pores into the body itself. As though my form was sucking it in like a sponge. The scientist and his helper were tense and taut with excitement. And suddenly my comfortable feeling left me. Until then it had seemed so smooth and velvety and peaceful drifting around over their heads, as though lying on a soft, fleecy cloud. But now I felt a sudden squeezing of my spirit body. Then I was in an agony. Before I knew what I was doing my spirit was clinging to the outside of that twisting glass bell, clawing to get into the body that was coming back to life! The glass now was perfectly clear of the gas, though as yet there was no sign of life in the body inside to hint to the scientist that he was to be successful. But I knew it. For I fought desperately to break in through the glass to get back into my discarded shell of a body again, knowing I must get in or die a worse death than I had before.

"Then my sharper eyes noted a slight shiver passing over the white thing before me, and the scientist must have seen it in the next second, for he sprang forward with a choking cry of delight. Then the lolling head inside lifted a bit. I—still desperately clinging with my spirit hands to the outside, and all the time growing weaker and weaker—I saw the breast of my body rise and fall. The assistant picked up a heavy steel hammer and stood ready to crash open the glass at the right moment. Then my once dead eyes opened in there to look around, while I, clinging and gasping outside, just as I had on the scaffold, went into a deeper, darker blackness than ever. Just before my spirit life died utterly I saw the eyes of my body realize completely what was going on, then—from the inside now—I saw the scientist give the signal that caused the assistant to crash away the glass shell with one blow of his hammer.

"They reached in for me then, and I fainted. When I came back to consciousness I was being carefully, slowly revived, and nursed back to life by oxygen and a pulmotor."

The terrible creature telling us this tale paused again to look around. My knees were weak, my clothes wet with sweat.

"Is that all?" I asked in a piping, strange voice, half sarcastic, half unbelieving, and wholly spellbound.

"Just about," he answered. "But what do you expect? I left my friend the scientist at once, even though he did hate to see me go. It had been all right while he was so keen on the experiment himself and while he only half believed his ability to bring me back. But now that he'd done it, it kinda worried him to think what sort of a man he was turning loose of the world again. I could see how he was figuring, and because I had no idea of letting him try another experiment on me, p'r'aps of putting me away again, I beat it in a hurry.

"That was five years ago. For five years I've lived with only just part of me here. Whatever it was trying to get back into that glass just before my body came to life—my spirit, I've been calling it—I've been without. It never did get back. You see, the scientist brought

me back inside a shell that kept my spirit out. That's why I'm the skeleton you see I am. Something vital is missing."

He stood up cracking and creaking before us, buttoning his loose coat about his angular body. "Well, boys," he asked lightly, "what do you think of that?"

"I think you're a liar! A damn liar!" I cried. "And now, if you don't want me to fill you full of lead, get out of here and get out now! If I have to do it to you, there's no scientist this time to bring you back. When you go out you'll stay out!"

"Don't worry," he grimaced back to me, waving a mass of bones that should have been a hand contemptuously at me, "I'm going. I'm headed for Shelton." He stalked the length of the floor and shut the door behind him. The beast had gone.

"The dirty liar!" I cried. "I wish—yes—I wish I had an excuse to kill him. Just think of that being loose, will you? A brute who would think up such a yarn! Of course it's all absurd. All crazy. All a lie."

"No. It's not a lie."

I turned to see who had spoken. Hammersly's voice was so unfamiliar and now so torn in addition that I could not have thought he had spoken, had he not been looking right at me, his glittering eyes challenging my assertion. Would wonders never cease? I asked myself. First this outrageous yarn, now Hammersly, the "sphinx," expressing an opinion, looking for an argument! Of course it must be that his susceptible and brooding brain had been turned a bit by the evening we had just experienced.

"Why Hammersly! You don't believe it?" I asked.

"I not only believe it, Jerry, but now it's my turn to say, as he did, I *know* it! Jerry, old friend," he went on, "that devil told the truth. He was hanged. He was brought back to life; and Jerry—I was that scientist!"

Whew! I fell back to a box again. My knees seemed to forsake me. Then I heard Hammersly talking to himself.

"Five years it's been," he muttered. "Five years since I turned him loose again. Five years of agony for me, wondering what new devilish crimes he was perpetrating, wondering when he would return to that little farm to swing his ax again. Five years—five years."

He came over to me, and without a word of explanation or to ask my permission he reached his hand into my pocket and drew out my revolver, and I did not protest.

"He said he was headed for Shelton," went on Hammersly's spoken thoughts. "If I slip across the ice I can intercept him at Black's woods." Buttoning his coat closely, he followed the stranger out into the night.

I was glad the moon had come up for my walk home, glad too when I had the door locked and propped with a chair behind me. I undressed in the dark, not wanting any grisly, sunken-eyed monster to be looking in through the window at me. For maybe, so I thought, maybe he was after all not headed for

Shelton, but perhaps planning on another of his ghastly tricks.

But in the morning we knew he had been going toward Shelton. Scientists, doctors, and learned men of all descriptions came out to our village to see the thing the papers said Si Waters had stumbled upon when on his way to the creamery that next morning.

It was a skeleton, they said, only that it had a dry skin all over it. A mummy. Could not have been considered capable of containing life only that the snow around it was lightly blotched with a pale smear that proved to be blood, that had oozed out from the six bullet holes in the horrid chest. They never did solve it.

There were five of us in the store that night. Five of us who know. Hammersly did what we all wanted to do. Of course his name is not really Hammersly, but it has done here as well as another. He is black-whiskered though, and he is still very much of a sphinx, but he'll never have to answer for having killed the man he once brought back to life.

Hammersly's secret will go into five other graves

besides his own.

#21 Monsters Of Moyon, By Arthur Josephus Burks:

"The western world shall be next!" was the dread ultimatum of the half-monster, half-god Moyon.

Aproximate word count: 17,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Forward:

In 1935 the mighty genius of Moyon gripped the Eastern world like a hand of steel. In a matter of months he had welded the Orient into an unbeatable war-machine. He had, through the sheer magnetism of a strange personality, carried the Eastern world with him on his march to conquest of the earth, and men followed him with blind faith as men in the past have followed the banners of the Thaumaturgists.

A strange name, to the sound of which none could assign nationality. Some said his father was a Russian refugee, his mother a Mongol woman. Some said he was the son of a Caucasian woman lost in the Gobi and rescued by a mad lama of Tibet, who became father of Moyen. Some said that his mother was a goddess, his father a fiend out of hell.

But this all men knew about him: that he combined within himself the courage of a Hannibal, the military genius of a Napoleon, the ideals of a Sun Yat Sen; and that he had sworn to himself he would never rest until the earth was peopled by a single nation, with Moyen himself in the seat of the mighty ruler.

Madagascar was the seat of his government, from which he looked across into United Africa, the first to join his confederacy. The Orient was a dependency, even to that forbidden land of the Goloks, where outlanders sometimes went, but whence they never returned—and to the wild Goloks he was a god whose will was absolute, to render obedience to whom was a privilege accorded only to the Chosen.

In a short year his confederacy had brought under his might the millions of Asia, which he had welded into a mighty machine for further conquest.

And because the Americas saw the handwriting on the wall, they sent out to see the man Moyen, with orders to penetrate to his very side, as a spy, their most trusted Secret Agent—Prester Kleig.

Only the ignorant believed that Moyen was mad. The military and diplomatic geniuses of the world recognized his genius, and resented it.

But Prester Kleig, of the Secret Service of the Americas, one of the *few* men whose headquarters were in the Secret Room in Washington, had reached Moyen.

Now he was coming home.

He came home to tell his people what Moyen was planning, and to admit that his investigations had been hampered at every turn by the uncanny genius of Moyen. Military plans had been guarded with

unbelievable secrecy. War machines he knew to exist, yet had seen only those common to all the armies of the world.

And now, twenty-four hours out of New York City, aboard the *S. S. Stellar*, Prester Kleig was literally willing the steamer to greater speed—and in far Madagascar the strange man called Moyen had given the ultimatum:

"The Western World shall be next!"

Chapter 1: The Hand of Moyen.

"Who is that man?" asked a young lady passenger of the steward, with the imperious inflection which tells of riches able to force obedience from menials who labor for hire.

She pointed a bejeweled finger at the slender, soldierly figure which stood in the prow of the liner, like a figurehead, peering into the storm under the vessel's forefoot.

"That gentleman, milady?" repeated the steward obsequiously. "That is Prester Kleig, head of the Secret Agents, Master of the Secret Room, just now returning from Madagascar, via Europe, after a visit to the realm of Moyen."

A gasp of terror burst from the lips of the woman. Her cheeks blanched.

"Moyen!" She almost whispered it. "Moyen! The half-god of Asia, whom men call mad!"

"Not mad, milady. No, Moyen is not mad, save with a lust for power. He is the conqueror of the ages, already ruling more of the earth's population than any man has ever done before him—even Alexander!"

But the young lady was not listening to stewards. Wealthy young ladies did not, save when asked questions dealing with personal service to themselves. Her eyes devoured the slender man who stood in the prow of the *Stellar*, while her lips shaped, over and over again, the dread name which was on the lips of the people of the world:

"Moyen! Moyen!"

Up in the prow, if Prester Kleig, who carried a dread secret in his breast, knew of the young lady's regard, he gave no sign. There were touches of gray at his temples, though he was still under forty. He had seen more of life, knew more of its terrors, than most men twice his age—because he had lived harshly in service to his country.

He was thinking of Moyen, the genius of the misshapen body, the pale eyes which reflected the fires of a Satanic soul, set deeply in the midst of the face of an angel; and wondering if he would be able to arrive in time, sorry that he had not returned home by airplane.

He had taken the *Stellar* only because the peacefulness of ocean liner travel would aid his thoughts, and he required time to marshal them. Liner travel was now a luxury, as all save the immensely wealthy traveled by plane across the oceans. Now Prester Kleig was sorry, for any moment, he felt, Moyen might strike.

He turned and looked back along the deck of the *Stellar*. His eyes played over the trimly gowned figure of the woman who questioned the steward, but did not really see her. And then....

"Great God!" The words were a prayer, and they burst from the lips of Prester Kleig like an explosion. Passengers appeared from the lee of lifeboats. Officers on the bridge whirled to look at the man who shouted. Seamen paused in their labors to stare. Aloft in the crow's-nest the lookout lowered his eyes from scouring the horizon to stare at Prester Kleig—who was pointing.

All eyes turned in the direction indicated.

Climbing into the sky, a mile off the starboard beam, was an airplane with a bulbous body and queerly slanted wings. It had neither wheels nor pontoons, and it traveled with unbelievable speed. It came on bullet-fast, headed directly for the side of the *Stellar*.

"Lower the boats!" yelled Kleig. "Lower the boats! For God's sake lower the boats!"

For Prester Kleig, in that casual turning, had seen what none aboard the *Stellar*, even the lookout above, had seen. The airplane, which had neither wheels nor pontoons, had risen, as Aphrodite is said to have risen, out of the waves! He had seen the wings come out of the bulbous body, snap backward into place, and the plane was in full flight the instant it appeared.

Prester Kleig had no hope that his warning would be in time, but he would always feel better for having given it. As the captain debated with himself as to whether this lunatic should be confined as dangerous, the strange airplane nosed over and dived down to the sea, a hundred yards from the side of the *Stellar*. Just before it struck the water, its wings snapped forward and became part of the bulbous body of the thing, the whole of which shot like a bullet into the sea.

Prester Kleig stood at the rail, peering out at the spot where the plane had plunged in with scarcely a splash, and his right hand was raised as though he gave a final, despairing signal.

Of all aboard the *Stellar*, he only saw that black streak which, ten feet under water, raced like a bolt of lightning from the nose of the submerged but visible plane, straight as a die for the side of the *Stellar*. Just a black streak, no bigger than a small man's arm, from the nose of the plane to the side of the *Stellar*.

From the crow's-nest came the startled, terrific voice of the lookout, in the beginning of a cry that must remain forever inarticulate.

The world, in that blinding moment, seemed to rock on its foundations; to shatter itself to bits in a chaotic jumble of sound and of movement, shot through and through with lurid flames. Kleig felt himself hurled upward and outward, turned over and over endlessly....

He felt the storm-tossed waters close over him, and knew he had struck. In the moment he knew—oblivion, deep, ebon and impenetrable, blotted out knowledge.

Chapter 2: The Half-Dream

A roaring, rushing river of chaotic sound, first. Jumbled sound to which Prester Kleig could give no adequate name. But as he tried to analyze its meanings, he was able to differentiate between sounds, and to discover the identity of some.

The river of sound he decided to be the sound of a vibrational explosion of some sort—vibrational because it had that quivery quality which causes a feeling of uneasiness and fret, that feeling which makes one turn and look around to find the eyes boring into one's back—yet multiplied in its intensity an uncounted number of times.

Other sounds which came through the chaotic river of sound were the terrified screaming of the men and women who were doomed. Lifeboats were never lowered, for the reason that with the disintegration of the *Stellar*, everything inanimate aboard her likewise disintegrated, dropping men and women, crew and passengers, into the freezing waters of the Atlantic.

Prester Kleig dropped with them, only partially unconscious after the first icy plunge. He knew when he floated on the surface, for he felt himself lifted and hurled by the waves. In his half-dream he saw men and women being carried away into wave-shrouded darkness, clawing wildly at nothingness for support, clawing at one another, locking arms, and going down together.

The *Stellar*, in the merest matter of seconds, had become spoil of the sea, and her crew and passengers had vanished forever from the sight of men. Yet Prester Kleig lived on, knew that he lived on, and that there was an element, too strong to be disbelieved, of reality in his dream.

There was a vibratory sense, too, as of the near activity of a noiseless motor. Noiseless motor! Where had he last thought of those two words? With what recent catastrophe were they associated? No, he could not recall, though he knew he should be able to do so.

Then the sense of motion to the front was apparent—

an unnumbered sense, rather than concrete feeling. Motion to front, influenced by the rising and falling motion of mountainous waves.

So suddenly as to be a distinct shock, the wave motion ceased, though the forward motion—and *upward!*—not only continued but increased.

That airplane of the bulbous body, the queerly slanted wings....

But the glimmering of realization vanished as a sickishly sweet odor assailed his nostrils and sent its swift-moving tentacles upward to wrap themselves soothingly about his brain. But the sense of flight, unbelievably swift, was present and recognizable, though all else eluded him. He had the impression, however, that it was intended that all save the most vagrant, most widely differentiated, impressions elude him—that he should acquire only half pictures, which would therefore be all the more terrible in retrospect.

The only impressions which were real were those of

motion to the front, and upward, and the sense of noiseless machinery, vibrating the whole, nearby.

Then a distinct realization of the cessation of the sense of flying, and a return, though in lesser degree, of the rising and falling of waves. This latter sensation became less and less, though the feeling of traveling downward continued. Prester Kleig knew that he was going down into the sea again, down into it deeply.... Then that odor once more, and the elusive memory.

Forward motion at last, in the depths, swift, forward motion, though Prester Kleig could not even guess at the direction. Just swift motion, and the mutter of voices, the giving of orders....

Prester Kleig regained consciousness fully on the sands of the shore. He sat up stiffly, staring out to sea. A storm was raging, and the sea was an angry waste. No ship showed on the waters; the mad, tumbled sky above it was either empty of planes or they had climbed to invisibility above the clouds that raced and churned with the storm.

Out of the storm, almost at Prester Kleig's feet, dropped a small airplane. Through the window a familiar face peered at Kleig. A helmeted, begoggled figure opened the door and stepped out.

"Kleig, old man," said the flyer, "you gave me the right dope all right, but I'll swear there isn't a wireless tower within a hundred miles of this place! How did you manage it?"

"Kane, you're crazy, or I am, or...." But Prester Kleig could not go on with the thought which had rushed through his brain with the numbing impact of a blow. He grasped the hand of Carlos Kane, of the Domestic Service, and the yellow flimsy Kane held out to him. It read simply:

"Shipwrecked. Am ashore at—" There followed grid coordinate map readings. "Come at once, prepared to fly me to Washington." It was signed "Kleig."

"Kane," said Kleig, "I did not send this message!"

What more was there to be said? Horror looked out of

the eyes of Prester Kleig, and was reflected in those of Carlos Kane. Both men turned, peering out across the tumbled welter of waters.

Somewhere out there, tight-locked in the gloomy archives of the Atlantic, was the secret of the message which had brought Carlos Kane to Prester Kleig—and the agency which had sent it.

Chapter 3: Wings of To-morrow

As Prester Kleig climbed into the enclosed passenger pit of the monoplane—a Mayther—his ears seemed literally to be ringing with the drumming, mighty voice of Moyen. But now that voice, instead of merely speaking, rang with sardonic laughter. He had never heard the laughter of Moyen, but he could guess how it would sound.

That airplane of the slanted wings, the bulbous, almost bulletlike fuselage, what of it? It was simple, as Kleig looked back at his memoried glimpse of it. The submarine was a metal fish made with human hands; the airplane aped the birds. The strange ship which had caused the destruction of the *Stellar*, was a combination fish and bird—which merely aped nature a bit further, as anyone who had ever traversed tropical waters would have instantly recognized.

But what did it portend? What ghastly terrors of Moyen roamed the deeps of the Atlantic, of the Pacific, the oceans of the world? How close were some of these to the United States?

The pale eyes of Moyen, he was sure, were already turned toward the West.

Prester Kleig sighed as he seated himself beside Carlos Kane. Then Kane pressed one of the myriad of buttons on the dash, and Kleig lifted his eyes to peer through the skylight, to where that single press of a button had set in motion the intricate machinery of the helicopter.

A four-bladed fan lifted on a slender pedestal, sufficiently high above the surface of the wing for the vanes to be free of the central propeller. Then, automatically, the vanes became invisible, and the Mayther lifted from the sandy beach as lightly, and far more straightly, than any bird.

As the ship climbed away for the skies, and through the transparent floor the beach and the Atlantic fell away below the ship, a sigh of relief escaped Kleig. This was living! Up here one was free, if only for a moment, and the swift wind of flight brushed all cobwebs from the tired human brain. He watched the slender needle of the altimeter, as it moved around

the face of the dial as steadily as the hands of a clock, around to thirty thousand, thirty-five, forty.

Then Carlos Kane, every movement as effortless as the flight of the silvery winged Mayther, thrust forth his hand to the dash again, pressed another button. Instantly the propellers vanished into a blur as the vanes of the helicopter dropped down the slender staff and the vanes themselves fitted snugly into their appointed notches atop the wing.

For a second Carlos Kane glanced at the tiny map to the right of the dash, and set his course. It was a matter of moments only, but while Kane worked, Prester Kleig studied the instruments on the dash, for it had been months since he had flown, save for his recent half-dreamlike experience. There was a button which released the mechanism of the deadly guns, fired by compressed air, all operated from the noiseless motor, whose muzzles exactly cleared the tips of Mayther's wings, two guns to each wing, one on the entering edge, one on the trailing edge, fitted snugly into the adamant rigging.

Four guns which could fire to right or left, twin streams of lead, the number of rounds governed only by the carrying power of the Mayther. Prester Kleig knew them all: the guns in the wings, the guns which fired through the three propellers, and the guns set two and two in the fuselage, to right and left of the pits, which could be fixed either up or down—all by the mere pressing of buttons. It was marvelous, miraculous, yet even as Kleig told himself that this was so, he felt, deep in the heart of him, that Moyen knew all about ships like these, and regarded them as the toys of children.

Kane touched Kleig on the shoulder, signaling, indicating that the atmosphere in the pits had been regulated to their new height, and that they could remove their helmets and oxygen tanks without danger.

With a sigh Prester Kleig sat back, and the two friends turned to face each other.

"You certainly look done in, Kleig," said Kane sympathetically. "You must have been through hell,

and then some. Tell me about this Moyen; that is, if you think you care to talk about him."

"Talk about him!" repeated Kleig. "Talk about him? It will be a relief! There has been nothing, and nobody, on my mind save Moyen for weary months on end. If I don't talk to someone about him, I'll go mad, if I'm not mad already. Moyen? A monster with the face of an angel! What else can one say about him? A devil and a saint, a brute whose followers would go with him into hell's fire, and sing him hosannas as they were consumed in agony! The greatest mob psychologist the world has ever seen. He's a genius, Kane, and unless something is done, the Western world, all the world, is doomed to sit at the feet, listen to the commands, of Moyen!

"He isn't an Oriental; he isn't a European; he isn't negroid or Indian; but there is something about him that makes one thing of all of these, singly and collectively. His body is twisted and grotesque, and when one looks at his face, one feels a desire to touch him, to swear eternal fealty to him—until one looks into his pale eyes, eyes almost milky in their paleness

—and gets the merest hint of the thoughts which actuate him. If he has a failing I did not find it. He does not drink, gamble...."

"And women?" queried Kane, softly.

Kleig was madly in love with the sister of Kane, Charmion, and this thing touched him nearest the heart, because Charmion was one of her country's most famous beauties, about whom Moyen must already have heard.

"Women?" repeated Kleig musingly, his black eyes troubled, haunted. "I scarcely know. He has no love for women, only because he has no capacity for any love save self-love. But when I think of him in this connection I seem to see Moyen, grown to monster proportions, sitting on a mighty throne, with nude women groveling at his feet, bathed in tears, their long hair in mantles of sorrow, hiding their shamed faces! That sounds wild, doesn't it? But it's the picture I get of Moyen when I think of Moyen and of women. Many women will love him, and have, perhaps. But while he has taken many, though I am

only guessing here, he has given *himself* to none. Another thing: His followers—well, he sets no limits to the lusts of his men, requiring only that every soldier be fit for duty, with a body strong for hardship. You understand?"

Kane understood; and his face was very pale.

"Yes," he said, his voice almost a whisper, "I understand, and as you speak of this man I seem to see a city in ruins, and hordes of men marching, bloodstained men entering houses ... from which, immediately afterward, come the screams of women ... terror-stricken women...."

He shuddered and could not go on for the very horror of the vision that had come to him.

But Kleig stared at him as though he saw a ghost.

"Great God, Carl!" he gasped. "The same identical picture has been in my mind, not once but a thousand times! I wonder...."

Was it an omen of the future for the West?

Deep in his soul Prester Kleig fancied he could hear the sardonic laughter of the half-god, Moyen.

A tiny bell rang inside the dash, behind the instruments. Kane had set direction finders, had pressed the button which signaled the Washington-control Station of the National Radio, thus automatically indicating the exact spot above land, by grid-coordinates, where the Mayther should start down for the landing.

An hour later they landed on the flat roof of the new Capitol Building, sinking lightly to rest as a feather, nursed to a gentle landing by the whirring vanes of the helicopter.

Prester Kleig, surrounded by uniformed guards who tried to shield him from the gaze of news-gatherers crowded there on the roof-top, hurried him to the stairway leading into the executive chambers, and through these to the Secret Chamber which only a few men knew, and into which not even Carlos Kane

could follow Prester Kleig—yet.

But one man, one news-gatherer, had caught a glimpse of the face of Kleig, and already he raced for the radio tower of his organization, to blazon to the Western world the fact that Kleig had come back.

Chapter 4: A Nation Waits in Dread

As Prester Kleig, looking twice his forty years because of fatigue, and almost nameless terrors through which he had passed, went to his rendezvous, the news-gatherer, who shall here remain nameless, raced for the Broadcasting Tower.

As Prester Kleig entered the Secret Room and at a signal all the many doors behind him, along that interminable stairway, swung shut and were tightly locked, the news-gatherer raced for the microphone and gave the "priority" signal to the operator. Millions of people would not only hear the words of the news-gatherer, but would see him, note the expressions which chased one another across his face. For television was long since an accomplished, everyday fact.

"Prester Kleig, of this government's Secret Service, has just returned to the United Americas! Your informer has just seen him step from the monoplane of Carlos Kane, atop the Capitol Building, and repair at once to the Secret Room, closely guarded. But I

saw his face, and though he is under forty, he seems twice that. And you know now what this country has only guessed at before—that he has seen Moyen. Moyen the half-man, half-god, the enigma of the ages. What does Prester Kleig think of this man? He doesn't say, for he dares not speak, yet. But your informer saw his face, and it is old and twisted with terror! And —"

That ended the discourse of the news-gatherer, and it was many hours before the public really understood. For, with a new sentence but half completed, the picture of the news-gatherer faded blackly off the screens in a million homes, and his voice was blotted out by a humming that mounted to a terrific appalling shriek! Some terrible agency, about which people who knew their radio could only guess, had drowned out the words of the news-gatherer, leaving the public stunned and bewildered, almost groping before a feeling of terror which was all the more unbearable because none could give it a name.

And the public had heard but a fraction of the truth—merely that Kleig had come back. It had been the

intention of the government to deny the public even this knowledge, and it had; but knowledge of the denial itself was public property, which filled the hearts of men and women all through the Western Hemisphere with nameless dread. And over all this abode of countless millions hovered the shadow of Moyen.

The government tried to correct the impression which the news-gatherer had given out.

"Prester Kleig is back," said the radio, while the government speaker tried, for the benefit of those who could see him, to smile reassuringly. "But there is nothing to cause anyone the slightest concern. He has seen Moyen, yes, and has heard him speak, but still there is nothing to distress anyone, and the whole story will be given to you as soon as possible. Kleig has gone into the Secret Room, yes, but every operative of the government, when discussing business connected with diplomatic relations with foreign powers, is received in the Secret Room. No cause for worry!"

It was so easy to say that, and the speaker realized it, which was why he could but with difficulty make his smile seem reassuring.

"Tell us the truth, and tell us quickly," might have been the voiceless cries of those who listened and saw the face and fidgeting form of the speaker. But the words were not spoken, because the people sensed a hovering horror, a dread catastrophe beyond the power of words to express—and so looked at one another in silence, their eyes wide with dread, their hearts throbbing to suffocation with nameless foreboding.

So eyes were horror-haunted, and men walked, flew, and rode in fear and trembling—while, down in the Secret Room, Prester Kleig and a dozen old men, men wise in the ways of science and invention, wise in the ways of men and of beasts, of Nature and the Infinite Outside, decided the fate of the Nation.

That Secret Room was closed to every one. Not even the news-gatherers could reach it; not even the all-seeing eye of the telephotograph emblazoned to the

world its secrets.

But *was* it secret?

Perhaps Moyen, the master mobster, smiled when he heard men say so, men who knew in their hearts that Moyen regarded other earthlings as earthlings regard children and their toys. Did the eyes of Moyen gaze even into the depths of the Secret Room, hundreds of feet below even the documentary-treasure vaults of the Capitol?

No one knew the answer to the question, but the radio, reporting the return of Kleig, had given the public a distorted vision of an embodied fear, and in its heart the public answered "Yes!" And what had drowned out the voice of the radio-reporter?

No wonder that, for many hours, a nation waited in fear and trembling, eyes filled with dread that was nameless and absolute, for word from the Secret Room. Fear mounted and mounted as the hours passed and no word came.

In that room Prester Kleig and the twelve old men, one of whom was the country's President, held counsel with the man who had come back. But before the spoken counsel had been held, awesome and awe-inspiring pictures had flashed across the screen, invented by a third of the old men, from which the world held no secrets, even the secrets of Moyon.

With this mechanism, guarded at forfeit of the lives of a score of men, the men of the Secret Room could peer into even the most secret places of the world. The old men had peered, and had seen things which had blanched their pale cheeks anew. And when they had finished, and the terrible pictures had faded out, a voice had spoken suddenly, like an explosion, in the Secret Room.

"Well, gentlemen, are you satisfied that resistance is futile?"

Just the voice; but to one man in the Secret Room, and to the others when his numbing lips spoke the name, it was far more than enough. For not even the wisest of the great men could explain how, as they

knew, having just seen him there, a man could be in Madagascar while his voice spoke aloud in the Secret Room, where even radio was barred!

The name on the lips of Prester Kleig!

"Moyen! Moyen!"

Chapter 5: *Monsters of the Deep*

"Gentlemen," said Prester Kleig as he entered the Secret Room, where sat the scientists and inventive geniuses of the Americas, "we haven't much time, and I shall waste but little of it. Moyen is ready to strike, if he hasn't already done so, as I believe. We will see in a matter of seconds. Professor Maniel, we shall need, first of all, your apparatus for returning the vibratory images of events which have transpired within the last thirty-six hours.

"I wish to show those of you who failed to see it the sinking of the *Stellar*, on which I was a passenger and, I believe, the only survivor."

Professor Maniel strangely mouse-like save for the ponderous dome of his forehead, stepped away from the circular table without a word. He had invented the machine in question, and he was inordinately proud of it. Through its use he could pick up the

sounds, and the pictures, of events which had transpired down the past centuries, from the tinkling of the cymbals of Miriam to all the horror of the conflict men had called the Great War, simply by drawing back from the ether, as the sounds fled outward through space, those sounds and vibrations which he needed.

His science was an exact one, more carefully exact even than the measurement of the speed of light, taking into consideration the dispersion of sound and movement, and the element of time.

The interior of the Secret Room became dark as Maniel labored with his minute machinery. Only behind the screen on the wall in rear of the table was there light.

The voice of Maniel began to drone as he thought aloud.

"There is a matter of but a few minutes difference in time between Washington and the last recorded location of the *Stellar*. The sinking occurred at ten-

thirty last evening you say, Kleig? Ah, yes, I have it! Watch carefully, gentlemen!"

So silent were the Secret Agents one could not even have heard the breathing of one of them, for on the screen, misty at first, but becoming moment by moment bolder of outline, was the face of a storm-tossed sea. The liner was slower in forming, and was slightly out of focus for a second or two.

"Ah," said Professor Maniel. "There it is!"

Through the sound apparatus came the roaring and moaning of a storm at sea. On the screen the *Stellar* rose high on the waves, dropped into the trough, while spumes of black smoke spread rearward on the waters from her spouting funnels. Figures were visible on her decks, figures which seemed carved in bronze.

In the prow, every expression on his face plainly visible, stood Prester Kleig himself, and as his picture appeared he was in the act of turning.

"Now," said Kleig himself, there in the Secret Room, "look off to the left, gentlemen, a mile from the *Stellar*!"

A rustling sound as the scientists shifted in their places.

They all saw it, and a gasp burst from their lips as though at a signal. For, as the *Stellar* seemed about to plunge off the shadowed screen into the Secret Room, a flying thing had risen out of the sea—an airplane with a bulbous body and queerly slanting wings.

At the same time, out of the mouth of the pictured figure of Prester Kleig, clear and agonized as the tones of a bell struck in frenzy, the words:

"Great God! Lower the boats! Lower the boats! For God's sake lower the boats!"

In the Secret Room the real Prester Kleig spoke again.

"When the black streak leaves the nose of the plane,

after it has submerged, Professor Maniel," said Kleig softly, "slow your mechanism so that we can see the whole thing in detail."

There came a grunted affirmative from Professor Maniel.

The nose of the pictured plane tilted over, diving down for the surface of the sea.

"Now!" snapped Kleig. "Don't wait!"

Instantly the moving pictures on the screen reduced their speed, and the plane appeared to stop its sudden seaward plunge and to drop down as lightly as a feather. The wings of the thing moved forward slowly, folding into the body of the dropping plane.

"They fold forward," said Kleig quietly, "so that the speed of the plane in the take-off will snap them *backward* into position for flying!"

No one spoke, because the explanation was so obvious.

Slowly the airplane went down to the surface of the sea, with scarcely a plume of spindrift leaping back after she had struck. She dropped to ten feet below the surface of the water, a hundred yards off the starboard beam of the *Stellar*, her blunt nose pointing squarely at the side of the doomed liner.

"Now," said Kleig hoarsely, "watch closely, for God's sake!"



[Image description start. A black and white illustration showing several white men gathered at a table in a dark room, watching a picture on the wall. Many of them wear glasses, and all are in suits, with faces wrinkled with age. Image description end.]

The liner rose and fell slowly. Out of the nose of the plane, which had now become a tiny submarine, started a narrow tube of black, oddly like the sepia of a giant squid. Straight toward the side of the liner it went. Above the rail the Secret Agents could see the pictured form of Prester Kleig, hand upraised. The black streak reached the side of the *Stellar*.

It touched the metal plates, spreading upon impact, growing, enlarging, to right and left, upward and downward, and where it touched the *Stellar* the black of it seemed to erase that portion of the ship. In the slow motion every detail was apparent. At regular speed the blotting out of the *Stellar* would have been instantaneous.

Kleig saw himself rise slowly from the vanished rail, turning over and over, going down to the sea. He almost closed his eyes, bit his lips to keep back the cries of terror when he saw the others aboard the liner rise, turn over and over, and fly in all directions like jackstraws in a high wind.

The ship was erased from beneath passengers and

crew, and passengers and crew fell into the sea. Out of the depths, from all directions, came the starving denizens of the sea—starving because liners now were so few.

"That's enough of that, Professor," snapped Kleig.

"Now jump ahead approximately eight hours, and see if you can pick up that aero-sub after it dropped me on the Jersey Coast."

The picture faded out quickly, the screaming of doomed human beings, already hours dead, called back to apparent living by the genius of Maniel died away, and for a space the screen was blank.

Then, the sea again, storm-tossed as before, shifting here and there as Maniel sought in the immensity of sea and sky for the thing he desired.

"Two hundred miles south by east of New York City," he droned. "There it is, gentlemen!"

They all saw it then, in full flight, eight thousand feet above the surface of the Atlantic, traveling south by

east at a dizzy rate of speed.

"Note," said Kleig, "that it keeps safely to the low altitudes, in order to escape the notice of regular air traffic."

No one answered.

The eyes of the Secret Agents were on that flashing, bulbous-bodied plane of the strange wings. It appeared to be heading directly for some objective which must be reached at top speed.

For fifteen minutes the flight continued. Then the plane tilted over and dived, and at an altitude still of three thousand feet, the wings slashed forward, clicking into their notches in the sides of the bulbous body, with a sound like the ratchets on subway turnstiles, and, holding their breath, the Secret Agents watched it plummet down to the sea. It was traveling with terrific speed when it struck, yet it entered the water with scarcely a splash.

Then, for the first time, an audible gasp, as that of

one person, came from the lips of the Secret Agents. For now they could see the objective of the aero-sub. A monster shadow in the water, at a depth of five hundred feet. A shadow which, as Maniel manipulated his instruments, became a floating underwater fortress, ten times the size of any submarine known to the Americas.

Sporting like porpoises about this held-in-suspension fortress were myriads of other aero-sub, maneuvering by squadrons and flights, weaving in and out like schools of fish. The plane which had borne Prester Kleig churned in between two of the formations, and vanished into the side of the motionless monster of the deep.

The striking of a deep sea bell, muted by tons and tons of water, sounded in the Secret Room.

"Don't turn it off, Maniel," said Kleig. "There's more yet!"

And there was, for the sound of the bell was a signal. The aero-sub, darting outward from the side of the

floating fortress like fish darting out of seaweed, were plunging up toward the surface of the Atlantic. Breathlessly the Secret Agents watched them.

They broke water like flying fish, and their wings shot backward from their notches in the myriad bulbous bodies to click into place in flying position as the scores of aero-subbs took the air above the invisible hiding places of the mother submarine.

At eight thousand feet the aero-subbs swung into battle formation and, as though controlled by word of command, they maneuvered there like one vast machine of a central control—beautiful as the flight of swallows, deadly as anything that flew.

The Secret Agents swept the cold sweat from their brows, and sighs of terror escaped them all.

At that moment came the voice, loud in the Secret Room, which Kleig at least immediately recognized:

"Well, gentlemen, are you satisfied that resistance is futile?"

And Kleig whispered the name, over and over again.

"Moyen! Moyen!"

It was Prester Kleig, Master of the Secret Room, who was the first to regain control after the nerve-numbing question which, asked in far Madagascar, was heard by the Agents in the Secret Room.

"No!" he shouted. "No! No! Moyen, in the end we will beat you!"

Only silence answered, but deep in the heart of Prester Kleig sounded a burst of sardonic laughter—the laughter of Moyen, half-god of Asia. Then the voice again:

"The attack is beginning, gentlemen! Within an hour you will have further evidence of the might of Moyen!"

Chapter 6: *Vanishing Ships*

Prester Kleig, ordered to Madagascar from the Secret Room, had been merely an operative, honored above others in that he had been one of the few, at that time, ever to visit the Secret Room. Now, however, because he had walked closer to Moyen than anyone else, he assumed leadership almost by natural right, and the men who had once deferred to him took orders from him.

"Gentlemen," he snapped, while the last words of Moyen still hung in the air of the Secret Room, "we must fight Moyen from here. The best brains in the United Americas are gathered here, and if Moyen can be beaten—*if* he can be beaten—he will be beaten from the Secret Room!"

A sigh from the lips of Professor Maniel. The President of the United Americas nodded his head, as though he too mutely gave authority into the hands of Prester Kleig. The other Secret Agents shifted slightly, but said nothing.

"I have been away a year," said Kleig, "as you know, and many things have come into regular use since I left. Professor Maniel's machine for example, upon which he was working when I departed under orders. There will be further use for it in our struggle with Moyen. Professor, will you kindly range the ocean, beginning at once, and see how many of these monsters of Moyen we have to contend with?"

Professor Maniel turned back to his instruments, which he fondled with gentle, loving hands.

"We have nothing with which to combat the attacking forces of Moyen," went on Kleig, "save antiquated airplanes, and such obsolete warships as are available. These will be mere fodder for the guns, or rays, or whatever it is that Moyen uses in his aero-subs. Thousands, perhaps millions, of human lives will be lost; but better this than that Moyen rule the West! Better this than that our women be given into the hands of this mob as spoils of war!"

From the Secret Agents a murmur of assent.

And then, that voice again, startling, clear, with the slightest suggestion of some Oriental accent, in the Secret Room.

"Do not depend too much, gentlemen," it said, "upon your antiquated warships! See, I am merciful, in that I do not allow you to send them against me loaded with men to be slaughtered or drowned! Professor Maniel, I would ask you to turn that plaything of yours and gaze upon the fleet of obsolete ships anchored in Hampton Roads! In passing, Professor, I venture to guess that the secret of how I am able to talk with you gentlemen, here in your Secret Room, is no secret at all to you. Now look!"

The Secret Agents gasped again, in consternation.

From the white lips of mouselike Maniel came mumbled words, even as his hands worked with lightning speed.

"His machine is simply a variation of my own. And, gentlemen, compatriots, with it he could as easily project himself, bodily, here into the room with us!"

Something like a suppressed scream from one of the men present. A cold hand of ice about the heart of Prester Kleig. But the words of Professor Maniel were limned on the retina of his brain in letters of fire. Suppose Moyen *were* to project himself into the Secret Room....

But he would not. He was no fool, and even these Secret Agents, most of whom were old and no longer strong, would have torn him limb from limb. But those words of Maniel set whirling once more, and in a new direction, the thoughts of Prester Kleig.

"Mr. President, gentlemen...." It was the voice of Professor Maniel.

All eyes turned again to the screen upon which the professor worked his miracles, which today were commonplaces, which yesterday had been undreamed of. Every Secret Agent recognized the outlines of Hampton Roads, with Norfolk and its towering buildings in the background, and the obsolete warships riding silently at anchor in the roadstead.

For three years they had been there, while a procrastinating Cabinet, Congress and Senate had debated their permanent disposal. They represented millions of dollars in money, and were utterly worthless. Prester Kleig, looking at them now, could see them putting out to sea, loaded with brave-visaged men, volunteering to go to sure destruction to feed the rapacity of Moyen's hordes. Men going out to sea in tubs, singing....

But these ships were silent. No plumes of smoke from their funnels. Like floating mausoleums, filled with dead hopes, shells of past and departed glories.

The beating of waves against their sides could plainly be heard. The anchor chains squeaked rustily in the hawse-holes. Wind sighed through regal, towering superstructures, and no man walked the decks of any one of them.

With bated breath the Secret Agents watched.

Why had Moyen bidden them turn their attention to these shells of erstwhile naval grandeur?

This time no gasps broke from the lips of the Secret Agents. Not even the sound of breathing could be heard. Just the sighing of wind through the superstructures of a hundred ships, the whispering of waves against rusted bulkheads.

Almost imperceptibly at first the towering dreadnought in the foreground began to move! Slowly, the water swirling about her, she backed away from her anchor, tightening the curve of the anchor chain! Water quivered about the point of the chain's contact with the waves!

Quickly the eyes of the Secret Agents swept along the street of ships. The same backward motion, of dragging against their anchor chains, was visible at the bow of each warship!

With not a soul aboard them, the ships were waking into strange and awesome life, dragging at their anchors, like hounds pulling at leashes to be free and away!

"How are they doing it?" It was almost a whisper from

the President.

"Some electro-magnetic force, sir!" stated Prester Kleig. "Professor Blaine, that is your province! Please note what is happening, and advise us at once if you see how they are doing it!"

A grunt of affirmation from surly, obese Professor Blaine.

All eyes turned back again to the miracle of the moving ships. One by one, with crashes which echoed and re-echoed through the Secret Room, the anchor chains of the dreadnoughts parted. The ends of them swung from the prows of the warships, while the severed portions splashed into the Roads, and the waters hid them from view.

The great dreadnought in the foreground swung slowly about until her prow was pointed in the direction of the open sea, and though no sea was running, no smoke rose from her funnels, she got slowly, ponderously under way, and started out the Roads. Behind her, in formation, the other ships

swung into line.

In a matter of seconds, faster than any of these vessels had ever traveled before, they were racing in column for the open Atlantic. And from the sound apparatus came wails and shrieks of terror, the lamentations of men and women frightened as they had never been frightened before.

The shores behind the moving column of ships was moment by moment growing blacker with people—a black sea of people, whose faces were white as chalk with terror.

But on, out to sea, moved the column of brave ships.

A new note entered into the picture, as from all sides airplanes of many makes swooped in, and swept back and forth over the moving ships, while hooded heads looked out of pits, and faces of pilots were aghast at what they saw.

A ghost column of ships, moving out to sea, speed increasing moment by moment unbelievably. Even

now, five minutes after the first dreadnought had started seaward, the wake of each ship spread away on either hand in the two sides of a watery triangle whose walls were a dozen feet high—racing for the shores with all the sullen majesty of tidal waves.

The crowds gave back, and their screams rose into the air in a frightened roar of appalling sound.

Even now, so rapidly did the warships travel, many of the planes could throttle down, so that they flew directly above the heaving decks of the runaway warships.

"Get word to them!" cried Prester Kleig suddenly.

"Get word to them that if they follow the ships out to sea not a pilot will escape alive!"

One of the Secret Agents rose and hurried from the Secret Room, traveling at top speed for the first of the many doors enroute to the broadcasting tower from which all the planes could be reached at once. Prester Kleig turned back to the magic screen of Maniel.

The warships, water thrown aside by the lifting thrust of their forefeet in mountains that raced landward with ever-increasing fury, were clearing the Roads and swinging south by east, heading into the wastes of the Atlantic. As they cleared the land, and open water for unnumbered miles lay ahead, the speed of the mighty ships increased to a point where they rode as high on the water as racing launches, and the creaking and groaning of their rusty bolts and spars were a continual paeon of protest in the sound apparatus accompanying the showing of the miracle on the screen.

"They're heading straight for the spot where that super-submarine lies!" said the President, and no one answered him.

Prester Kleig, watching, was racing over in his mind what he could recall of his country's armament. Warships were useless, as was being proved here before his eyes. But there still remained airplanes, in countless numbers, which could be diverted from ocean travel and from routine business, to battle this menace of Moyen.

But....

He shuddered as he pictured in his mind's eye the meeting of his country's flower of flying manhood with the monsters of Moyon.

His eyes, as he thought, were watching the racing of those ocean greyhounds, out to sea. They were now out of sight of land, and still some of the planes followed them.

A half hour passed, and then....

The American pilots, in obedience to the radio signals, turning back from this strange phenomenon of the ghost column of capital ships.

Simultaneously, out of the sky dead ahead, dropped the first flight of Moyon's aero-sub.

At the same moment the mysterious power which had dragged the ships to sea was withdrawn, and the warships, with no hands to guide them, swung whither they willed, and floated in as many directions

as there were ships, under their forward momentum. There were a score of collisions, and some of the ships were in sinking condition even before the aero-sub began their labors.

The remaining ships floated high out of the water, because they carried no ballast, and from all sides the aero-sub of Moyon settled to the task of destruction—destruction which was simply a warning of what was to come: Moyon's manner of proving to the Americas the fact that he was all-powerful.

"God, what fools!" cried Prester Kleig.

The rearmost of the American aviators had looked back, had seen the first of the aero-sub drop down among the doomed ships. Instantly he turned out to sea again, signalling as he did so to the nearest other planes. And in spite of the radio warning a hundred planes answered that signal and swept back to investigate this new mystery.

"They're going to death!" groaned the President.

"Yes," said Kleig, softly, "but it saves us ordering others to death. Perhaps we may learn something of value as we watch them die!"

Chapter 7: *Golden Oblivion*

"This," said Prester Kleig, as coldly precise as a judge pronouncing sentence of death, "will precipitate the major engagement with Moyen's forces. The fools, to rush in like this, when they have been warned! But even so, they are magnificent!"

The pilots of the aero-sub must instantly have noticed the return of the American pilots, for some of the aero-sub which had dropped to the ocean's surface rose again almost instantly, and swept into battle formation above the drifting hulks of the warships.

The Americans were wary. They drew together like frightened chickens when a hawk hovers above them, and watched the activities of the aero-sub, every move of each one being at the same time visible and audible to the Secret Agents in the Capitol's Secret

Room.

The aero-sub which had submerged singled out their particular prey among the floating ships, and the Secret Agents, trying to see how each separate act of destruction was accomplished, watched the aero-sub in the foreground, which happened to be concentrating on the dreadnought which had led the ghost-march of the warships out to sea.

The aero-sub circled the swaying dreadnought as a shark circles a wreck, and through the walls of the aero-sub the watchers in the Secret Room could see the four-man crew of the thing. Grim faced men, men of the Orient they plainly were, coldly concentrating on the work in hand. Their faces were those of men who are merciless, even brutal, with neither heart nor compassion of any kind for weaker ones. One man maneuvered the aero-sub, while the other three concentrated on the apparatus in the nose of the hybrid vessel.

"See," spoke Prester Kleig again, "if you can tell what manner of ray they use, and how it is projected.

That's your province, General Munson!"

From the particular Secret Agent named, who was expert for war in the membership of the Secret Room, came a short grunt of affirmation. A few murmured words.

"I'll be able to tell more about it when I see how they operate when they are flying. That black streak under water ... well, I must see it out of the water, and then...."

But here General Munson ended, for the aero-sub which they were especially watching had got into action against the dreadnought.

The aero-sub was motionless and submerged just off the port bow of the dreadnought. The three men inside the aero-sub were working swiftly and efficiently with the complicated but minute machinery in the nose of their transport.

"It can be controlled, then, this ray," said Munson, interrupting himself. "Watch!"

From the nose of the aero-sub leaped, like a streak of black lightning, that ebon agency of death. It struck the prow of the battleship—and the prow, as far aft as the well-deck, simply vanished from sight, disintegrated! It was as though it had never been, and for a second, so swiftly had it happened, the water of the ocean held the impression that portion of the warship had made—as an explosive leaves a crater in the soil of earth!

Then a drumming roar as the sea rushed in to claim its own. The roaring, as of a Niagara, as the waters claimed the ship, rushing down passageways into the hold, possessing the warship with all the invincible, speedy might of the sea.

Mingled with this roaring was the shivering, vibratory sound which Prester Kleig had experienced in his half-dream. The sound was so intense that it fairly rocked the Secret Room to its furthestmost cranny.

For a second the dreadnought, wounded to death, seemed to shudder, to hesitate, then to move backward as though wincing from her death blow. It

was the pound of the intrushing waters which did it. Then up came the stern of the mighty ship, as she started her last long plunge into the depths.

But attention had swung to another warship, on the starboard beam of which another aero-sub had taken up position. Again the ebon streak of death from her blunt nose, smashing in and through the warship, directly amidships, cutting her in twain as though the black streak had been a pair of shears, the warship a strip of tissue paper.

Up went the prow and the stern of this one, and together, the water separating the two parts as it rushed into the gap, the broken warship went down to its final resting place.

Abruptly Professor Maniel swung back to the American planes which had come back to investigate the activities of the aero-sub, and on the screen, in the midst of the battle formation into which the pilots had swept to hurriedly, the Secret Agents could see the faces of those pilots....

White as chalk with fear, mouths open in gasping unbelief. One man, a pale-faced youth, was the first to recover. He stared around at his compatriots, and plainly through the sound apparatus in the Secret Room came his swift radio signals.

"Attack! Who will follow me against these people?"

His signals were very plain. So, too, were the answers of the other pilots, and the heart of Prester Kleig swelled with pride as he listened to the answering signals—and counted them, discovered that every last pilot there present elected to stay with this youngster, to avenge their country for this contemptuous insult which had been put upon her by the rape of Hampton Roads.

Into swift formation they swept, and with these planes—all planes in use were required by franchise of operating companies to be equipped for the emergencies of war—swung into an echelon formation, the youthful pilot leading by mutual consent.

They swept at full speed toward the warships, four of which had by this time been sent to destruction—one of which had appeared to vanish utterly in the space of a single heartbeat, so quickly that for a second or two the shape of its bilge, the bulge of its keel, was visible in the face of the deep—and openly challenged the aero-sub.

Muzzles of compressed air guns projected from the wing-tips of the planes. Buttons were pressed which elevated the muzzles of guns arranged to fire upward from either side the fighting pits, twin guns that were fired downward from the same central magazine—the only guns in use in the Americas which fired in opposite directions at the same time.

But for a few moments the aero-sub refused combat. Their speed was terrific, dazzling. They eluded the thrusts, the dives and plunges of the American ships as easily as a swallow eludes the dive of a buzzard.

It came to Prester Kleig, however, that the aero-sub were merely playing with the Americans; that when they elected to move, the planes would be blasted

from the sky as easily as the warships were being erased from the surface of the Atlantic.

One by one, as methodically as machines, the aero-sub pilots blasted the warships into nothingness. They had their orders, and they went about their performance with a rigidity of discipline which astounded the Secret Agents. They had been ordered to destroy the warships, and they were doing that first—would go on to completion of this task, no matter how many American planes buzzed about their ears.

But one by one as the warships sank, the aero-sub which had either sunk or erased them made the surface and leaped into space with a snapping back of wings that was horribly businesslike as to sound, and climbed up to take part in the fight against the American planes, which must inevitably come.

The last warship, cut squarely in two from stem to stern along her center, as though split thus by a bolt of lightning, fell apart like pieces of cake, and splashed down, sinking away while the spume of her

disintegration rolled back from her fallen sides in white-crested waves.

"It exemplifies the policies of Moyen," said Prester Kleig, "for his conquest of the world is a conquest of destruction."

The last aero-sub took to the sky, and the Americans rushed into battle with fine disregard for what they knew must be certain death. They were not fools, exactly, and they had seen, but not understood, the manner in which those gallant old hounds of the sea had been erased from existence.

But in they went, plunging squarely into the heart of the aero-sub's leading formation, which formation consisted of three aero-sub's, flying a wing and wing formation.

The young American signaled with upraised hand, and the American pilots made their first move. Every plane started rolling, at dazzling speed, on the axis of its fuselage, while bullets spewed from the guns that fired through the propellers.

Bullets smashed into the leading aero-sub, with no apparent effect, though for a second it seemed that the central aero-sub of the leading formation hesitated for a moment in flight.

Then, swift as had that black streak flashed from the nose of aero-sub submerged, a streak darted from the nose of the central aero-sub, and glistened in the sun like molten gold!

It touched the youngster who had called for volunteers for his attack against this strange enemy. It touched his plane—and the plane vanished instantly, while for a fraction of a second the pilot was visible in his place, in the posture of sitting, hand on a row of buttons which did not exist, head forward slightly as he aimed guns that had vanished.

Then the pilot, still living, apparently unhurt, plunged down eight thousand feet to the sea. The water geysered up as he struck, then closed over the spot, and the gallant American youngster had become the first victim in battle of the monsters of Moya.

Victim of a slender lancet of what seemed to be golden lightning.

"He could have killed the pilot aloft there," came quietly from Munson, "but he chose to pull his plane away from around him! Their control of the ray is miraculous!"

As though to confirm the statement of Munson, the leading aero-sub struck again, a second plane. The plane vanished, but from the spot where it had flown, not even a bit of metal or of man sufficiently large to be seen by the delicate recording instruments of Maniel dropped out of the sky.

The ray of gold was a ray of oblivion if the minions of Moyen willed.

Chapter 8: *Charmion*

"Prester Kleig," came suddenly into the Secret Room the voice of far distant Moyan, "you will at once make a change in your rules regarding the admission of other than Secret Agents to the Secret Room. You will at once see that Charmion Kane, sister of your friend, is allowed to enter!"

"God Almighty!" A cry of agony from the lips of Prester Kleig. He had not forgotten Charmion, but simply had had to move so swiftly that he had put her out of his mind. For a year he had not seen her, and an hour or two more could not matter greatly.

"And her brother Carlos," went on the voice, "see that he, too, is admitted. I wish, for certain reasons, that Charmion come unharmed through the direct attack I am about to make against your country. I confess that, save for this ability to speak to you, I am unable to work any damage to the Secret Room, which is therefore the safest place for Charmion Kane! Carlos Kane is being spared because he is her brother!"

There was no mistaking the import of this sinister command from Moyen. He had singled out Charmion, the best beloved of Prester Kleig, for his attentions, and that he was sure of the success of his attack against the United Americas was proved by the calm assurance of his voice, and the fact that, concentrating on the attack as he must be, he still found time for a thought of Charmion Kane.

The hand of ice which had seldom been absent from the heart of Kleig since he had first seen and heard the voice of Moyen gripped him anew. Blood pounded maddeningly in his temples. Cold sweat bathed his body.

But the rest of the Secret Agents, save to freeze into immobility when the hated voice spoke, gave no sign. They had worries of their own, for no instructions had been given that they bring their own loved ones into the sanctuary of the Secret Room.

As though answering the thoughts of the others, the hated voice spoke again.

"I regret that I cannot arrange for sanctuary for the loved ones of all of you, for you are gallant antagonists; why save the few, when the many must perish? For I know you will not surrender, however much I have proved to you that I am invincible. But Charmion Kane must be saved."

"God!" whispered Kleig. "God!"

Then spoke General Munson.

"I think this ray which the Moyenites use is a variation of the principle used in the intricate machinery of Professor Maniel, though how they render it visible I do not know. But it doesn't matter, and may be only a blind! You'll note that when the black streak, or the golden ray, strikes anything that thing instantly disintegrates. A certain pitch of resonance will break a pane of glass. It's a matter of vibration, solely, wherein the molecules composing any object animate or inanimate, are hurled in all directions instantaneously.

"Professor Maniel's apparatus, the Vibration-Retarder,

is able to recapture the vibrations, speeding outward endlessly through space, and to reconstruct, and *draw back* to visibility the objects destroyed by this visible vibratory ray, whatever it is. This problem, then, falls into the province of Professor Maniel!"

Through the heart and soul of Prester Kleig there suddenly flowed a great surge of hope.

"General Munson, if you will operate the machinery of the Vibration-Retarder, I wish to talk with Professor Maniel!"

Instantly, efficiently, without a word in reply to the eager command of Prester Kleig, General Munson relieved Professor Maniel at the apparatus which Maniel called the Vibration-Retarder, his invention which he had combined with audible televue to complete this visual miracle of the Secret Room. Professor Maniel stepped to where Prester Kleig was sitting.

Prester Kleig put fingers to his lips for silence, and an expression of surprise crossed the wrinkled dead-

white face of the Professor.

Before Kleig could speak, however, there came a signal from somewhere outside the Secret Room, a signal which said that the doors were being opened and that a personage was coming. The Secret Agents looked at one another in surprise, for every man who had a right to be inside the Secret Room was already present.

"I know," said Kleig, his face a mask of terror. "It is Charmion and Carlos Kane! Moyen, the devil, has managed to make sure of obedience to his orders!"

The Secret Agents turned back to the screen, upon which the view of the first aerial brush of the American flyers with the minions of Moyen, in their aero-sub, was drawing to a terrible close.

For, as the aero-sub commanders had played with the warships, which had no human beings aboard them, so now did they play with the planes of the Americas.

One American flyer, startled into a frenzy by the fate

of his fellows, put his helicopter into action, and leaped madly out of the midst of the battle. Instantly an aero-sub zoomed, skyward after him. Again that golden streak of light from the nose of an aero-sub, and the helicopter vanes and the slender staff upon whose tip they whirled vanished, shorn short off above the vane-grooves in the top of the wing!

The plane dropped away, fluttering like a falling leaf for a moment, before the aviator started his three propellers again.

A cheer broke from the lips of Prester Kleig as he watched. The commander of that particular aero-sub, apparently contemptuous of this flyer who had tried to cut out of the fight, allowed him to fall away unmolested—and the American, driven berserk by the casual, contemptuous treatment accorded him by this strange enemy, zoomed the second his propellers whirred into top-speed action, and raced up the sky toward the belly of the aero-sub.

"If only the aero-sub has a blind spot!" cried Prester Kleig.

In that instant a roaring crash sounded in the Secret Room as the American plane, going full speed, crashed, propellers foremost, into the belly of the aero-sub.

And the aero-sub, whose brothers had seemed until this moment invincible, did not escape the wrath of the American—though the American went into oblivion with it!

For, welded together, American plane and aero-sub started the eight thousand feet plunge downward to the sea!

"Watch!" shrieked Munson. "Watch!"

As the aero-sub and the plane plunged down through the formation of fighters, the aero-sub pilots saw it, and they fled in wild dismay and at top speed from their falling compatriot. Why? For a moment it was not apparent. And then it was.

For out of the body of the doomed aero-sub came sheets of golden flame! Not the flames of fire, but the

golden sheen of that streak which the aero-sub had used against the American planes already out of the fight! The American flyer had crashed into the container, whatever it was, that harnessed the agency through which the minions of Moyon had destroyed the *Stellar*, and the battleships raped from Hampton Roads!

"It is liquid, then!" shrieked Munson.

And it seemed to be. For a second the golden mantle, strange, awe-inspiring, bathed and rendered invisible the aero-sub and the plane which had slain her. Then the golden flame vanished utterly, instantly—and in the air where it had been there was nothing! The aero-sub was gone, and the plane whose mad charge had erased her.

"Her own death dealing agency destroyed her!" shrieked Munson. "And the other aero-sub cut away from the fight to save themselves, because they too carry death and destruction within them!"

Then the inner door of the Secret Room opened and

two people entered. One of them, a dazzling beauty with glorious black hair and the tread of a princess, a picture of perfection from jeweled sandals to coiffured hair, was Charmion Kane. Behind her came her brother, whose face was chalky white. But Charmion, as she crossed to Kleig and kissed him, while her eyes were luminous with love, held her head proudly high, imperious.

"I know," she said softly to Kleig, "and I am not afraid! I know you will prevent it!"

Kleig waved the two to chairs and turned again to Professor Maniel.

On a piece of paper he wrote swiftly, using a mode of shorthand known only to the Secret Agents.

"Professor," he wrote feverishly, "can you reverse the process used in your Vibration-Retarder? Tell me with your eyes, for Moyen may even know this writing, and I am sure he hears what we say here, may even be able to see us?"

Professor Maniel started and stared deeply into the eyes of Prester Kleig. His face grew thoughtful. He brushed his slender hand over the massive dome of his brow. Hope burned high in the heart of Prester Kleig.

Then, despite Kleig's instructions to answer merely by the expression in his eyes, Professor Maniel leaned forward and wrote quickly on the piece of paper Kleig had used.

"Two hours!"

Nothing else, no explanations; but Prester Kleig knew. Maniel believed he could do it, but he needed two hours in which to perfect his theory and make it workable. Kleig knew that had he been able to do it in two years, or two decades, it still would have been in the nature of a miracle.

But two hours....

And Moyen had said that he was preparing to attack at once.

In two hours Moyer, unless the Americas fought against him with every resource at their command, could depopulate half the Western World. Kleig looked back to the screen.

There was not a single American plane in the sky above the graveyard of those vanished warships. And the aero-sub, swift flying as the wind, were racing back to the mother ship, scores of miles away.

Munson worked with the Vibration-Retarder, the Sound-and-Vision devices, ranging the sea off the coast to either side of that huge, suspended fortress which was the mother submarine of the aero-sub.

Gasps of terror, though the sight was not unexpected, broke from the lips of every person in the Secret Room.

For super-monsters of Moyer were moving to the attack.

Chapter 9: Flowers of Martyrdom

For a minute the Secret Agents were appalled by the air of might of the deep-sea monsters of Moyon, brought bodily, almost into the Secret Room by the activities of General Munson at the Sound-and-Vision apparatus.

Off the coast, miles away, yet looming moment by moment larger, indicating the deceptively swift speed of the monsters, were scores of the great under-water fortresses, traveling toward the coast of the United Americas in a far-flung formation, each submarine separated from its neighbor to right and left by something like a hundred miles, easy cruising radius for the little aero-subbs carried inside the monsters.

That each submarine did carry such spawn of Satan was plainly seen, for as the great submarines moved landward, scores of aero-subbs sported gleefully about the mother ships. There was no counting the number of them.

Two hours Maniel needed for his labors, which meant

that for two hours the flower of the country's manhood must try to hold in check the mighty hordes of Moyon.

"Somewhere there," stated Prester Kleig, "in one or the other of those monsters, is Moyon himself. I know that since he wished Charmion saved for his attentions! Do your work with your apparatus, Munson, while I go out to the radio tower to broadcast an appeal for volunteers. Charmion—Carlos...."

But Prester Kleig found that he could not continue. Not that it was necessary, for Charmion and Carlos knew what was in his mind. Charmion was a lady of vast intelligence, from whom life's little ironies had not been hidden—and Kane and Kleig had already discussed the activities of Moyon where women were concerned.

Prester Kleig hurried to the Central Radio Tower, and as he passed through each of the many doors leading out to the roof of the new Capitol Building the guards at the doors left to form a guard for him, at this

moment the most precious man in the country, because he knew best the terrible trials which faced her.

The country was in turmoil. It seemed almost impossible that a whole day had passed since Prester Kleig had returned and entered the Secret Room. In the meantime a fleet of battleships had been drawn by some mysterious agency out to sea from Hampton Roads, and a fleet of fighting planes which had followed the ghost column outward had not returned.

News-gatherers had spread the stories, distorted and garbled, across the western continents, and throughout the western confederacy men, women and children lived in the throes of the greatest fear that had ever gripped them. Fear held them most because they could not give the cause of their fear a name—save one....

Moyen.... And the name was on the lips of everyone, and frenzied woman stilled their squalling babes with its mention.

No word yet from the Secret Room, but Prester Kleig had scarcely appeared from it than someone started the radio signal which informed the frenzied, waiting world of the west that information, exact if startling, would now be forthcoming.

In millions of homes, in thousands of high-flying planes, listeners tuned in at the clear-all hum.

Prester Kleig wasted no time in preliminaries.

"Prester Kleig speaking. We are threatened by Moyen, with scores of monster submarines, each a mother ship for scores of aero-subs, combinations of airplanes and miniature submarines. They are moving up on our eastern coast, from some secret base which we have not yet located. They are equipped with death dealing instruments of which we have but the most fragmentary knowledge, and for two hours I must call upon all flyers to combat the menace; until the Secret Agents, especially Professor Maniel, have had opportunity to counteract the minions of Moyen.

"Flyers of the United Americas! In the name of our

country I ask that volunteers gather on the eastern coast, each flyer proceeding at once to the nearest coast-landing, after dropping all passengers. Your commanders have already been named by your various organizations, as required by franchise, and orders for the movement of the entire winged armada will come from this station. However, the orders will simply be this: Hold Moyen's forces at bay for a period of two hours! And know that many of you go to certain death, and make your own decisions as to whether you shall volunteer!"

This ended, Prester Kleig, excitement mounting high, hurried back to the Secret Room.

Now the public knew, and as the American public is given to doing, it steadied down when it knew the worst. Fear of the unknown had changed the public into a myriad-souled beast gone berserk. Now that knowledge was exact men grew calm of face, determined, and women assumed the supporting role which down the ages has been that of brave women, mothers of men.

A period of silence for a time after Prester Kleig's pronouncement.

As he entered the first door leading into the Secret Room, Carlos Kane met and passed him with a smile.

"You called for winged volunteers, did you not, Kleig?" he asked quietly.

Kleig nodded. "You are going?" he said.

"Yes. It is my duty."

No other words were necessary, as the men shook hands. Prester Kleig going on to the Secret Room, Carlos Kane going out to join the mighty armada which must fight against the minions of Moyon.

The words of Prester Kleig were heard by the pilots of the sky-lanes. The passenger pits, equipped with self-opening parachutes which dropped jumpers in series of long falls in order to acquire swift but accurate and safe landing—they opened at intervals in long falls of two thousand feet, stayed the fall, then closed again,

so that drops were almost continuous until the last four hundred feet—and pilots, swiftly making up their minds, dropped their passengers, banked their planes, and raced into the east.

All over the Americas pilots dropped their passengers and their loads if their franchises called for the carrying of freight, and banked about to take part in the first skirmish with the Moyenites.

Dropping figures almost darkened the sky as passengers plunged downward after the startling signal from Washington. Flowers, which were the umbrellas of chutes, opened and closed like breathing winged orchids, letting their burdens safely to earth.

And clouds and fleets of airplanes came in from all directions to land, in rows and rows which were endless, wing and wing, along the eastern coast.

Prester Kleig had scarcely entered the Secret Room than the hated voice of Moyen again broke upon the ears of the machinelike Secret Agents.

"This is madness, gentlemen! My people will annihilate yours!"

But, since time for speech had passed, not one of the Secret Agents made answer or paid the slightest heed to the warning, though deep in the heart of each and every one was the belief that Moyon spoke no more than the truth.

Too, there was a growing respect for the half-god of Asia, in that he was good enough to warn them of the holocaust which faced their country.

By hundreds and thousands, wing and wing, airplanes dropped to the Atlantic coast at the closest point of contact, when the signal reached them. At high altitudes, planes crossing the Atlantic turned back and returned at top speed, dropping their passengers as soon as over land. That Moyon made no move to prevent the return of flyers out over the ocean, and now coming back, was an ominous circumstance.

It seemed to show that he held the American flyers, all of them, in utter contempt.

Prester Kleig regarded the time. It had been half an hour since Moyon had spoken of attack, half an hour since the monsters of the deep had started the inexorable move toward land. On the screen the submarines were bulking larger and larger as the moments fled, until it seemed to the Secret Agents that the great composite shadow of them already was sweeping inland from the coast.

As the coast came close ahead of the monster subs the little aero-subs, to the surprise of the Secret Agents, all vanished into their respective mother ships.

"But they have to use them," groaned Munson. "For their submarines are useless in frontal attack against our shores!"

"I am not so sure of that," said Prester Kleig. "For I have a suspicion that those submarines have tractors under their keels, and that they can come out on land! If this is so the monsters can, guarded by armour-plate, penetrate to the very heart of our most populated areas before their aero-subs are released."

None of the Secret Agents as yet had stopped to ponder how the monsters had reached their positions, and why Moyen was attacking from the east, when the Pacific side of the continents would have appeared to be the obvious point of attack, and would have obviated the necessity of long, secret under-sea journeys wherein discovery prematurely must have been one of the many worries of the submarine commanders.

The mere fact of the presence of the monsters was enough. What had preceded their presence was unimportant, save that their presence, and their near approach to the shore undetected, further proved the executive and planning genius of Moyen.

Two miles, on an average, off the eastern coast the submarines laid their eggs—the aero-subs, which darted from the sides of the mother ships in flights and squadrons, made the surface, and leaped into the sky.

Five minutes later and the signal went forth to the phalanx of the volunteers.

"Take off! Fly east and engage the enemy, and hold him in check, and the God of our fathers go with you!"

One hour had passed since Moyen's ultimatum when the first vanguard of the American flyers, obeying the peremptory signal, took the air and darted eastward to meet the winged death-harbingers of Moyen.

Chapter 10: "They Shall Not Pass!"

Prester Kleig's heartfelt desire, as the American flyers closed with the first of the aero-sub, was to go out with them and aid them in the attack against the Moyenites. But he knew, and it was a tacit thing, that he best served his country from the safe haven of the Secret Room.

As he watched the scenes unfold on the screen of Maniel's genius, with occasional glances at the somewhat mysterious but profound and concentrated labors of Maniel, Charmion Kane rose from her place and came to his side.

Wide-eyed as she watched the joining of battle, she stood there, her tiny hand encased in the tense one of Prester Kleig.

"You would like to be out there," she murmured. "I know it! But your country needs you here—and I have already given Carlos!"

Prester Kleig tightened his grip on her hand.

There was deep, silent understanding between these two, and Prester Kleig, in fighting against the Moyenites, realized, even above his realization that his labors were primarily for the benefit of his country, that he really matched wits with Moyen for the sake of Charmion. Had anyone asked him whether he would have sacrificed her for the benefit of his country, it would have been a difficult question to answer.

He was glad that the question was never asked.

"Yes, beloved," he whispered, "I would like to be out there, but the greatest need for me is here."

But even so he felt as though he was betraying those intrepid flyers he was sending to sure death. Yet they had volunteered, and it was the only way.

Maniel, a gnomelike little man with a Titan's brain, labored with his calculations, made swiftly concrete his theories, while at the Sound-and-Vision apparatus excitable General Munson ranged the aerial battlefield to see how the tide of battle ebbed and

flowed.

That neither side would either ask or give quarter was instantly apparent, for they rushed head-on to meet each other, those vast opposing winged armadas, at top speed, and not a single individual swerved from his course, though at least the Americans knew that death rode the skyways ahead.

Then....

The battle was joined. Moyon's forces were superior in armament. Their sky-steeds were faster, more readily maneuverable, though the flying forces of the Americas in the last five years had made vast strides in aviation. But what the Americans lacked in power they made up for in fearless courage.

The plan of battle seemed automatically to work itself out.

The first vanguard of American planes came into contact with the forces of Moyon, and from the noses of countless aero-subbs spurted that golden streak

which the Secret Agents knew and dreaded.

The first flight of planes, stretching from horizon to horizon, vanished from the sky with that dreadful surety which had marked the passing of the *Stellar*, and such of those warships as had felt the full force of the visible ray.

From General Munson rose a groan of anguish. These convertible fighting planes had been the pride of the heart of the old warrior. To do him credit, however, it was the wanton, so terribly inevitable destruction of the flyers themselves which affected him. It was so final, so absolute—and so utterly impossible to combat.

"Wait!" snapped Prester Kleig.

For the intrepid flyers behind that vanguard which had vanished had witnessed the wholesale disintegration of the leading element of the vast armada, and the pilots realized on the instant that no headlong rush into the very noses of the aero-sub would avail anything.

The vast American formation broke into a mad maelstrom of whirling, darting, diving planes. Every third plane plummeted downward, every second one climbed, and the remaining ships, even in the face of what had happened to the vanished first flight, held steadily to the front.

In this mad, seemingly meaningless formation, they closed on the aero-sub. Without having seen the fight, the Americans were aping the action of that one nameless flyer who had charged the aero-sub that had been destroyed.

Kleig remembered. A score of ships had been destroyed utterly above the graveyard of dreadnoughts, yet only one aero-sub, and that quite by chance, had been marked off in the casualty column.

Death rode the heavens as the American flyers went into action. For head-on fights, flyers went in at top speed, their planes whirling on the axes of fuselages, all guns going. Planes were armored against their own bullets, and they were not under the necessity of

watching to see that they did not slay their own friends.

Even so, bullets were rather ineffective against the aero-sub, whose apparently flimsy, almost transparent outer covering diverted the bullets with amazing ease.

A whirling maelstrom of ships. The monsters of Moyon had drawn first blood, if the expression may be used in an action where no blood at all was drawn, but machines and men simply erased from existence.

Hundreds of planes already gone when the second flight of ships closed with the aero-sub. Yellow streaks of death flashed from aero-sub nostrils, but even as aero-sub operators set their rays into motion the American flyers in head-on charge rolled, dived or zoomed, and kept their guns going.

High above the first flight of aero-sub, behind which another flight was winging swiftly into action, American flyers tilted the noses of their planes over and dived under full power—to sure death by suicide,

though none knew it there at the moment.

These aero-subbs could not be driven from the sky by usual means, and could destroy American ships even before those planes could come to handgrips; but they, the flyers plainly believed, could be crashed out of the sky and so, never guessing what besides death in resulting crashes they faced, the flyers above the aero-subbs, even as aero-subbs in rear flashed in to prevent, dived down straight at the backs of the aero-subbs.

In a hundred places the dives of the Americans worked successfully, and American planes crashed full and true, full power on, into the backs of the "flying fish." In some aero-subbs the container of the Moyon-dealing agency apparently remained untouched, and airplanes and aero-subbs, welded together, plunged down the invisible skylanes into the sea.

Under water, some of the aero-subbs were seen to keep in motion, limping toward the nearest mother submarines.

"I hope," said Prester Kleig, "the American flyers in such cases are already dead, for Moyen will be a maniac in his tortures. Munson, do you hurriedly examine the mother-subbs and see if you can locate Moyen."

However, only a scattered aero-sub here and there went down without the strange substance of the yellow ray being released. In most cases, upon the contact of plane with aero-sub, the aero-subbs and planes were instantly blotted from view by the yellow, golden flames from the heart of the winged harbingers of Moyen.

Golden flames, blinding in their brightness, dropping down, mere shapeless blotches, then fading out to nothingness in a matter of seconds—with aero-sub and airplane totally erased from action and from existence.

The American flyers saw and knew now the manner of death they faced. Yet all along the battle front not an American tried to evade the issue and draw out of the fight. A sublime, inspiring exhibition of mass courage

which had not been witnessed down the years since that general engagement which men of the time had called the Great War.

Prester Kleig turned to look at Maniel. Drops of perspiration bathed the cheeks of the master scientist, but his eyes were glowing like coals of fire. His face was set in a white mask of concentration, and Prester Kleig knew that Maniel would find the answer to the thing he sought if such answer could be found.

Would the American flyers be able to hold off the minions of Moyen until Maniel was ready? The fight out there above the waters was a terrible thing, and the Americans fought and died like men inspired, yet inexorably the winged armada of Moyen, preceded by those licking golden tongues, was moving landward.

"Great God!" cried Munson. "Look!"

There was really no need for the order, for every Secret Agent saw as soon as did Munson. Under the sea, just off the coast, the mother-subbs had touched

their blunt nose against the upward shelving of the sea bottom—had touched bottom, and were slowly but surely following the underwater curve of the land, up toward the surface, like unbelievable antediluvian monsters out of some nightmare.

"Yes," said Kleig quietly, "those monsters of Moyen can move on land, and the aero-subs can operate from them as easily on land as under water."

Kleig regarded the time, whirled to look at Professor Maniel.

One hour and forty minutes had passed since Maniel had begged for two hours in which to prepare some mode of effectively combatting the might of Moyen. Twenty minutes to go; yet the mother-subs would be ashore, dragging their sweating, monstrous sides out of the deep, within ten minutes!

Ten minutes ashore and there was no guessing the havoc they could cause to the United Americas!

"Hurry, Maniel! Hurry! Hurry!" said Prester Kleig.

But he spoke the words to himself, though even had he spoken them aloud Maniel would not have heard. For Maniel, for two hours, had closed his mind to everything that transpired outside his own thoughts, devoted to foiling the power of Moyen.

"I've found him!" snapped Munson.

He pointed with a shaking forefinger to one of the mother-subs crawling up the slant of the ocean bed, twisted one of the little nubs of the Sound-and-Vision apparatus, and the angelic face and Satanic eyes, the twisted body, of Moyen came into view.

The face was calm with dreadful purpose, and Moyen stood in the heart of one of his monsters, his eyes turned toward the land. With a gasp of terror, dreadfully afraid for the first time, Prester Kleig turned and looked into the eyes of Charmion....

"No," she said. "It will never happen. I have faith in you!"

There were still ten minutes of the two hours left

when the mother-subbs broke water and started crawling inland, swiftly, surely, without faltering in the slightest as they changed their element from water to land.

As though their appearance had been the signal, the aero-subbs in action against the first line of American planes broke out of the one-sided fight and dived for their mother ships, while a mere handful of the American planes started back for home to prepare anew to continue the struggle.

Prester Kleig gave the signal to the second monster armada which had remained in reserve.

"Do everything in your power to halt the march of Moyer's amphibians!"

Ten minutes to go, and Professor Maniel still labored like a Titan.

Chapter 11: Caucasia Falls Silent

As the scores of amphibian monsters came lumbering

forth upon dry land it became instantly apparent why the aero-sub had returned to the mother ships. For a few moments, out of the water, the amphibians were almost helpless, with practically no way of attack or defense—as helpless as huge turtles turned legs up.

But as each aero-sub entered its proper slot in the side of the mother amphibian, it was turned about and the nose thrust back into the opening, which closed down to fit tightly about the nose of the aero-sub, so that those flame-breathing monsters protruded from the sides of the amphibians in many places—transforming the amphibians into monsters with hundreds of golden, licking tongues!

As, with each and every aero-sub in place, the amphibians started moving inland, Professor Maniel made his first move. With the tiny apparatus upon which he had been working, he stepped to the table before the Sound-and-Vision apparatus and spoke softly to his compatriots.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have finished, and it will work effectively!"

Though Maniel spoke softly, it was plain to be seen that he was proud of his accomplishment, which remained only to be attached to start performance.

A matter of seconds....

Yet during those seconds was the real might, the real power for utter devastation, of Moyen fully exposed!

The amphibians got under way as the airplanes of the Americas swept into the fight.

From the sides of the monsters licked out those golden tongues of flame—and from the front.

Half a dozen amphibians slipped into New York from the harbor side and started into the heart of the city. And between the time when Maniel had said he was ready and the moment when he made his first active move against Moyen, a half-dozen skyscrapers vanished into nothingness, the spots where they had stood swept as clear of debris as though the land had never been reclaimed from Nature!

None was ever destined to know how many lives were lost in that first attack of the monsters of the golden, myriad tongues; but the monsters struck in the midst of a working day when the skyscrapers were filled with office workers.

And resolve struck deep into the hearts of the Secret Agents: if Moyon were turned back, he must be made to pay for the slaughter.

A matter of seconds....

Then a moment of deathly silence as Munson gave way at the screen for the gnomelike little Professor Maniel.

"Now, gentlemen!" snapped Maniel. "If my theory is correct," manipulating instruments with lightning speed as he talked, "the reversion of the principle of my Vibration-Retarder—which captures vibrations speeding outward from the earth and transforms them once again into sound and pictures audible and visible to the human ear—this apparatus will disintegrate the monsters as our boats and planes

were disintegrated!

"In this I have even been compelled to manipulate in the matter of time! I must not only defeat and annihilate the minions of Moyen, but must work from a mathematical absurdity, so that at the moment of impact that moment itself must become part of the past, sufficiently remote to remove the monsters at such distance from the earth that not even the mighty genius of Moyen can return them!"

The whirring, gentle as the whirring of doves' wings. In the center of the picture on the screen were those half-dozen amphibians laying waste Manhattan. Maniel set his intricate, delicate machinery into motion.

Instantly the amphibians there seemed to become misty, shadowy, and to lift out of Manhattan up above the roof-tops of skyscrapers still remaining, nebulous and wraithlike as ghost-shrouds—yet swinging outward from the earth with speed almost too swift for the eye to detect.

But where the amphibians had rested there stood, reclined—in all sorts of postures, surprising and even a bit ridiculous—the men of Moyen who had operated the monsters of Moyen!

From the Central Radio tower went forth a mighty voice of command to the planes which had been engaging the aero-sub's off the coast.

"Slay! Slay!"

Down flashed the planes of the Americas, and their guns were blazing, inaudibly, but none the less deadly of aim and of purpose, straight into the midst of the men of Moyen who had thus been left marooned and almost helpless with the vanishing of their amphibians.

And, noting how they fell in strangled, huddled heaps before the vengeful fire of the American planes, the Secret Agents sighed, and Maniel, his face alight with the pride of accomplishment, switched to another point along the coast.

And as a new group of the monsters of Moyon came into view, and Maniel bent to his labors afresh, the hated voice of the master mobster broke once more in the Secret Room.

"Enough, Kleig! Enough! We will surrender to save lives! I stipulate only that my own life be spared!"

To which Prester Kleig made instant reply.

"Did you offer us choice of surrender? Did you spare the lives of our people which, with your control of your golden rays, you could easily have done? No! Nor will we spare lives, least of all the life of Moyon!"

The whirring again, as of the whirring of doves' wings. More metal monsters, even as golden tongues spewed forth from their many sides, vanished from view, leaping skyward, while the operators of them were left to the mercies of the remaining airmen of the Americans.

Voicelessly the word went forth:

"Slay! Slay!"

It was Charmion who begged for mercy for the vanquished as, one by one, as surely as fate, the monsters with their contained aero-subbs were blotted out, leaving pilots and operators behind them. Down upon these dropped the airmen of the West, slaying without mercy....

"Please, lover!" Charmion whispered. "Spare them!"

"Even...?" he began, thinking of Moyen, who would have taken Charmion. He felt her shudder as she read his mind, understood what he would have asked.

"There he is!" came softly from Munson.

An amphibian had just been disintegrated, had just climbed mistily, swiftly, into invisibility in the skies. And there in the midst of the conquerors left behind, his angel's face set in a moody mask, his pale eyes awful with fear, his misshapen body sagging, terrible in its realization of failure, was Moyen!

Even as Kleig prepared to give the mercy signal, a plane dived down on the group about Moyon, and the Secret Agents could see the hand of the pilot, lifted high, as though he signaled.

The plane was a Mayther! The pilot was Carlos Kane!

Just as Kane went into action, and the noiseless bullets from his ship crashed into that twisted body, causing it to jump and twitch with the might of them, Prester Kleig gave the signal.

Even as the figure of Moyon crashed to the soil and the man's soul quitted its mortal casement, Kleig commanded:

"Spare all who surrender! Make them prisoners, to be used to repair the damage they have done to our country! Guards will be instantly placed over the amphibians and the aero-sub— for the day may come when we shall need to know their secrets!"

And, as men, hands lifted high in token of surrender, quitted the now motionless amphibians, and flyers

dropped down to make them prisoners, Maniel sighed, pressed various buttons on his apparatus, and the mad scene of carnage they had witnessed for hours faded slowly out, and darkness and silence filled the Secret Room.

But darkness is the joy of lovers, and in the midst of silence that was almost appalling by contrast, Kleig and Charmion were received into each other's arms.

#22 Vampires Of Venus, By Anthony Pelcher:

Leslie Larner, an Entomologist borrowed from the earth, pits himself against the night-flying vampires that are ravaging the inhabitants of Venus.

Aproximate word count: 7,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was as if someone had thrown a bomb into a Quaker meeting, when adventure suddenly began to crowd itself into the life of the studious and methodical Leslie Larner, professor of entomology.

Fame had been his since early manhood, when he began to distinguish himself in several sciences, but the adventure and thrills he had longed for had always fallen to the lot of others.

His father, a college professor, had left him a good

working brain and nothing else. Later his mother died and he was left with no relatives in the world, so far as he knew. So he gave his life over to study and hard work.

Still youthful at twenty-five, he was hoping that fate would "give him a break." It did.

He was in charge of a Government department having to do with Oriental beetles, Hessian flies, boll weevils and such, and it seemed his life had been just one bug after another. He took creeping, crawling things seriously and believed that, unless curbed, insects would some day crowd man off the earth. He sounded an alarm, but humanity was not disturbed. So Leslie Larner fell back on his microscope and concerned himself with saving cotton, wheat and other crops. His only diversion was fishing for the elusive rainbow trout.

He managed to spend a month each year in the Colorado Rockies angling for speckled beauties.

Larner was anything but a clock-watcher, but on a

certain bright day in June he was seated in his laboratory doing just that.

"Just five minutes to go," he mused.

It was just 4:25 P. M. He had finished his work, put his affairs in order, and in five minutes would be free to leave on a much needed and well earned vacation. His bags were packed and at the station. His fishing tackle, the pride of his young life, was neatly rolled in oiled silk and stood near at hand.

"I'll just fill my calabash, take one more quiet smoke, and then for the mountains and freedom," he told himself. He settled back with his feet on his desk. He half closed his eyes in solid comfort. Then the bomb fell and exploded.

B-r-r-r-r!

The buzzer on his desk buzzed and his feet came off the desk and hit the floor with a thud. His eyes popped open and the calabash was immediately laid aside.

That buzzer usually meant business, and it would be his usual luck to have trouble crash in on him just as he was on the edge of a rainbow trout paradise.

A messenger was ushered into the room by an assistant. The boy handed him an envelope, said, "No answer," and departed.

Larner tore open the envelope lazily. He read and then re-read its contents, while a look of puzzled surprise disturbed his usually placid countenance. He spread the sheet of paper out on his desk, and for the tenth time he read:

Confidential.

Memorize this address and destroy this paper:

Tula Bela, 1726 88th Street, West, City of Hesper,
Republic of Pana, Planet Venus.

Will meet you in the Frying Pan.

That was all. It was enough. Larner lost his temper.

He crumpled the paper and tossed it in the waste basket. He was not given to profanity, but he could say "Judas Priest" in a way that sizzled.

"Judas Priest!" he spluttered. "Anyone who would send a man a crazy bunch of nonsense like that, at a time like this, ought to be snuffed out like a beetle!

"Meet you in the Frying Pan," he quoted. Then he happened to recall something. "By golly, there is a fishing district in Colorado known as the Frying Pan. That's not so crazy, but the planet Venus part surely is cuckoo."

He fished the paper out of the waste basket, found the envelope, placed the strange message within and put it in his inside coat pocket. Then he seized his suitcase and fishing tackle, and, rushing out, hailed a taxi. Not long after he was on his way west by plane.

As the country unrolled under him he retrieved the strange note from his pocket. He read it again and again. Then he examined the envelope. It was an ordinary one of good quality, designed for business

rather than social usage. The note paper appeared quite different. It was unruled, pure white, and of a texture which might be described as pebbly. It was strongly made, and of a nature unlike any paper Larner had ever seen before. It appeared to have been made from a fiber rather than a pulp.

"Wonder who wrote it?" Larner asked himself. "It is beautiful handwriting, masculine yet artistic. Wonder where he got the Frying Pan idea? At any rate, I'm not going to the Frying Pan this year—I'm camping on Tennessee Creek, in Lake County, Colorado. The country there is more beautiful and restful.

"But this street address on the planet Venus. Seems to me I read somewhere that Marconi had received mysterious signals that he believed came from the planet Venus. Hesper, Hesper ... it sounds familiar, somehow. Wonder if there could be anything to it?"

Something impelled him to follow out the instructions in the note. He spent the next few hours repeating the address over and over again. When he was satisfied that he had memorized it thoroughly, he tore the

strange paper into bits and sent it fluttering earthward like a tiny snowstorm.

Larner was not a gullible individual, but neither was he unimaginative. He was scientist enough to know that "the impossibilities of to-day are the accomplishments of to-morrow." So while not convinced that the note was a serious communication, still his mind was open.

The weird address insisted on creeping into his mind and driving out other thoughts, even those of his speckled playfellows, the rainbow trout.

"I've a notion to change my plans and go from Denver to the Frying Pan," he cogitated. Then he thought, "No, I won't take it that seriously."

Anyone who knows the Colorado Rockies knows paradise. There is no more beautiful country on the globe. Lake County, where Larner had chosen his fishing grounds, has as its seat the old mining camp of Leadville. It has been visited and settled more for its gold mines than the golden glow of its sunsets

above the clouds, but the gold of the sunsets is eternal, while the gold of the mines is fading quickly away.

Leadville, with its 5,000 inhabitants, nestles above the clouds, at an altitude of more than 10,000 feet. Mount Massive with its three peaks lies back of the town in panorama and rises to a height of some 14,400 feet. In the rugged mountains thereabouts are hundreds of lakes fed by wild streams and bubbling crystal springs. All these lakes are above the clouds.

Winter sees the whole picture decorated with bizarre snowdrifts from twenty to forty feet deep, but spring comes early. The beautiful columbines and crocuses bloom before the snow is all off the ground in the valleys. The lands up to 12,000 feet altitude are carpeted with a light green grass and moss. Giant pines and dainty aspens, with their silvery bark and pinkish leaves blossom forth and whisper, while the eternal snows still linger in the higher rocky cliffs and peaks above.

Indian-paint blooms its blood red in contrast to the

milder colorings. Blackbirds and bluebirds chatter and chipmunks chirp. The gold so hard to find in the mines glares from the skies. The hills cuddle in banks of snowy clouds, and above all a pure clear blue sky sweeps. The lakes and streams abound with rainbow trout, the gamest of any fresh water fish. It is indeed a paradise for either poet or sportsman.

In any direction near to Leadville a man can find Heaven and recreation and rest.

Finding himself on Harrison Avenue, the main street of the county seat, Larner, after renewing some old acquaintanceships, started west in a flivver for Tennessee Creek. The flivver is a modern adjustment. Until a few years ago the only means of traversing these same hills was by patient, sure-footed donkeys, which carried the pack while the wayfarer walked along beside.

The first day's fishing was good. Trout seemed to greet him cheerily and sprang eagerly to the fray. They bit at any sort of silken fly he cast.

The site chosen by Larner for his camp was in a mossy clearing separated from the stream by a fringe of willows along the creek. Then came a border of aspens backed by a forest of silver-tipped firs.

It was ideal and his eyes swept the scene with satisfaction. Then he began whittling bacon to grease his pan for frying trout over the open fire.

Suddenly he heard a rustle in the aspens, and, looking up, beheld a picture which made his eyes bulge. A man and a woman, garbed seemingly in the costumes of another world, walked toward him. Neither were more than five feet tall but were physically perfect, and marvelously pleasing to the eye. There was little difference in their dress.

Both wore helmets studded with what Larner believed to be sapphires. He learned later they were diamonds. Their clothing consisted of tight trouserlike garments surmounted by tunics of some white pelt resembling chamois save for color. A belt studded with precious stones encircled their waists. Artistic laced sandals graced their small firm feet.

Their skin was a pinkish white. Their every feature was perfection plus, and their bodies curved just enough wherever a curve should be. The woman was daintier and more fully developed, and her features were even more finely chiseled than the man. Otherwise it would have been difficult to distinguish their sex.

Larner took in these details subconsciously, for he was awed beyond expression. All he could do was to stand seemingly frozen, half bent over the campfire with his frying pan in his hand.

The man spoke.

"I hope we did not startle you," he said. "I thought my note would partly prepare you for this meeting. We expected to find you in the Frying Pan district. When you did not appear there we tuned our radio locator to your heart beats and in that way located you here. It was hardly a second's space-flying time from where we were."

Larner said nothing. He could only stand and gape.

"I do not wonder that you are surprised," said the strange little man. "I will explain that I am Nern Bela, of the City of Hesper, on the planet Venus. This is my sister Tula. We greet you in the interest of the Republic of Pana, which embraces all of the planet you know as Venus."

When Larner recovered his breath, he lost his temper.

"I don't know what circus you escaped from, but I crave solitude and I have no time to be bothered with fairy tales," he said with brutal brusqueness.

Expressions of hurt surprise swept the countenances of his visitors.

The man spoke again:

"We are just what we assert we are, and our finding you was made necessary by a condition which grieves the souls of all the 900,000,000 inhabitants of Venus. We have come to plead with you to come with us and use your scientific knowledge to thwart a scourge which threatens the lives of millions of people."

There was a quiet dignity about the man and an air of pride about the woman which made Larner stop and think, or try to. He rubbed his hand over his brow and looked questioningly at the pair.

"If you are what you say you are, how did you get here?" he asked.

"We came in a targo, a space-flying ship, capable of doing 426,000 miles an hour. This is just 1200 times as fast as 355 miles an hour, the highest speed known on earth. Come with us and we will show you our ship." They looked at him appealingly, and both smiled a smile of wistful friendliness.

Larner, without a word, threw down his frying pan and followed them through the aspens. The brother and sister walking ahead of him gave his eyes a treat. He surveyed the perfect form of the girl. Her perfection was beyond his ken.

"They certainly are not of this world," he mused.

A few hundred yards farther on there was a beach of

pebbles, where the stream had changed its course. On this plot sat a gigantic spherical machine of a glasslike material. It was about 300 feet in diameter and it was tapered on two sides into tees which Larner rightly took to be lights.

"This is a targo, our type of space-flyer," said Nern Bela. "It is capable of making two trips a year between Venus and the earth. We have visited this planet often, always landing in some mountain or jungle fastness as heretofore we did not desire earth-dwellers to know of our presence."

"Why not?" asked Larner, his mouth agape and his eyes protruding. His mind was so full of questions that he fairly blurted his first one.

"Because," said Bela, slowly and frankly, "because our race knows no sickness and we feared contagion, as your race has not yet learned to control its being."

"Oh," said Lamer thoughtfully. He realized that humans of the earth, whom he had always regarded as God's most perfect beings, were not so perfect

after all.

"How do you people control your being, as you express it?" he asked.

"It is simple," was the reply. "For ninety centuries we have ceased to breed imperfection, crime and disease. We deprived no one of the pleasures of life, but only the most perfect mental and physical specimens of our people cared to have children. In other words, while we make no claim to controlling our sex habits, we do control results."

"Oh," said Larner again.

Nern Bela led the way to a door which opened into the side of the space-flyer near its base. "We have a crew of four men and four women," he said. "They handle the entire ship, with my sister and I in command, making six souls aboard in all."

"Why men and women?" thought Larner.

As if in answer to his thought Bela said:

"On the earth the two sexes have struggled for sex supremacy. This has thrown your civilization out of balance. On Venus we have struggled for sex equality and have accomplished it. This is a perfect balance. Man and women engage in all endeavor and share all favors and rewards alike."

"In war, too?" asked Larner.

"There has not been war on Venus for 600,000 years," said Bela. "There is only the one nation, and the people all live in perfect accord. Our only trouble in centuries is a dire peril which now threatens our people, and it is of this that I wish to talk to you more at length."

They were standing close to the targo. Larner was struck by the peculiar material of which it was constructed. There was a question in his eyes, and Nern Bela answered it:

"The metal is duranium; it is metalized quartz. It is frictionless, conducts no current or ray except repulsion and attraction ray NTR69X6 by which it is

propelled. It is practically transparent, lighter than air and harder than a diamond. It is cast in moulds after being melted or, rather, fused.

"We use cold light which we produce by forcing oxygen through air tubes into a vat filled with the fat of a deep sea fish resembling your whale. You are aware, of course, that that is exactly how cold light is produced by the firefly, except for the fact that the firefly uses his own fat."

Larner was positively fascinated. He smoothed the metal of the targo in appreciation of its marvelous construction, but he longed most to see the curious light giving mechanism, for this was closer to his own line of entomology. He had always believed that the light giving organs of fireflies and deep-sea fishes could be reproduced mechanically.

The interior of the ship resembled in a vague way that of an ocean liner. It was controlled by an instrument board at which a man and a girl sat. They did not raise their heads as the three people entered.

When called by Bela and his sister, who seemed to give commands in unison, the crew assembled and were presented to the visitor.

"Earth-dwellers are not the curiosity to us that we seem to be to you," said Tula Bela, speaking for the first time and smiling sweetly.

Larner was too engrossed to note the remark further than to nod his head. He was lost in contemplation of these strange people, all garbed exactly alike and all surpassingly lovely to look upon.

An odor of food wafted from the galley, and Larner remembered he was hungry, with the hunger of health. He had swung his basket of fish over his shoulder when he left his campfire, and Tula took it from him.

"Would you like to have our chef prepare them for you?" she said, as she caught his hungry glance at his day's catch. This time Larner answered her.

"If you will pardon me," he said awkwardly. "Really I

am famished."

"You will not miss your fish dinner," said the girl.

"I believe there is enough for all of us," said Larner. "I caught twenty beauties. I never knew fish to bite like that. Why, they—" and he was off on a voluminous discourse on a favorite subject.

Those assembled listened sympathetically. Then Tula took the fish, and soon the aroma of broiling trout mingled with the other entrancing galley odors.

After a dinner at which some weird yet satisfying viands were served and much unusual conversation indulged in, Nern Bela led the way to what appeared to be the captain's quarters. The crew and their visitor sat down to discuss a subject which proved to be of such a terrifying nature as to scar human souls.

"People on Venus," said Nern, as his eyes took on a worried expression, "are unable to leave their homes after nightfall due to some strange nocturnal beast which attacks them and vampirishly drains all blood

from their veins, leaving the dead bodies limp and empty."

"What? How?" questioned Larner leaning far forward over the conference table.

The others nodded their heads, and in the eyes of the women there was terror. Larner could not but believe this.

"The beasts, or should I say insects, are as large as your horses and they fly, actually fly, by night, striking down humans, domestic animals and all creatures of warm blood. How many there are we have no means of knowing, and we cannot find their hiding and breeding places. They are not native to our planet, and where they come from we cannot imagine. They are actually monstrous flys, or bugs, or some form of insects."

Larner was overcome by incredulity and showed it. "Insects as big as horses?" he questioned and he could hardly suppress a smile.

"Believe us, in the name of the God of us all," insisted Nern. "They have a mouth which consists of a large suction disk, in the center of which is a lancelike tongue. The lance is forced into the body at any convenient point, and the suction disk drains out the blood. If we only knew their source! They attack young children and the aged, up to five hundred years, alike."

"What! Five hundred years?" exploded Larner again.

"I should have explained," said Nern, simply, "that Venus dwellers, due to our advanced knowledge of sanitation and health conversation, live about 800 years and then die invariably of old age. The only unnatural cause of death encountered is this giant insect. Accidents do occur, but they are rare. There are no deliberate killings on Venus."

Larner did not answer. He only pondered. The more he ran over the strange happenings of the last week in his mind the more he believed he was dreaming. His thoughts took a strange turn: "Why do these vain people go around dressed in jeweled ornaments?"

Nern again anticipated a question. "Diamonds, gold and many of what you call precious stones are common on Venus," he volunteered. "Talc and many other things are more valuable."

"Talc?"

"Yes, we use an immense quantity of it. We have a wood that is harder than your steel. We build machinery with it. We cannot use oil to lubricate these wooden shafts and bearings as it softens the wood, so all parts exposed to friction are sprayed constantly by a gust of talc from a blower.

"You use talc mostly for toilet purposes. We use it for various purposes. There is little left on Venus, and it is more valuable to us than either gold or diamonds. We draw on your planet now for talc. You dump immense quantities. We just shipped one hundred 1,000-ton globes of it from the Cripple Creek district, and the district never missed it. We drew most of it from your mine dumps."

Nern tried not to look bored as he explained more in

detail: "We brought 100 hollow spheres constructed of duranium. We suspended these over the Cripple Creek district at an altitude of 10,000 feet above the earth's surface. Because of the crystal glint of duranium they were invisible to earth dwellers at that height. Then we used a suction draft at night, drawing the talc from the earth, filling one drum after another. This is done by tuning in a certain selective attraction that attracts only talc. It draws it right out of your ground in tiny particles and assembles it in the transportation drums as pure talc. On the earth, if noticed at all, it would have been called a dust storm.

"The drums, when loaded with talc, are set to attract the proper planetary force and they go speeding toward Venus at the rate of 426,000 miles an hour. They are prevented from colliding with meteors by an automatic magnetic device. This is controlled by magnetic force alone, and when the targo gets too close to a meteor it changes its course instantly. The passenger targo we ride in acts similarly. And now may I return to the subject of the vampires of Venus?"

"Pardon my ignorance," said Larner, and for the first

time in his life he felt very ignorant indeed.

"I know little more than I have told you," said Nern, rather hopelessly. "Our knowledge of your world, your people and your language comes from our listening in on you and observing you without being observed or heard. This might seem like taking an advantage of you, were it not for the fact that we respect confidences, and subjugate all else to science. We have helped you at times, by telepathically suggesting ideas to your thinkers.

"We would have given you all our inventions in this way, gladly, but in many instances we were unable to find minds attuned to accept such advanced ideas. We have had the advantage of you because our planet is so many millions of years older than your own." There was a plaintive note in Nern's voice as he talked.

"But now we are on our knees to you, so to speak. We do not know everything and, desperately, we need the aid of a man of your caliber. In behalf of the distraught people of Venus, I am asking you bluntly to make a great sacrifice. Will you face the dangers of a

trip to Venus and use your knowledge to aid us in exterminating these creatures of hell?" There was positive pleading in his voice, and in the eyes of his beautiful sister there were tears.

"But what would my superiors in the Government Bureau think?" feebly protested Larner, "I could not explain...."

"You have no superiors in your line. Our Government needs you at this time more than any earthly government. Your place here is a fixture. You can always return to it, should you live. We are asking you to face a horrible death with us. You can name your own compensation, but I know you are not interested so much in reward.

"Now, honestly, my good professor, there is no advantage to be gained by explanation. Just disappear. In the name of God and in the interests of science and the salvation of a people who are at your mercy, just drop out of sight. Drop out of life on this planet. Come with us. The cause is worthy of the man I believe you to be."

"I will go," said Larner, and his hosts waited for no more. An instant later the targo shot out into interstellar space.

"How do you know what course to follow?" asked Larner after a reasonable time, when he had recovered from his surprise at the sudden take-off.

"We do not need to know. Our machine is tuned to be attracted by the planetary force of Venus alone. We could not go elsewhere. A repulsion ray finds us as we near Venus and protects us against too violent a landing. We will land on Venus like a feather about three months from to-night."

The time of the journey through outer space was of little moment save for one incident. Larner and the other travelers were suddenly and rather rudely jostled about the rapidly flying craft.

Larner lost his breath but not his speech. "What happened?" he inquired.

"We just automatically dodged a meteor," explained

Nern.

Most of the time of the trip was spent by Larner in listening to explanations of customs and traditions of the people of the brightest planet in the universe.

There was a question Larner had desired to ask Nern Bela, yet he hesitated to do so. Finally one evening during the journey to Venus, when the travelers had been occupying themselves in a scientific discussion of comparative evolution on the two planets, Larner saw his opportunity.

"Why," he asked rather hesitatingly, "did the people of Venus always remain so small? Why did you not strive more for height? The Japanese, who are the shortest in stature of earth people, always wanted to be tall."

"Without meaning any offense," replied Nern, "I must say that it is characteristic of earth dwellers to want something without knowing any good reason why they want it. It is perfectly all right for you people to be tall, but for us it is not so fitting. You see, Venus is smaller than the earth. Size is comparative. You think

we are not tall because you are used to taller people. Comparatively we are tall enough. In proportion to the size of our planet we are exactly the right size. We keep our population at 900,000,000, and that is the perfectly exact number of people who can live comfortably on our planet."

Arriving on Venus, Larner was assigned a laboratory and office in one of the Government buildings. It was a world seemingly made of glass. Quartz, of rose, white and crystal coloring, Larner found, was the commonest country rock of the planet. In many cases it was shot full of splinters of gold which the natives had not taken the trouble to recover. This quartz was of a terrific hardness and was used in building, paving, and public works generally. The effect was bewildering. It was a world of shimmering crystal.

The atmosphere of Venus had long puzzled Larner. While not an astronomer in the largest sense of the word, yet he had a keen interest in the heavens as a giant puzzle picture, and he had given some spare time to the study.

He knew that from all indications Venus had a most unusual atmosphere. He had read that the atmosphere was considerably denser than that of the earth, and that its presence made observation difficult. The actual surface of the planet he knew could hardly be seen due, either to this atmosphere, or seemingly perpetual cloud banks.

He had read that the presence of atmosphere surrounding Venus is indicated to earthly astronomers, during the planet's transit, by rings of light due to the reflection and scattering of collected sunlight by its atmosphere.

Astronomers on earth, he knew, had long been satisfied of the presence of great cloud banks, as rocks and soils could not have such high reflecting power. He knew that like the moon, Venus, when viewed from the earth, presents different phases from the crescent to the full or total stage.

Looking up at the sky from the quartz streets of Venus, Larner beheld, in sweeping grandeur, massed cloud banks, many of them apparently rain clouds.

Nern noted his skyward gaze, and said:

"We have accomplished meteorological control. Those clouds were brought under control when we conquered interplanetary force, and what you call gravity. We form them and move them at will. They are our rain factory. We make rain when and where we will. This insures our crops and makes for health and contentment.

"The air, you will note, is about the same or a little more moist than the earth air at sea level. This is due to the planet's position nearer the sun.

"We have been striving for centuries to make the air a little drier and more rare, but we have not succeeded yet. The heavy content of disintegrated quartz in our soil makes moisture very necessary for our crops, so our moist atmosphere is evidently a provision of providence. We are used to breathing this moist air, and when I first visited the earth I was made uncomfortable by your rarified atmosphere. Now I can adjust myself to breathing the air of either planet. However, I find myself drinking a great deal more

water on earth than on Venus."

In this fairyland which had enjoyed centuries of peace, health and accord, stark terror now reigned. In some instances the finely-bred, marvellously intelligent people were in a mental condition bordering on madness.

This was especially true in the farming districts, where whole herds of lats had been wiped out. Lats, Larner gleaned, were a common farm animal similar to the bovine species on earth, only more wooly. On these creatures the Venus dwellers depended for their milk and dairy supplies, and for their warmer clothing, which was made from the skin. The hair was used for brushes, in the building trades, and a thousand ways in manufacturing.

Besides the domestic animals hundreds of people continued to meet death, and only a few of the flying vampires had been hunted down. The giant insects were believed to breed slowly as compared to earth

insects, their females producing not more than ten eggs, by estimate, after which death overtook the adult. In spite of this they were reported to be increasing.

In the Government building Larner was placed in touch with all the Government scientists of Venus. His nearest collaborator was one Zorn Zada, most profound scientist of the planet. The two men, with a score of assistants, worked elbow to elbow on the most gigantic scientific mystery in the history of two planets.

A specimen of the dread invader was mounted and studied by the scientists, who were so engrossed in their work that they hardly took time to eat. As for sleep, there was little of it. Days were spent in research and nights in hunting the monsters. This hunting was done by newly recruited soldiers and scientists. The weapons used were a short ray-gun of high destructive power which disintegrated the bodies of the enemies by atomic energy blasts. The quarry was wary, however, and struck at isolated individuals rather than massed fighting lines.

Seated at his work-bench Larner asked Zorn Zada what had become of Nern Bela. In his heart he had a horrible lurking fear that the beautiful Tula Bela might fall before a swarm of the strange vampires, but he did not voice this anxiety.

"Nern and his sister are explorers and navigators," was the reply. "They have been assigned to carry you anywhere on this or any other planet where your work may engage you. They await your orders. They are too valuable as space-navigators to be placed in harm's way."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Larner bent to his labors.

"What other wild animals or harmful insects have you on this planet?" he asked Zorn.

"I get your thought," replied the first scientist of Venus. "You are seeking a natural enemy to this deadly flying menace, are you not?"

"Yes," admitted Larner.

"All insects left on Venus with this one exception are beneficial," said Zorn. "There are no wild animals, and no harmful insects. All animals, insects and birds have been domesticated and are fed by their keepers. We get fabrics from forms of what you call spiders and other web-builders and cocoon spinners. All forms of birds, beasts and crawling and flying things have been brought under the dominion of man. We will have to seek another way out than by finding an enemy parasite."

"Where do you think these insect invaders came from?" asked Larner.

"You have noticed they are unlike anything you have on earth in anatomical construction," said the savant. "They partake of the general features of Coleoptera (beetles), in that they wear a sheath of armor, yet their mouth parts are more on the order of the Diptera (flies). I regard them more as a fly than a beetle, because most Coleoptera are helpful to humanity while practically all, if not all, Diptera are malignant."

"As to their original habitat, I believe they migrated here from some other planet."

"They could not fly through space," said Larner.

"No, that is the mystery of it," agreed Zorn. "How they got here and where they breed are the questions that we have to answer."

Long days passed on Venus. Long days and sleepless nights. The big insects were hunted nightly by men armed with ray-guns, and nightly the blood-sucking monsters took their toll of humanity and animals.

Finally Larner and Zorn determined to capture one of the insects alive, muzzle its lance and suction pad, and give it sufficient freedom to find its way back to its hiding place. By following the shackled monster the scientists hoped to find the breeding grounds.

All the provinces of the planet joined in the drive. Men turned out in automatic vehicles, propelled by energy gathered from the atmosphere. They came on

foot and in aircraft. Mobilization was at given points and, leading the van, were Zorn and Larner and their confreres in the targo of Nern and Tula Bela. The great army of Venus carried giant searchlights and was armed with deadly ray-guns.

Headquarters of the vast Army of Offense was in the targo of the Belas. Larner was in supreme command. Just before the big army set out to scour the planet to seek the breeding place of the monsters Larner issued a bulletin that set all Venus by the ears.

Addressed to President Vole Vesta of the Republic of Pana and the good people of Venus, it read:

As is generally known, it has been the habit of the nation's space-flying merchantmen to visit the sunlit side of the planet Mercury to obtain certain rare woods and other materials not found on this planet.

One side of Mercury, as is known, is always turned from the sun and is in a condition of perpetual night. In this perpetual darkness and dampness, where many rivers flow into warm black swamps, the

vampires have bred for centuries. Conditions were ideal for their growth, and so through the ages they evolved into the monsters we have encountered lately on Venus.

During some comparatively recent visit to Mercury the grubs of these insects have found their way abroad a vegetation-laden targo left standing near the edge of the black swamps of Mercury. These grubs were thus transported to Venus and underwent their natural metamorphosis here. Reaching adult stage, they have found some place to hide and breed, and thus is explained the origin of the vampires of Venus.

This was widely read and discussed and was finally accepted as the means of the invasion of peaceful, beautiful Venus by a horror that might well have originated in hell.

However, this did not reveal the breeding grounds, or remove the nation-wide scourge of the horrible winged vampires, so the mobilization of all the forces of the planet continued.

As day followed day the hordes of fighting Venus dwellers grew in the concentration camps. In the targo of the Belas, Larner, brain-weary and body-racked as he was with overwork, found a grain of happiness in being in the presence of Nern and his beautiful, petite sister.

With Zorn, Larner was supervising the construction of a big net of strongly woven wire mesh, in which it was hoped to catch one of the vampires. It was decided to bait the trap with a fat female lat.

Zorn, Larner and the Belas fared forth from the concentration camp followed by a company of soldiers carrying the big net. Tula with her own hand led the fat lat heifer. His eyes were filled with commiseration for the poor animal.

Thousands of soldiers and citizenry, in fighting array, watched the departure of the little group.

In a glade the trap was set and the net arranged to fall over the monster once it attacked the calf. From a

thicket, in utter darkness, Zorn and Larner and the two Belas waited for the possible catch. The whole nation stood awaiting the order to advance.

On the fourth night the vigil was rewarded in a manner frightful to relate.

A clumsy flutter of giant wings broke the stillness.

The four waiting forms in the thicket rejoiced, believing the fat lat was about to be attacked.

Onward came the approaching horror. The measured flap, flap of its armored wings drawing nearer and nearer. Then, horror—horrors!

A feminine scream rent the air. Cries loud and shrill arose above a hysterical feminine cry for help.

The monster had chosen Tula Bela for its prey!

Zorn exploded an alarm bomb. A compressed air siren brought the army forward on the run. Giant floodlights began to light up the scene. The blood of

Larner and Nern froze.

The monster had borne the girl to the ground. Its frightful lance and cupper was upraised to strike. Larner was the nearest and the quickest to act. He grabbed for his ray-gun, swung at his belt. It was gone! In horror he remembered he had left it at the base. He seized a short knife and threw himself forward, rolling his body between that of the girl and the descending lance and cupper.



[Image description start. A black and white illustration showing a giant insect crouching over a woman on the ground, ready to suck out her blood.

The insect has its wings flared, with a round head and fat body tapering to a point. In the foreground, a man holding a short curved knife is running forward. Spotlights cut into the black sky in the background.
Image description end.]

As the lance pierced his shoulder Larner, in one wild gesture of frenzy, drove his knife through the soft, yielding flesh of the vampire's organ of suction.

Protected by no bony structure the snout of the monster was amputated.

The terrible creature had been disarmed of his most formidable weapon, but he continued to fight. Larner felt the spikes on the monster's legs tear at his flesh.

"Don't kill the thing," he shouted. "Bring on the net. For the love of God bring on the net!" Then he lost consciousness.

It was daylight when Larner, somewhat weakened from loss of blood, regained consciousness.

The beautiful Tula Bela was leaning over him.

She whispered comforting words to him in a language he did not fully understand. She whispered happy exclamations in words he did not know the meaning of, but the tone was unmistakably those of a sweetheart towards her lover.

Finally, in answer to a true scientist's question in his eyes, she said in English:

"They caught the thing alive. They await your order to advance."

"Let us be on our way," said Larner, and he started to arise.

"You are hardly strong enough," said Tula.

"Believe me, I am all right," insisted Larner, and after several trials he got to his feet. His constitution was naturally strong and his will was stronger, so he fought back all feelings of weakness and soon announced himself ready to go ahead with the project

at hand. For speed was all important, and the young professor found himself unable to remain inactive.

He rejoiced when Zorn told him that the big insect that had attacked Tula Bela had been captured alive and had been kept well nourished by lat's blood injected into its stomach.

With Zorn Larner went to inspect the hideous monstrosity and found it in leash and straining. It was ready to be used to lead the way back to its breeding place.

Its wings shackled, the lumbering insect floundered on its way straight north. Ponderously and half blindly it crawled as the searchlights' glare was kept far enough in advance to keep from blinding the monster.

True to instinct it finally brought up at early dawn under a high cliff of smoky quartz. Here, in the great crevices, the drove of diabolical vampires were hiding.

As the light struck their dens, they attempted clumsily to take wing, but a interlacing network of devastating disintegrating rays from the ray-guns shattered their bodies to dust, which was borne away by the wind.

The next few months were spent in combing the quartz crags of Venus for similar infested areas, but only the one breeding nest was found. The scourge had been conquered in its first and only stronghold.

So ended the greatest reign of terror in the history of Venus.

Leslie Larner was given a vote of thanks, and riches were showered upon him by the good people of the sky's brightest star.

His modesty was characteristic, and he insisted that his part in saving humanity on the planet had been small.

Passage back to earth was offered him, but Nern and Tula Bela urged him to stay and live his life on Venus. This he finally agreed to do.

"If I returned," he said, "I would always be tempted to tell my experiences while away, and there is not a jury in the world which would account me sane after I had once spoken."

That the story of Larner's adventure reached earth dwellers at all is due to the fact that Nern Bela on a subsequent visit to the earth narrated it to a Colorado quartz miner. This miner, a bronzed and bearded prospector for gold, stumbled on the targo in a mountain fastness, and there was nought to do but make him welcome and pledge him to secrecy.

The miner surveyed the crystal targo in rapt wonderment and said: "And to think I am the only earth man who ever viewed such a craft!"

"No," answered Nern Bela, "there is one other." And then the stirring story of Leslie Larner's life on Venus was told.

#23 The Soul Snatcher, By Tom Curry:

From twenty miles away stabbed the "Atom-filtering" rays to Allen Baker in his cell in the death house.

Aproximate word count: 6,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The shrill voice of a woman stabbed the steady hum of the many machines in the great, semi-darkened laboratory. It was the onslaught of weak femininity against the ebony shadow of Jared, the silent negro servant of Professor Ramsey Burr. Not many people were able to get to the famous man against his wishes; Jared obeyed orders implicitly and was generally an efficient barrier.

"I will see him, I will," screamed the middle-aged woman. "I'm Mrs. Mary Baker, and he—he—it's his fault my son is going to die. His fault. *Professor!*

Professor Burr!"

Jared was unable to keep her quiet.

Coming in from the sunlight, her eyes were not yet accustomed to the strange, subdued haze of the laboratory, an immense chamber crammed full of equipment, the vista of which seemed like an apartment in hell. Bizarre shapes stood out from the mass of impedimenta, great stills which rose full two stories in height, dynamos, immense tubes of colored liquids, a hundred puzzles to the inexperienced eye.

The small, plump figure of Mrs. Baker was very out of place in this setting. Her voice was poignant, reedy. A look at her made it evident that she was a conventional, good woman. She had soft, cloudy golden eyes and a pathetic mouth, and she seemed on the point of tears.

"Madam, madam, de doctor is busy," whispered Jared, endeavoring to shoo her out of the laboratory with his polite hands. He was respectful, but firm.

She refused to obey. She stopped when she was within a few feet of the activity in the laboratory, and stared with fear and horror at the center of the room, and at its occupant, Professor Burr, whom she had addressed during her flurried entrance.

The professor's face, as he peered at her, seemed like a disembodied stare, for she could see only eyes behind a mask of lavender gray glass eyeholes, with its flapping ends of dirty, gray-white cloth.

She drew in a deep breath—and gasped, for the pungent fumes, acrid and penetrating, of sulphuric and nitric acids, stabbed her lungs. It was like the breath of hell, to fit the simile, and aptly Professor Burr seemed the devil himself, manipulating the infernal machines.

Acting swiftly, the tall figure stepped over and threw two switches in a single, sweeping movement. The vermillion light which had lived in a long row of tubes on a nearby bench abruptly ceased to writhe like so many tongues of flame, and the embers of hell died out.

Then the professor flooded the room in harsh gray-green light, and stopped the high-pitched, humming whine of his dynamos. A shadow picture writhing on the wall, projected from a lead-glass barrel, disappeared suddenly, the great color filters and other machines lost their semblance of horrible life, and a regretful sigh seemed to come from the metal creatures as they gave up the ghost.

To the woman, it had been entering the abode of fear. She could not restrain her shudders. But she bravely confronted the tall figure of Professor Burr, as he came forth to greet her.

He was extremely tall and attenuated, with a red, bony mask of a face pointed at the chin by a sharp little goatee. Feathery blond hair, silvered and awry, covered his great head.

"Madam," said Burr in a gentle, disarmingly quiet voice, "your manner of entrance might have cost you your life. Luckily I was able to deflect the rays from your person, else you might not now be able to voice your complaint—for such seems to be your purpose in

coming here." He turned to Jared, who was standing close by. "Very well, Jared. You may go. After this, it will be as well to throw the bolts, though in this case I am quite willing to see the visitor."

Jared slid away, leaving the plump little woman to confront the famous scientist.

For a moment, Mrs. Baker stared into the pale gray eyes, the pupils of which seemed black as coal by contrast. Some, his bitter enemies, claimed that Professor Ramsey Burr looked cold and bleak as an iceberg, others that he had a baleful glare. His mouth was grim and determined.

Yet, with her woman's eyes, Mrs. Baker, looking at the professor's bony mask of a face, with the high-bridged, intrepid nose, the passionless gray eyes, thought that Ramsey Burr would be handsome, if a little less cadaverous and more human.

"The experiment which you ruined by your untimely entrance," continued the professor, "was not a safe one."

His long white hand waved toward the bunched apparatus, but to her the room seemed all glittering metal coils of snakelike wire, ruddy copper, dull lead, and tubes of all shapes. Hell cauldrons of unknown chemicals seethed and slowly bubbled, beetle-black bakelite fixtures reflected the hideous light.

"Oh," she cried, clasping her hands as though she addressed him in prayer, "forget your science, Professor Burr, and be a man. Help me. Three days from now my boy, my son, whom I love above all the world, is to die."

"Three days is a long time," said Professor Burr calmly. "Do not lose hope: I have no intention of allowing your son, Allen Baker, to pay the price for a deed of mine. I freely confess it was I who was responsible for the death of—what was the person's name?—Smith, I believe."

"It was you who made Allen get poor Mr. Smith to agree to the experiments which killed him, and which the world blamed on my son," she said. "They called it

the deed of a scientific fiend, Professor Burr, and perhaps they are right. But Allen is innocent."

"Be quiet," ordered Burr, raising his hand.

"Remember, madam, your son Allen is only a commonplace medical man, and while I taught him a little from my vast store of knowledge, he was ignorant and of much less value to science and humanity than myself. Do you not understand, can you not comprehend, also, that the man Smith was a martyr to science? He was no loss to mankind, and only sentimentalists could have blamed anyone for his death. I should have succeeded in the interchange of atoms which we were working on, and Smith would at this moment be hailed as the first man to travel through space in invisible form, projected on radio waves, had it not been for the fact that the alloy which conducts the three types of sinusoidal failed me and burned out. Yes, it was an error in calculation, and Smith would now be called the Lindbergh of the Atom but for that. Yet Smith has not died in vain, for I have finally corrected this error—science is but trial and correction of error—and all will be well."

"But Allen—Allen must not die at all!" she cried. "For weeks he has been in the death house: it is killing me. The Governor refuses him a pardon, nor will he commute my son's sentence. In three days he is to die in the electric chair, for a crime which you admit you alone are responsible for. Yet you remain in your laboratory, immersed in your experiments, and do nothing, nothing!"

The tears came now, and she sobbed hysterically. It seemed that she was making an appeal to someone in whom she had only a forlorn hope.

"Nothing?" repeated Burr, pursing his thin lips.

"Nothing? Madam, I have done everything. I have, as I have told you, perfected the experiment. It is successful. Your son has not suffered in vain, and Smith's name will go down with the rest of science's martyrs as one who died for the sake of humanity. But if you wish to save your son, you must be calm. You must listen to what I have to say, and you must not fail to carry out my instructions to the letter. I am ready now."

Light, the light of hope, sprang in the mother's eyes. She grasped his arm and stared at him with shining face, through tear-dipped eyelashes.

"Do—do you mean it? Can you save him? After the Governor has refused me? What can you do? No influence will snatch Allen from the jaws of the law: the public is greatly excited and very hostile toward him."

A quiet smile played at the corners of Burr's thin lips.

"Come," he said. "Place this cloak about you. Allen wore it when he assisted me."

The professor replaced his own mask and conducted the woman into the interior of the laboratory.

"I will show you," said Professor Burr.

She saw before her now, on long metal shelves which appeared to be delicately poised on fine scales whose balance was registered by hair-line indicators, two small metal cages.

Professor Burr stepped over to a row of common cages set along the wall. There was a small menagerie there, guinea pigs—the martyrs of the animal kingdom—rabbits, monkeys, and some cats.

The man of science reached in and dragged out a mewling cat, placing it in the right-hand cage on the strange table. He then obtained a small monkey and put this animal in the left-hand cage, beside the cat. The cat, on the right, squatted on its haunches, mewling in pique and looking up at its tormentor. The monkey, after a quick look around, began to investigate the upper reaches of its new cage.

Over each of the animals was suspended a fine, curious metallic armament. For several minutes, while the woman, puzzled at how this demonstration was to affect the rescue of her condemned son, waited impatiently, the professor deftly worked at the apparatus, connecting wires here and there.

"I am ready now," said Burr. "Watch the two animals carefully."

"Yes, yes," she replied, faintly, for she was half afraid.

The great scientist was stooping over, looking at the balances of the indicators through microscopes.

She saw him reach for his switches, and then a brusque order caused her to turn her eyes back to the animals, the cat in the right-hand cage, the monkey at the left.

Both animals screamed in fear, and a sympathetic chorus sounded from the menagerie, as a long purple spark danced from one gray metal pole to the other, over the cages on the table.

At first, Mrs. Baker noticed no change. The spark had died, the professor's voice, unhurried, grave, broke the silence.

"The first part of the experiment is over," he said.

"The ego—"

"Oh, heavens!" cried the woman. "You've driven the poor creatures mad!"

She indicated the cat. That animal was clawing at the top bars of its cage, uttering a bizarre, chattering sound, somewhat like a monkey. The cat hung from the bars, swinging itself back and forth as on a trapeze, then reached up and hung by its hind claws.

As for the monkey, it was squatting on the floor of its cage, and it made a strange sound in its throat, almost a mew, and it hissed several times at the professor.

"They are not mad," said Burr. "As I was explaining to you, I have finished the first portion of the experiment. The ego, or personality of one animal has been taken out and put into the other."

She was unable to speak. He had mentioned madness: was he, Professor Ramsey Burr, crazy? It was likely enough. Yet—yet the whole thing, in these surroundings, seemed plausible. As she hesitated about speaking, watching with fascinated eyes the out-of-character behavior of the two beasts, Burr went on.

"The second part follows at once. Now that the two egos have interchanged, I will shift the bodies. When it is completed, the monkey will have taken the place of the cat, and vice versa. Watch."

He was busy for some time with his levers, and the smell of ozone reached Mrs. Baker's nostrils as she stared with horrified eyes at the animals.

She blinked. The sparks crackled madly, the monkey mewed, the cat chattered.

Were her eyes going back on her? She could see neither animal distinctly: they seemed to be shaking in some cosmic disturbance, and were but blurs. This illusion—for to her, it seemed it must be optical—persisted, grew worse, until the quaking forms of the two unfortunate creatures were like so much ectoplasm in swift motion, ghosts whirling about in a dark room.

Yet she could see the cages quite distinctly, and the table and even the indicators of the scales. She closed her eyes for a moment. The acrid odors penetrated to

her lungs, and she coughed, opening her eyes.

Now she could see clearly again. Yes, she could see a monkey, and it was climbing, quite naturally about its cage; it was excited, but a monkey. And the cat, while protesting mightily, acted like a cat.

Then she gasped. Had her mind, in the excitement, betrayed her? She looked at Professor Burr. On his lean face there was a smile of triumph, and he seemed to be awaiting her applause.

She looked again at the two cages. Surely, at first the cat had been in the right-hand cage, and the monkey in the left! And now, the monkey was in the place where the cat had been and the cat had been shifted to the left-hand cage.

"So it was with Smith, when the alloys burned out," said Burr. "It is impossible to extract the ego or dissolve the atoms and translate them into radio waves unless there is a connection with some other ego and body, for in such a case the translated soul and body would have no place to go. Luckily, for you,

madam, it was the man Smith who was killed when the alloys failed me. It might have been Allen, for he was the second pole of the connection."

"But," she began faintly, "how can this mad experiment have anything to do with saving my boy?"

He waved impatiently at her evident denseness. "Do you not understand? It is so I will save Allen, your son. I shall first switch our egos, or souls, as you say. Then switch the bodies. It must always take this sequence; why, I have not ascertained. But it always works thus."

Mrs. Baker was terrified. What she had just seen, smacked of the blackest magic—yet a woman in her position must grasp at straws. The world blamed her son for the murder of Smith, a man Professor Burr had made use of as he might a guinea pig, and Allen must be snatched from the death house.

"Do—do you mean you can bring Allen from the prison here—just by throwing those switches?" she asked.

"That is it. But there is more to it than that, for it is not magic, madam; it is science, you understand, and there must be some physical connection. But with your help, that can easily be made."

Professor Ramsey Burr, she knew, was the greatest electrical engineer the world had ever known. And he stood high as a physicist. Nothing hindered him in the pursuit of knowledge, they said. He knew no fear, and he lived on an intellectual promontory. He was so great that he almost lost sight of himself. To such a man, nothing was impossible. Hope, wild hope, sprang in Mary Baker's heart, and she grasped the bony hand of the professor and kissed it.

"Oh, I believe, I believe," she cried. "You can do it. You can save Allen. I will do anything, anything you tell me to."

"Very well. You visit your son daily at the death house, do you not?"

She nodded; a shiver of remembrance of that dread spot passed through her.

"Then you will tell him the plan and let him agree to see me the night preceding the electrocution. I will give him final instructions as to the exchange of bodies. When my life spirit, or ego, is confined in your son's body in the death house, Allen will be able to perform the feat of changing the bodies, and your son's flesh will join his soul, which will have been temporarily inhabiting my own shell. Do you see? When they find me in the cell where they suppose your son to be, they will be unable to explain the phenomenon; they can do nothing but release me. Your son will go here, and can be whisked away to a safe place of concealment."

"Yes, yes. What am I to do besides this?"

Professor Burr pulled out a drawer near at hand, and from it extracted a folded garment of thin, shiny material.

"This is metal cloth coated with the new alloy," he said, in a matter of fact tone. He rummaged further, saying as he did so, "I expected you would be here to see me, and I have been getting ready for your visit."

All is prepared, save a few odds and ends which I can easily clean up in the next two days. Here are four cups which Allen must place under each leg of his bed, and this delicate little director coil you must take especial pains with. It is to be slipped under your son's tongue at the time appointed."

She was staring at him still, half in fear, half in wonder, yet she could not feel any doubt of the man's miraculous powers. Somehow, while he talked to her and rested those cold eyes upon her, she was under the spell of the great scientist. Her son, before the trouble into which he had been dragged by the professor, had often hinted at the abilities of Ramsey Burr, given her the idea that his employer was practically a necromancer, yet a magician whose advanced scientific knowledge was correct and explainable in the light of reason.

Yes, Allen had talked to her often when he was at home, resting from his labors with Professor Burr. He had spoken of the new electricity discovered by the famous man, and also told his mother that Burr had found a method of separating atoms and then

transforming them into a form of radio-electricity so that they could be sent in radio waves, to designated points. And she now remembered—the swift trial and conviction of Allen on the charge of murder had occupied her so deeply that she had forgotten all else for the time being—that her son had informed her quite seriously that Professor Ramsey Burr would soon be able to transport human beings by radio.

"Neither of us will be injured in any way by the change," said Burr calmly. "It is possible for me now to break up human flesh, send the atoms by radio-electricity, and reassemble them in their proper form by these special transformers and atom filters."

Mrs. Baker took all the apparatus presented her by the professor. She ventured the thought that it might be better to perform the experiment at once, instead of waiting until the last minute, but this Professor Burr waved aside as impossible. He needed the extra time, he said, and there was no hurry.

She glanced about the room, and her eye took in the giant switches of copper with their black handles;

there were others of a gray-green metal she did not recognize. Many dials and meters, strange to her, confronted the little woman. These things, she felt with a rush of gratitude toward the inanimate objects, would help to save her son, so they interested her and she began to feel kindly toward the great machines.

Would Professor Burr be able to save Allen as he claimed? Yes, she thought, he could. She would make Allen consent to the trial of it, even though her son had cursed the scientist and cried he would never speak to Ramsey Burr again.

She was escorted from the home of the professor by Jared, and going out into the bright, sunlit street, blinked as her eyes adjusted themselves to the daylight after the queer light of the laboratory. In a bundle she had a strange suit and the cups; her purse held the tiny coil, wrapped in cotton.

How could she get the authorities to consent to her son having the suit? The cups and the coil she might slip to him herself. She decided that a mother would be allowed to give her son new underwear. Yes, she

would say it was that.

She started at once for the prison. Professor Burr's laboratory was but twenty miles from the cell where her son was incarcerated.

As she rode on the train, seeing people in everyday attire, commonplace occurrences going on about her, the spell of Professor Burr faded, and cold reason stared her in the face. Was it nonsense, this idea of transporting bodies through the air, in invisible waves? Yet, she was old-fashioned; the age of miracles had not passed for her. Radio, in which pictures and voices could be sent on wireless waves, was unexplainable to her. Perhaps—

She sighed, and shook her head. It was hard to believe. It was also hard to believe that her son was in deadly peril, condemned to death as a "scientific fiend."

Here was her station. A taxi took her to the prison, and after a talk with the warden, finally she stood there, before the screen through which she could talk

to Allen, her son.

"Mother!"

Her heart lifted, melted within her. It was always thus when he spoke. "Allen," she whispered softly.

They were allowed to talk undisturbed.

"Professor Burr wishes to help you," she said, in a low voice.

Her son, Allen Baker, M. D., turned eyes of misery upon her. His ruddy hair was awry. This young man was imaginative and could therefore suffer deeply. He had the gift of turning platitudes into puzzles, and his hazel eyes were lit with an elfin quality, which, if possible, endeared him the more to his mother. All his life he had been the greatest thing in the world to this woman. To see him in such straits tore her very heart. When he had been a little boy, she had been able to make joy appear in those eyes by a word and a pat; now that he was a man, the matter was more difficult, but she had always done her best.

"I cannot allow Professor Burr to do anything for me," he said dully. "It is his fault that I am here."

"But Allen, you must listen, listen carefully. Professor Burr can save you. He says it was all a mistake, the alloy was wrong. He has not come forward before, because he knew he would be able to iron out the trouble if he had time, and thus snatch you from this terrible place."

She put as much confidence into her voice as she could. She must, to enhearten her son. Anything to replace that look of suffering with one of hope. She would believe, she did believe. The bars, the great masses of stone which enclosed her son would be as nothing. He would pass through them, unseen, unheard.

For a time, Allen spoke bitterly of Ramsey Burr, but his mother pleaded with him, telling him it was his only chance, and that the deviltry Allen suspected was imaginary.

"He—he killed Smith in such an experiment," said

Allen. "I took the blame, as you know, though I only followed his instructions. But you say he claims to have found the correct alloys?"

"Yes. And this suit, you must put it on. But Professor Burr himself will be here to see you day after tomorrow, the day preceding the—the—" She bit her lip, and got out the dreaded word, "the electrocution. But there won't be any electrocution, Allen; no, there cannot be. You will be safe, safe in my arms." She had to fight now to hold her belief in the miracle which Burr had promised. The solid steel and stone dismayed her brain.

The new alloy seemed to interest Allen Baker. His mother told him of the exchange of the monkey and the cat, and he nodded excitedly, growing more and more restive, and his eyes began to shine with hope and curiosity.

"I have told the warden about the suit, saying it was something I made for you myself," she said, in a low voice. "You must pretend the coil and the cups are things you desire for your own amusement. You know,

they have allowed you a great deal of latitude, since you are educated and need diversion."

"Yes, yes. There may be some difficulty, but I will overcome that. Tell Burr to come. I'll talk with him and he can instruct me in the final details. It is better than waiting here like a rat in a trap. I have been afraid of going mad, mother, but this buoys me up."

He smiled at her, and her heart sang in the joy of relief.

How did the intervening days pass? Mrs. Baker could not sleep, could scarcely eat, she could do nothing but wait, wait, wait. She watched the meeting of her son and Ramsey Burr, on the day preceding the date set for the execution.

"Well, Baker," said Burr nonchalantly, nodding to his former assistant. "How are you?"

"You see how I am," said Allen, coldly.

"Yes, yes. Well, listen to what I have to say and note it

carefully. There must be no slip. You have the suit, the cups and the director coil? You must keep the suit on, the cups go under the legs of the cot you lie on. The director under your tongue."

The professor spoke further with Allen, instructing him in scientific terms which the woman scarcely comprehended.

"To-night, then at eleven-thirty," said Burr, finally. "Be ready."

Allen nodded. Mrs. Baker accompanied Burr from the prison.

"You—you will let me be with you?" she begged.

"It is hardly necessary," said the professor.

"But I must. I must see Allen the moment he is free, to make sure he is all right. Then, I want to be able to take him away. I have a place in which we can hide, and as soon as he is rescued he must be taken out of sight."

"Very well," said Burr, shrugging. "It is immaterial to me, so long as you do not interfere with the course of the experiment. You must sit perfectly still, you must not speak until Allen stands before you and addresses you."

"Yes, I will obey you," she promised.

Mrs. Baker watched Professor Ramsey Burr eat his supper. Burr himself was not in the least perturbed; it was wonderful, she thought, that he could be so calm. To her, it was the great moment, the moment when her son would be saved from the jaws of death.

Jared carried a comfortable chair into the laboratory and she sat in it, quiet as a mouse, in one corner of the room.

It was nine o'clock, and Professor Burr was busy with his preparations. She knew he had been working steadily for the past few days. She gripped the arms of her chair, and her heart burned within her.

The professor was making sure of his apparatus. He

tested this bulb and that, and carefully inspected the curious oscillating platform, over which was suspended a thickly bunched group of gray-green wire, which was seemingly an antenna. The numerous indicators and implements seemed to be satisfactory, for at quarter after eleven Burr gave an exclamation of pleasure and nodded to himself.

Burr seemed to have forgotten the woman. He spoke aloud occasionally, but not to her, as he drew forth a suit made of the same metal cloth as Allen must have on at this moment.

The tension was terrific, terrific for the mother, who was awaiting the culmination of the experiment which would rescue her son from the electric chair—or would it fail? She shuddered. What if Burr were mad?

But look at him, she was sure he was sane, as sane as she was.

"He will succeed," she murmured, digging her nails into the palms of her hands. "I *know* he will."

She pushed aside the picture of what would happen on the morrow, but a few hours distant, when Allen, her son, was due to be led to a legal death in the electric chair.

Professor Burr placed the shiny suit upon his lank form, and she saw him put a duplicate coil, the same sort of small machine which Allen possessed, under his tongue.

The Mephistophelian figure consulted a matter-of-fact watch; at that moment, Mrs. Baker heard, above the hum of the myriad machines in the laboratory, the slow chiming of a clock. It was the moment set for the deed.

Then, she feared the professor was insane, for he suddenly leaped to the high bench of the table on which stood one of the oscillating platforms.

Wires led out from this, and Burr sat gently upon it, a strange figure in the subdued light.

Professor Burr, however, she soon saw, was not

insane. No, this was part of it. He was reaching for switches near at hand, and bulbs began to glow with unpleasant light, needles on indicators swung madly, and at last, Professor Burr kicked over a giant switch, which seemed to be the final movement.

For several seconds the professor did not move. Then his body grew rigid, and he twisted a few times. His face, though not drawn in pain, yet twitched galvanically, as though actuated by slight jabs of electricity.

The many tubes fluoresced, flared up in pulsing waves of violet and pink: there were gray bars of invisibility or areas of air in which nothing visible showed. There came the faint, crackling hum of machinery rather like a swarm of wasps in anger. Blue and gray thread of fire spat across the antenna. The odor of ozone came to Mrs. Baker's nostrils, and the acid odors burned her lungs.

She was staring at him, staring at the professor's face. She half rose from her chair, and uttered a little cry.

The eyes had changed, no longer were they cold, impersonal, the eyes of a man who prided himself on the fact that he kept his arteries soft and his heart hard; they were loving, soft eyes.

"Allen," she cried.

Yes, without doubt, the eyes of her son were looking at her out of the body of Professor Ramsey Burr.

"Mother," he said gently. "Don't be alarmed. It is successful. I am here, in Professor Burr's body."

"Yes," she cried, hysterically. It was too weird to believe. It seemed dim to her, unearthly.

"Are you all right, darling?" she asked timidly.

"Yes. I felt nothing beyond a momentary giddy spell, a bit of nausea and mental stiffness. It was strange, and I have a slight headache. However, all is well."

He grinned at her, laughed with the voice which was not his, yet which she recognized as directed by her

son's spirit. The laugh was cracked and unlike Allen's whole-hearted mirth, yet she smiled in sympathy.

"Yes, the first part is a success," said the man. "Our egos have interchanged. Soon, our bodies will undergo the transformation, and then I must keep under cover. I dislike Burr—yet he is a great man. He has saved me. I suppose the slight headache which I feel is one bequeathed me by Burr. I hope he inherits my shivers and terrors and the neuralgia for the time being, so he will get some idea of what I have undergone."

He had got down from the oscillating platform, the spirit of her son in Ramsey's body.

"What—what are you doing now?" she asked.

"I must carry out the rest of it myself," he said. "Burr directed me when we talked yesterday. It is more difficult when one subject is out of the laboratory, and the tubes must be checked."

He went carefully about his work, and she saw him

replacing four of the tubes with others, new ones, which were ready at hand. Though it was the body of Ramsey Burr, the movements were different from the slow, precise work of the professor, and more and more, she realized that her son inhabited the shell before her.

For a moment, the mother thought of attempting to dissuade her son from making the final change; was it not better thus, than to chance the disintegration of the bodies? Suppose something went wrong, and the exchange did not take place, and her son, that is, his spirit, went back to the death house?

Midnight struck as he worked feverishly at the apparatus, the long face corrugated as he checked the dials and tubes. He worked swiftly, but evidently was following a procedure which he had committed to memory, for he was forced to pause often to make sure of himself.

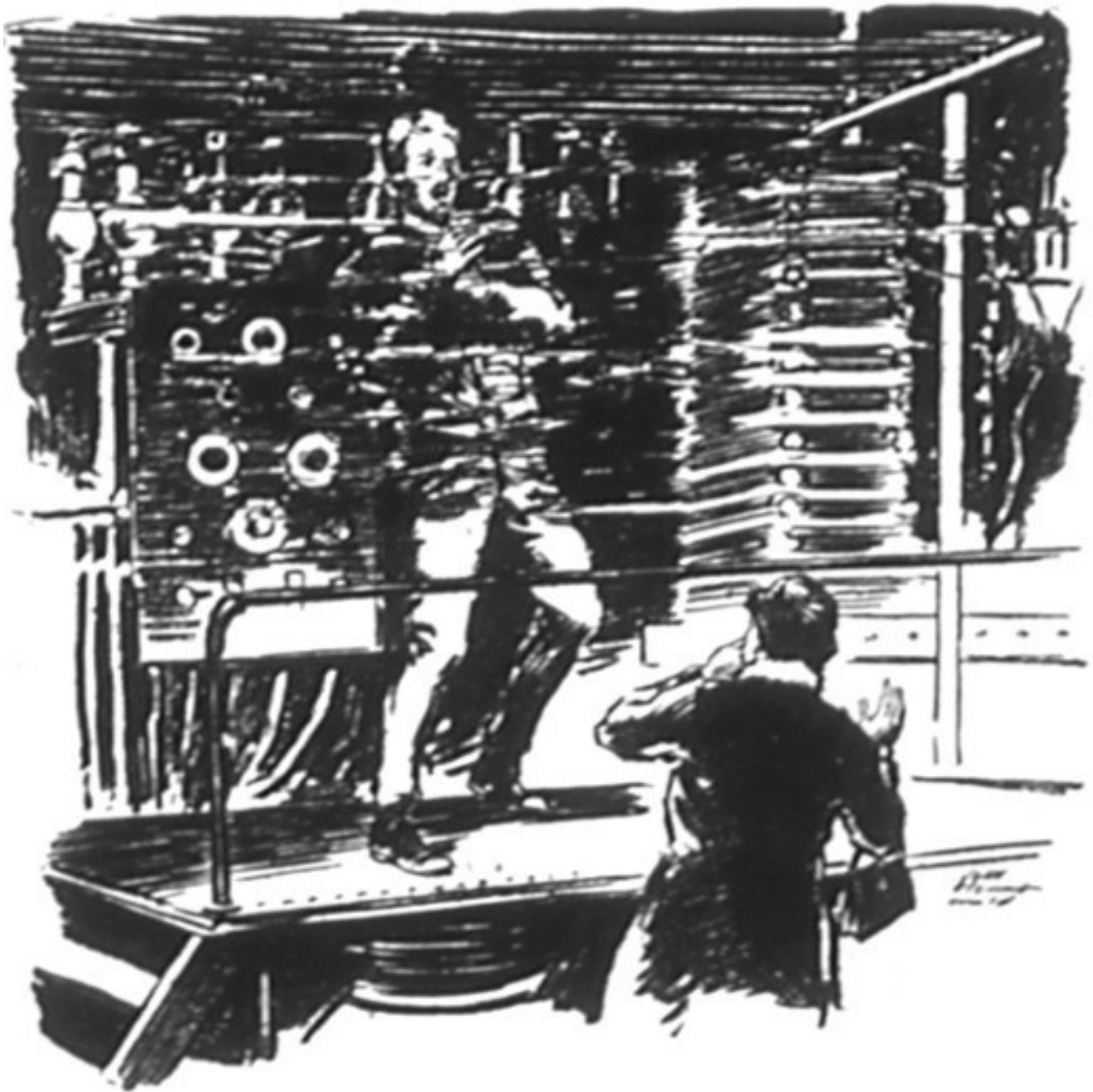
"Everything is O. K.," said the strange voice at last. He consulted his watch. "Twelve-thirty," he said.

She bit her lip in terror, as he cried, "Now!" and sprang to the table to take his place on the metallic platform, which oscillated to and fro under his weight. The delicate grayish metal antenna, which, she knew, would form a glittering halo of blue and gray threads of fire, rested quiescent above his head.

"This is the last thing," he said calmly, as he reached for the big ebony handled switch. "I'll be myself in a few minutes, mother."

"Yes, son, yes."

The switch connected, and Allen Baker, in the form of Ramsey Burr, suddenly cried out in pain. His mother leaped up to run to his side, but he waved her away. She stood, wringing her hands, as he began to twist and turn, as though torn by some invisible force. Every scream came from the throat of the man on the platform, and Mrs. Baker's cries of sympathy mingled with them.



[Image description start. A black and white illustration of a man standing on a platform in a laboratory, his mouth open as though crying out in pain, and his hands drawn to his chest, while a woman in front of the platform looks on in horror.

Image description end.]

The mighty motors hummed in a high-pitched, unnatural whine, and suddenly Mrs. Baker saw the tortured face before her grow dim. The countenance of the professor seemed to melt, and then there came a dull, muffled thud, a burst of white-blue flame, the odor of burning rubber and the tinkle of broken glass.

Back to the face came the clarity of outline, and still it was Professor Ramsey Burr's body she stared at.

Her son, in the professor's shape, climbed from the platform, and looked about him as though dazed. An acrid smoke filled the room, and burning insulation assailed the nostrils.

Desperately, without looking at her, his lips set in a determined line, the man went hurriedly over the apparatus again.

"Have I forgotten, did I do anything wrong?" she heard his anguished cry.

Two tubes were burned out, and these he replaced as swiftly as possible. But he was forced to go all over

the wiring, and cut out whatever had been short-circuited so that it could be hooked up anew with uninjured wire.

Before he was ready to resume his seat on the platform, after half an hour of feverish haste, a knock came on the door.

The person outside was imperative, and Mrs. Baker ran over and opened the portal. Jared, the whites of his eyes shining in the dim light, stood there. "De professah—tell him dat de wahden wishes to talk with him. It is very important, ma'am."

The body of Burr, inhabited by Allen's soul, pushed by her, and she followed falteringly, wringing her hands. She saw the tall figure snatch at the receiver and listen.

"Oh, God," he cried.

At last, he put the receiver back on the hook, automatically, and sank down in a chair, his face in his hands.

Mrs. Baker went to him quickly. "What is it, Allen?" she cried.

"Mother," he said hoarsely, "it was the warden of the prison. He told me that Allen Baker had gone temporarily insane, and claimed to be Professor Ramsey Burr in my body."

"But—but what is the matter?" she asked. "Cannot you finish the experiment, Allen? Can't you change the two bodies now?"

He shook his head. "Mother—they electrocuted Ramsey Burr in my body at twelve forty-five to-night!"

She screamed. She was faint, but she controlled herself with a great effort.

"But the electrocution was not to be until morning," she said.

Allen shook his head. "They are allowed a certain latitude, about twelve hours," he said. "Burr protested up to the last moment, and begged for time."

"Then—then they must have come for him and dragged him forth to die in the electric chair while you were attempting the second part of the change," she said.

"Yes. That was why it failed. That's why the tubes and wires burned out and why we couldn't exchange bodies. It began to succeed, then I could feel something terrible had happened. It was impossible to complete the Beta circuit, which short-circuited. They took him from the cell, do you see, while I was starting the exchange of the atoms."

For a time, the mother and her boy sat staring at one another. She saw the tall, eccentric figure of Ramsey Burr before her, yet she saw also the soul of her son within that form. The eyes were Allen's, the voice was soft and loving, and his spirit was with her.

"Come, Allen, my son," she said softly.

"Burr paid the price," said Allen, shaking his head.
"He became a martyr to science."

The world has wondered why Professor Ramsey Burr, so much in the headlines as a great scientist, suddenly gave up all his experiments and took up the practice of medicine.

Now that the public furor and indignation over the death of the man Smith has died down, sentimentalists believe that Ramsey Burr has reformed and changed his icy nature, for he manifests great affection and care for Mrs. Mary Baker, the mother of the electrocuted man who had been his assistant.

#24 The Ray Of Madness By Sterner St. Paul Meek:

Dr. Bird Uncovers a dastardly plot, amazing in its mechanical ingenuity, behind the apparently trivial eye trouble of the president.

Aproximate word count: 8,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

A knock sounded at the door of Dr. Bird's private laboratory in the Bureau of Standards. The famous scientist paid no attention to the interruption but bent his head lower over the spectroscope with which he was working. The knock was repeated with a quality of quiet insistence upon recognition. The Doctor smothered an exclamation of impatience and strode over to the door and threw it open to the knocker.

"Oh, hello, Carnes," he exclaimed as he recognized

his visitor. "Come in and sit down and keep your mouth shut for a few minutes. I am busy just now but I'll be at liberty in a little while."

"There's no hurry, Doctor," replied Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service as he entered the room and sat on the edge of the Doctor's desk. "I haven't got a case up my sleeve this time; I just came in for a little chat."

"All right, glad to see you. Read that latest volume of the *Zeitschrift* for a while. That article of Von Beyer's has got me guessing, all right."

Carnes picked up the indicated volume and settled himself to read. The Doctor bent over his apparatus. Time and again he made minute adjustments and gave vent to muttered exclamations of annoyance at the results he obtained. Half an hour later he rose from his chair with a sigh and turned to his visitor.

"What do you think of Von Beyer's alleged discovery?" he asked the operative.

"It's too deep for me, Doctor," replied the operative. "All that I can make out of it is that he claims to have discovered a new element named 'lunium,' but hasn't been able to isolate it yet. Is there anything remarkable about that? It seems to me that I have read of other new elements being discovered from time to time."

"There is nothing remarkable about the discovery of a new element by the spectroscopic method," replied Dr. Bird. "We know from Mendeleff's table that there are a number of elements which we have not discovered as yet, and several of the ones we know were first detected by the spectroscope. The thing which puzzles me is that so brilliant a man as Von Beyer claims to have discovered it in the spectra of the moon. His name, lunium, is taken from Luna, the moon."

"Why not the moon? Haven't several elements been first discovered in the spectra of stars?"

"Certainly. The classic example is Lockyer's discovery of an orange line in the spectra of the sun in 1868. No

known terrestrial element gave such a line and he named the new element which he deduced helium, from Helos, the sun. The element helium was first isolated by Ramsey some twenty-seven years later. Other elements have been found in the spectra of stars, but the point I am making is that the sun and the stars are incandescent bodies and could be logically expected to show the characteristic lines of their constituent elements in their spectra. But the moon is a cold body without an atmosphere and is visible only by reflected light. The element, lunium, may exist in the moon, but the manifestations which Von Beyer has observed must be, not from the moon, but from the source of the reflected light which he spectro-analyzed."

"You are over my depth, Doctor."

"I'm over my own. I have tried to follow Von Beyer's reasoning and I have tried to check his findings. Twice this evening I thought that I caught a momentary glimpse on the screen of my fluoroscope of the ultra-violet line which he reports as characteristic of lunium, but I am not certain. I

haven't been able to photograph it yet. He notes in his article that the line seems to be quite impermanent and fades so rapidly that an accurate measurement of its wave-length is almost impossible. However, let's drop the subject. How do you like your new assignment?"

"Oh, it's all right. I would rather be back on my old work."

"I haven't seen you since you were assigned to the Presidential detail. I suppose that you fellows are pretty busy getting ready for Premier McDougal's visit?"

"I doubt if he will come," replied Carnes soberly.
"Things are not exactly propitious for a visit of that sort just now."

Dr. Bird sat back in his chair in surprise.

"I thought that the whole thing is arranged. The press seems to think so, at any rate."

"Everything is arranged, but arrangements may be cancelled. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that they were."

"Carnes," replied Dr. Bird gravely, "you have either said too much or too little. There is something more to this than appears on the surface. If it is none of my business, don't hesitate to tell me so and I'll forget what you have said, but if I can help you any, speak up."

Carnes puffed meditatively at his pipe for a few minutes before replying.

"It's really none of your business. Doctor," he said at length, "and yet I know that a corpse is a chatterbox compared to you when you are told anything in confidence, and I really need to unload my mind. It has been kept from the press so far; but I don't know how long it can be kept muzzled. In strict confidence, the President of the United State acts as though he were crazy."

"Quite a section of the press has claimed that for a

long time," replied Dr. Bird, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I don't mean crazy in that way, Doctor, I mean *really* crazy. Bugs! Nuts! Bats in his belfry!"

Dr. Bird whistled softly.

"Are you sure, Carnes?" he asked.

"As sure as may be. Both of his physicians think so. They were non-committal for a while, especially as the first attack waned and he seemed to recover, but when his second attack came on more violently than the first and the President began to act queerly, they had to take the Presidential detail into their confidence. He has been quietly examined by some of the greatest psychiatrists in the country, but none of them have ventured on a positive verdict as to the nature of the malady. They admit, of course, that it exists, but they won't classify it. The fact that it is intermittent seems to have them stopped. He was bad a month ago but he recovered and became, to all appearances, normal for a time. About a week ago he began to show queer symptoms again and now he is

getting worse daily. If he goes on getting worse for another week, it will have to be announced so that the Vice-President can take over the duties of the head of the government."

"What are the symptoms?"

"The first we noticed was a failing of his memory. Coupled with this was a restlessness and a habit of nocturnal prowling. He tosses continually on his bed and mutters and at times leaps up and rages back and forth in his bedchamber, howling and raging. Then he will calm down and compose himself and go to sleep, only to wake in half an hour and go through the same performance. It is pretty ghastly for the men on night guard."

"How does he act in the daytime?"

"Heavy and lethargic. His memory becomes a complete blank at times and he talks wildly. Those are the times we must guard against."

"Overwork?" queried the Doctor.

"Not according to his physicians. His physical health is splendid and his appetite unusually keen. He takes his exercise regularly and suffers no ill health except for a little eye trouble."

Dr. Bird leaped to his feet.

"Tell me more about this eye trouble, Carnes," he demanded.

"Why, I don't know much about it, Doctor. Admiral Clay told me that it was nothing but a mild opthalmia which should yield readily to treatment. That was when he told me to see that the shades of the President's study were partially drawn to keep the direct sunlight out."

"Opthalmia be sugared! What do his eyes look like?"

"They are rather red and swollen and a little bloodshot. He has a tendency to shut them while he is talking and he avoids light as much as possible. I hadn't noticed anything peculiar about it."

"Carnes, did you ever see a case of snow blindness?"

The operative looked up in surprise.

"Yes, I have. I had it myself once in Maine. Now that you mention it, his case does look like snow blindness, but such a thing is absurd in Washington in August."

Dr. Bird rummaged in his desk and drew out a book, which he consulted for a moment.

"Now, Carnes," he said, "I want some dates from you and I want them accurately. Don't guess, for a great deal may depend on the accuracy of your answers. When was this mental disability on the part of the President first noticed?"

Carnes drew a pocket diary from his coat and consulted it.

"The seventeenth of July," he replied. "That is, we are sure, in view of later developments, that that was the date it first came on. We didn't realize that anything was wrong until the twentieth. On the night of the

nineteenth the President slept very poorly, getting up and creating a disturbance twice, and on the twentieth he acted so queerly that it was necessary to cancel three conferences."

Dr. Bird checked off the dates on the book before him and nodded.

"Go on," he said, "and describe the progress of the malady by days."

"It got progressively worse until the night of the twenty-third. The twenty-fourth he was no worse, and on the twenty-fifth a slight improvement was noticed. He got steadily better until, by the third or fourth of August, he was apparently normal. About the twelfth he began to show signs of restlessness which have increased daily during the past week. Last night, the nineteenth, he slept only a few minutes and Brady, who was on guard, says that his howls were terrible. His memory has been almost a total blank today and all of his appointments were cancelled, ostensibly because of his eye trouble. If he gets any worse, it probably will be necessary to inform the country as to

his true condition."

When Carnes had finished, Dr. Bird sat for a time in concentrated thought.

"You did exactly right in coming to me, Carnes," he said presently. "I don't think that this is a job for a doctor at all—I believe that it needs a physicist and a chemist and possibly a detective to cure him. We'll get busy."

"What do you mean, Doctor?" demanded Carnes. "Do you think that some exterior force is causing the President's disability?"

"I think nothing, Carnes," replied the Doctor grimly, "but I intend to know something before I am through. Don't ask for explanations: this is not the time for talk, it is the time for action. Can you get me into the White House to-night?"

"I doubt it, Doctor, but I'll try. What excuse shall I give? I am not supposed to have told you anything about the President's illness."

"Get Bolton, your chief, on the phone and tell him that you have talked to me when you shouldn't have. He'll blow up, but after he is through exploding, tell him that I smell a rat and that I want him down here at once with *carte blanche* authority to do as I see fit in the White House. If he makes any fuss about it, remind him of the fact that he has considered me crazy several times in the past when events showed that I was right. If he won't play after that, let me talk to him."

"All right, Doctor," replied Carnes as he picked up the scientist's telephone and gave the number of the home of the Chief of the Secret Service. "I'll try to bully him out of it. He has a good deal of confidence in your ability."

Half an hour later the door of Dr. Bird's laboratory opened suddenly to admit Bolton.

"Hello, Doctor," exclaimed the Chief, "what the dickens have you got on your mind now? I ought to skin Carnes alive for talking out of turn, but if you really have an idea, I'll forgive him. What do you

suspect?"

"I suspect several things, Bolton, but I haven't time to tell you what they are. I want to get quietly into the White House as promptly as possible."

"That's easy," replied Bolton, "but first I want to know what the object of the visit is."

"The object is to see what I can find out. My ideas are entirely too nebulous to attempt to lay them out before you just now. You've never worked directly with me on a case before, but Carnes can tell you that I have my own methods of working and that I won't spill my ideas until I have something more definite to go on than I have at present."

"The Doctor is right, Chief," said Carnes. "He has an idea all right, but wild horses won't drag it out of him until he's ready to talk. You'll have to take him on faith, as I always do."

Bolton hesitated a moment and then shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it your own way, Doctor," he said. "Your reputation, both as a scientist and as an unraveller of tangled skeins, is too good for me to boggle about your methods. Tell me what you want and I'll try to get it."

"I want to get into the White House without undue prominence being given to my movements, and listen outside the President's door for a short time. Later I will want to examine his sleeping quarters carefully and to make a few tests. I may be entirely wrong in my assumptions, but I believe that there is something there that requires my attention."

"Come along," said Bolton. "I'll get you in and let you listen, but the rest we'll have to trust to luck on. You may have to wait until morning."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," replied the Doctor. "I'll get a little stuff together that we may need."

In a few moments he had packed some apparatus in a bag and, taking up it and an instrument case, he

followed Bolton and Carnes down the stairs and out onto the grounds of the Bureau of Standards.

"It's a beautiful moon, isn't it?" he observed.

Carnes assented absently to the Doctor's remark, but Bolton paid no attention to the luminous disc overhead, which was flooding the landscape with its mellow light.

"My car is waiting," he announced.

"All right, old man, but stop for a moment and admire this moon," protested the Doctor. "Have you ever seen a finer one?"

"Come on and let the moon alone," snorted Bolton.

"My dear man, I absolutely refuse to move a step until you pause in your headlong devotion to duty and pay the homage due to Lady Luna. Don't you realize, you benighted Christian, that you are gazing upon what has been held to be a deity, or at least the visible manifestation of deity, for ages immemorial? Haven't

you ever had time to study the history of the moon-worshipping cults? They are as old as mankind, you know. The worship of Isis was really only an exalted type of moon worship. The crescent moon, you may remember, was one of her most sacred emblems."

Bolton paused and looked at the Doctor suspiciously.

"What are you doing—pulling my leg?" he demanded.

"Not at all, my dear fellow. Carnes, doesn't the sight of the glowing orb of night influence you to pious meditation upon the frailty of human life and the insignificance of human ambition?"

"Not to any very great degree," replied Carnes dryly.

"Carnesy, old dear, I fear that you are a crass materialist. I am beginning to despair of ever inculcating in you any respect for the finer and subtler things of life. I must try Bolton. Bolton, have you ever seen a finer moon? Remember that I won't move a step until you have carefully considered the matter and fully answered my question."

Bolton looked first at the Doctor, then at Carnes, and finally he looked reluctantly at the moon.

"It's a fine one," he admitted, "but all full moons look large on clear nights at this time of the year."

"Then you *have* studied the moon?" cried Dr. Bird with delight. "I was sure—"

He broke off his speech suddenly and listened. From a distance came the mournful howl of a dog. It was answered in a moment by another howl from a different direction. Dog after dog took up the chorus until the air was filled with the melancholy wailing of the animals.

"See, Bolton," remarked the Doctor, "even the dogs feel the chastening influence of the Lady of Night and repent of the sins of their youth and the follies of their manhood, or should one say doghood? Come along. I feel that the call of duty must tear us away from the contemplation of the beauties of nature."

He led the way to Bolton's car and got in without

further words. A half-hour later, Bolton led the way into the White House. A word to the secret service operative on guard at the door admitted him and his party, and he led the way to the newly constructed solarium where the President slept. An operative stood outside the door.

"What word, Brady?" asked Bolton in a whisper.

"He seems worse, sir. I doubt if he has slept at all. Admiral Clay has been in several times, but he didn't do much good. There, listen! The President is getting up again."

From behind the closed door which confronted them came sounds of a person rising from a bed and pacing the floor, slowly at first, and then more and more rapidly, until it was almost a run. A series of groans came to the watchers and then a long drawn out howl. Bolton shuddered.

"Poor devil!" he muttered.

Dr. Bird shot a quick glance around.

"Where is Admiral Clay?" he asked.

"He is sleeping upstairs. Shall I call him?"

"No. Take me to his room."

The President's naval physician opened the door in response to Bolton's knock.

"Is he worse?" he demanded anxiously.

"I don't think so, Admiral," replied Bolton. "I want to introduce you to Dr. Bird of the Bureau of Standards. He wants to talk with you about the case."

"I am honored, Doctor," said the physician as he grasped the scientist's outstretched hand. "Come in. Pardon my appearance, but I was startled out of a doze when you knocked. Have a chair and tell me how I can serve you."

Dr. Bird drew a notebook from his pocket.

"I have received certain dates in connection with the

President's malady from Operative Carnes," he said, "and I wish you to verify them."

"Pardon me a moment, Doctor," interrupted the Admiral, "but may I ask what is your connection with the matter? I was not aware that you were a physician or surgeon."

"Dr. Bird is here by the authority of the secret service," replied Bolton. "He has no connection with the medical treatment of the President, but permit me to remind you that the secret service is responsible for the safety of the President and so have a right to demand such details about him as are necessary for his proper protection."

"I have no intention in obstructing you in the proper performance of your duties, Mr. Bolton," began the Admiral stiffly.

"Pardon me, Admiral," broke in Dr. Bird, "it seems to me that we are getting started wrong. I suspect that certain exterior forces are more or less concerned in this case and I have communicated my suspicions to

Mr. Bolton. He in turn brought me here in order to request from you your cooperation in the matter. We have no idea of demanding anything and are really seeking help which we believe that you can give us."

"Pardon me, Admiral," said Bolton. "I had no intention of angering you."

"I am at your service, gentlemen," replied Admiral Clay. "What information did you wish, Doctor?"

"At first merely a verification of the history of the case as I have it."

Dr. Bird read the notes he had taken down from Carnes and the Admiral nodded agreement.

"Those dates are correct," he said.

"Now, Admiral, there are two further points on which I wish enlightenment. The first is the opthalmia which is troubling the patient."

"It is nothing to be alarmed about as far as symptoms

go, Doctor," replied the Admiral. "It is a rather mild case of irritation, somewhat analogous to granuloma, but rather stubborn. He had an attack several weeks ago and while it did not yield to treatment as readily as I could have wished, it did clear up nicely in a couple of weeks and I was quite surprised at this recurrent attack. His sight is in no danger."

"Have you tried to connect this opthalmia with his mental aberrations?"

"Why no, Doctor, there is no connection."

"Are you sure?"

"I am certain. The slight pain which his eyes give him could never have such an effect upon the mind of so able and energetic a man as he is."

"Well, we'll let that pass for the moment. The other question is this: has he any form of skin trouble?"

The Admiral looked up in surprise.

"Yes, he has," he admitted. "I had mentioned it to no one, for it really amounts to nothing, but he has a slight attack of some obscure form of dermatitis which I am treating. It is affecting only his face and hands."

"Please describe it."

"It has taken the form of a brown pigmentation on the hands. On the face it causes a slight itching and subsequent peeling of the affected areas."

"In other words, it is acting like sunburn?"

"Why, yes, somewhat. It is not that, however, for he has been exposed to the sun very little lately, on account of his eyes."

"I notice that he is sleeping in the new solarium which was added last winter to the executive mansion. Can you tell me with what type of glass it is equipped?"

"Yes. It is not equipped with glass at all, but with fused quartz."

"When did he start to sleep there?"

"As soon as it was completed."

"And all the time the windows have been of fused quartz?"

"No. They were glazed at first, but the glass was removed and the fused quartz substituted at my suggestion about two months ago, just before this trouble started."

"Thank you, Admiral. You have given me several things to think about. My ideas are a little too nebulous to share as yet but I think that I can give you one piece of very sound advice. The President is spending a very restless night. If you would remove him from the solarium and get him to lie down in a room which is glazed with ordinary glass, and pull down the shades so that he will be in the dark, I think that he will pass a better night."

Admiral Clay looked keenly into the piercing black eyes of the Doctor.

"I know something of you by reputation, Bird," he said slowly, "and I will follow your advice. Will you tell me why you make this particular suggestion?"

"So that I can work in that solarium to-night without interruption," replied Dr. Bird. "I have some tests which I wish to carry out while it is still dark. If my results are negative, forget what I have told you. If they yield any information, I will be glad to share it with you at the proper time. Now get the President out of that solarium and tell me when the coast is clear."

The Admiral donned a dressing gown and stepped out of the room. He returned in fifteen minutes.

"The solarium is at your disposal, Doctor," he announced. "Shall I accompany you?"

"If you wish," assented Dr. Bird as he picked up his apparatus and strode out of the room.

In the solarium he glanced quickly around, noting the position of each of the articles of furniture.

"I presume that the President always sleeps with his head in this direction?" he remarked, pointing to the pillow on the disturbed bed.

The Admiral nodded assent. Dr. Bird opened the bag which he had packed in his laboratory, took out a sheet of cardboard covered with a metallic looking substance, and placed it on the pillow. He stepped back and donned a pair of smoked glasses, watching it intently. Without a word he took off the glasses and handed them to the Admiral. The Admiral donned them and looked at the pillow. As he did so an exclamation broke from his lips.

"That plate seems to glow," he said in an astonished voice.

Dr. Bird stepped forward and laid his hand on the pillow. He was wearing a wrist watch with a radiolite dial. The substance suddenly increased its luminescence and began to glow fiercely, long luminous streamers seeming to come from the dial. The Doctor took away his hand and substituted a bottle of liquid for the plate on the pillow.

Immediately the bottle began to glow with a phosphorescent light.

"What on earth is it?" gasped Carnes.

"Excitation of a radioactive fluid," replied the Doctor.

"The question is, what is exciting it. Somebody get a stepladder."

While Bolton was gone after the ladder, the Doctor took from his bag what looked like an ordinary pane of glass.

"Take this, Carnes," he directed, "and start holding it over each of those panes of quartz which you can reach. Stop when I tell you to."

The operative held the glass over each of the panes in succession, but the Doctor, who kept his eyes covered with the smoked glasses and fastened on the plate which he had replaced on the pillow, said nothing. When Bolton arrived with the ladder, the process went on. One end and most of the front of the solarium had been covered before an exclamation

from the Doctor halted the work.

"That's the one," he exclaimed. "Hold the glass there for a moment."



[Image description start: A black and white illustration from the story *The Ray of Madness*, by Sterner St. Paul Meek. The left half of the illustration shows only the foreground, with a blank white background, showing two characters standing near a bed. The right half of the drawing shows the background, revealing that the ceiling of the room is

made of curved glass like a greenhouse. Carnes, also in a military uniform, is standing on a ladder, holding one of the panes of glass, while Bolton, the assistant, stands at the base holding the ladder steady with one hand. Dr. Bird, in a suit, stands at the head of the bed, with a suitcase and box of tools at his feet as he leans over the pillow, upon which rests a shining square of glass. Admiral Clay, in a long military uniform, stands at the foot of the bed, and has his hands in his pockets as he watches Dr. Bird. Image description end.]

Hurriedly he removed the plate from the pillow and replaced the phial of liquid. There was only a very feeble glow.

"Good enough," he cried. "Take away the glass, but mark that pane, and be ready to replace it when I give the word."

From the instrument case he had brought he took out a spectroscope. He turned back the mattress and mounted it on the bedstead.

"Cover that pane," he directed.

Carnes did so, and the Doctor swung the receiving tube of the instrument until it pointed at the covered pane. He glanced into the eyepiece, and then held a tiny flashlight for an instant opposite the third tube.

"Uncover that pane," he said.

Carnes took down the glass plate and the Doctor gazed into the instrument. He made some adjustments.

"Are you familiar with spectroscopy, Admiral?" he asked.

"Somewhat."

"Take a squint in here and tell me what you see."

The Admiral applied his eye to the instrument and looked long and earnestly.

"There are some lines there, Doctor," he said, "but

your instrument is badly out of adjustment. They are in what should be the ultra-violet sector, according to your scale."

"I forgot to tell you that this is a fluoroscopic spectroscope designed for the detection of ultra-violet lines," replied Dr. Bird. "Those lines you see are ultra-violet, made visible to the eye by activation of a radioactive compound whose rays in turn impinge on a zinc blende sheet. Do you recognize the lines?"

"No, I don't."

"Small wonder; I doubt whether there are a dozen people who would. I have never seen them before, although I recognize them from descriptions I have read. Bolton, come here. Sight along this instrument and through that plate of glass which Carnes is holding and tell me what office that window belongs to."

Bolton sighted as directed up at the side of the State, War and Navy Building.

"I can't tell exactly at this time of night, Doctor," he said, "but I'll go into the building and find out."

"Do so. Have you a flashlight?"

"Yes."

"Flash it momentarily out of each of the suspected windows in turn until you get an answering flash from here. When you do, flash it out of each pane of glass in the window until you get another flash from here. Then come back and tell me what office it is. Mark the pane so that we can locate it again in the morning."

"It is the office of the Assistant to the Adjutant General of the Army," reported Bolton ten minutes later.

"What is there in the room?"

"Nothing but the usual desks and chairs."

"I suspected as much. The window is merely a

reflector. That is all that we can do for to-night, gentlemen. Admiral, keep your patient quiet and in a room with *glass* windows, preferably with the shades drawn, until further notice. Bolton, meet me here with Carnes at sunrise. Have a picked detail of ten men standing by where we can get hold of them in a hurry. In the mean time, get the Chief of Air Service out of bed and have him order a plane at Langley Field to be ready to take off at 6 A. M. He is not to take off, however, until I give him orders to do so. Do you understand?"

"Everything will be ready for you, Doctor, but I confess that I don't know what it is all about."

"It's the biggest case you ever tackled, old man, and I hope that we can pull it off successfully. I'd like to go over it with you now, but I'll be busy at the Bureau for the rest of the night. Drop me off there, will you?"

At sunrise the next morning, Bolton met Dr. Bird at the entrance to the White House grounds.

"Where is your detail?" he asked.

"In the State, War and Navy Building."

"Good. I want to go to the solarium, put a light on the place where the President's pillow was last night, and mark that pane of quartz we were looking through. Then we'll join the detail."

Dr. Bird placed the light and walked with Carnes across the White House grounds. Bolton's badge secured admission to the State, War and Navy Building for the party and they made their way to the office of the Assistant to the Adjutant General.

"Did you mark the pane of glass through which you flashed your light last night, Bolton?" asked the Doctor.

The detective touched one of the panes.

"Good," exclaimed the Doctor. "I notice that this window has hooks for a window washer's belt. Get a life belt, will you?"

When the belt was brought, the Doctor turned to

Carnes.

"Carnes," he said, "hook on this life saver and climb out on the window ledge. Take this piece of apparatus with you."

He handed Carnes a piece of apparatus which looked like two telescopes fastened to a base, with a screw adjustment for altering the angles of the barrels.

Carnes took it and looked at it inquiringly.

"That is what I was making at the Bureau last night," explained Dr. Bird. "It is a device which will enable me to locate the source of the beam which was reflected from this pane of glass onto the President's pillow. I'll show you how to work it. You know that when light is reflected the angle of reflection always equals the angle of incidence? Well, you place these three feet against the pane of glass, thus putting the base of the instrument in a plane parallel to the pane of glass. By turning these two knobs, one of which gives lateral and the other vertical adjustment, you will manipulate the instrument until the first

telescope is pointing directly toward the President's pillow. Now notice that the two telescope barrels are fastened together and are connected to the knobs, so that when the knobs are turned, the scopes are turned in equal and opposite amounts. When one is turned from its present position five degrees to the west, the other automatically turns five degrees to the east. When one is elevated, the other is correspondingly depressed. Thus, when the first tube points toward the pillow, the other will point toward the source of the reflected beam."

"Clever!" ejaculated Bolton.

"It is rather crude and may not be accurate enough to locate the source exactly, but at least it will give us a pretty good idea of where to look. Given time, a much more accurate instrument could have been made, but two telescopic rifle sights and a theodolite base were all the materials I could find to work with. Climb out, Carnesy, and do your stuff."

Carnes climbed out on the window and fastened the hooks of the life saver to the rings set in the window

casings. He sat the base of the instrument against the pane of glass and manipulated the telescope knobs as Dr. Bird signalled from the inside. The scientist was hard to please with the adjustment, but at last the cross hairs of the first telescope were centered on the light in the solarium. He changed his position and stared through the second tube.

"The angle is too acute and the distance too great for accuracy," he said with an air of disappointment. "The beam comes from the roof of a house down along Pennsylvania Avenue, but I can't tell from here which one it is. Take a look, Bolton."

The Chief of the Secret Service stared through the telescope.

"I couldn't be sure, Doctor," he replied. "I can see something on the roof of one of the houses, but I can't tell what it is and I couldn't tell the house when I got in front of it."

"It won't do to make a false move," said the Doctor. "Did you arrange for that plane?"

"It is waiting your orders at the field, Doctor."

"Good. I'll go up to the office of the Chief of Air Service and get in touch with the pilot over the Chief's private line. There are some orders that I wish to give him and some signals to be arranged."

Dr. Bird returned in a few minutes.

"The plane is taking off now and will be over the city soon," he announced. "We'll take a stroll down the Avenue until we are in the vicinity of the house, and then wait for the plane. Carnes will take five of your men and go down behind the house and the rest of us will go in front. Which building do you think it is, Bolton?"

"About the fourth from the corner."

"All right, the men going down the back will take station behind the house next to the corner and the rest of us will get in front of the same building. When the plane comes over, watch it. If you receive no signal, go to the next house and wait for him to make

a loop and come over you again. Continue this until the pilot throws a white parachute over. That is the signal that we are covering the right house. When you get that signal, Carnes, leave two men outside and break in with the other three. Get that apparatus on the roof and the men who are operating it. Bolton and I will attack the front door at the same time. Does everybody understand?"

Murmurs of assent came from the detail.

"All right, let's go. Carnes, lead out with your men and go half a block ahead so that the two parties will arrive in position at about the same time."

Carnes left the building with five of the operatives. Dr. Bird and Bolton waited for a few minutes and then started down Pennsylvania Avenue, the five men of their squad following at intervals. For three-quarters of a mile they sauntered down the street.

"This should be it, Doctor," said Bolton.

"I think so, and here comes our plane."

They watched the swift scout plane from Langley Field swing down low over the house and then swoop up into the sky again without making a signal. The party walked down the street one house and paused. Again the plane swept over them without sign. As they stopped in front of the next house a white parachute flew from the cockpit of the plane and the aircraft, its mission accomplished, veered off to the south toward its hangar.

"This is the place," cried Bolton. "Haggerty and Johnson, you two cover the street. Bemis, take the lower door. The rest come with me."

Followed closely by Dr. Bird and two operatives, Bolton sprinted across the street and up the steps leading to the main entrance of the house. The door was barred, and he hurled his weight against it without result.

"One side, Bolton," snapped Dr. Bird.

The diminutive Chief drew aside and Dr. Bird's two hundred pounds of bone and muscle crashed against

the door. The lock gave and the Doctor barely saved himself from sprawling headlong on the hall floor. A woman's scream rang out, and the Doctor swore under his breath.

"Upstairs! To the roof!" he cried.

Followed by the rest of the party, he sprinted up the stairway which opened before him. Just as he reached the top his way was barred by an Amazonian figure in a green bathrobe.

"Who th' divil arre yer?" demanded an outraged voice.

"Police," snapped Bolton. "One side!"

"Wan side, is it?" demanded the fiery haired Amazon.

"The divil a stip ye go until ye till me ye'er bizness.

Phwat th' divil arre yer doin' in th' house uv a rayspictable female at this hour uv th' marnin'?"

"One side, I tell you!" cried Bolton as he strove to push past the figure that barred the way.

"Oh, ye wud, wud yer, little mann?" demanded the Irishwoman as she grasped Bolton by the collar and shook him as a terrier does a rat. Dr. Bird stifled his laughter with difficulty and seized her by the arm. With a heave on Bolton's collar she raised him from the ground and swung him against the Doctor, knocking him off his feet.

"Hilp! P'lice! Murther!" she screamed at the top of her voice.

"Damn it, woman, we're on—"

Dr. Bird's voice was cut short by the sound of a pistol shot from the roof, followed by two others. The Irishwoman dropped Bolton and slumped into a sitting position and screamed lustily. Bolton and Dr. Bird, with the two operatives at their heels, raced for the roof. Before they reached it another volley of shots rang out, these sounding from the rear of the building. They made their way to the upper floor and found a ladder running to a skylight in the roof. At the foot of the ladder stood one of Carnes' party.

"What is it, Williams?" demanded Bolton.

"I don't know, Chief. Carnes and the other two went up there, and then I heard shooting. My orders were to let no one come down the ladder."

As he spoke, Carnes' head appeared at the skylight.

"It's the right place, all right, Doctor," he called.

"Come on up, the shooting is all over."

Dr. Bird mounted the ladder and stepped out on the roof. Set on one edge was a large piece of apparatus, toward which the scientist eagerly hastened. He bent over it for a few moments and then straightened up.

"Where is the operator?" he asked.

Carnes silently led the way to the edge of the roof and pointed down. Dr. Bird leaned over. At the foot of the fire escape he saw a crumpled dark heap, with a secret service operative bending over it.

"Is he dead, Olmstead?" called Carnes.

"Dead as a mackerel," came the reply. "Richards got him through the head on his first shot."

"Good business," said Dr. Bird. "We probably could never have secured a conviction and the matter is best hushed up anyway. Bolton, have two of your men help me get this apparatus up to the Bureau. I want to examine it a little. Have the body taken to the morgue and shut up the press. Find out which room the chap occupied and search it, and bring all his papers to me. From a criminal standpoint, this case is settled, but I want to look into the scientific end of it a little more."

"I'd like to know what it was all about, Doctor," protested Bolton. "I have followed your lead blindly, and now I have a housebreaking without search-warrant and a killing to explain, and still I am about as much in the dark as I was at the beginning."

"Excuse me, Bolton," said Dr. Bird contritely; "I didn't mean to slight you. Admiral Clay wants to know about it and so does Carnes, although he knows me too well to say so. As soon as I have digested the case I'll let you know and I'll go over the whole thing with you."

A week later Dr. Bird sat in conference with the President in the executive office of the White House. Beside him sat Admiral Clay, Carnes and Bolton.

"I have told the President as much as I know, Doctor," said the Admiral, "and he would like to hear the details from your lips. He has fully recovered from his malady and there is no danger of exciting him."

"I cannot read Russian," said Dr. Bird slowly, "and so was forced to depend on one of my assistants to translate the papers which Mr. Bolton found in Stokowsky's room. There is nothing in them to definitely connect him with the Russian Union of Soviet Republics, but there is little doubt in my mind that he was a Red agent and that Russia supplied the money which he spent. It would be disastrous to Russia's plans to have too close an accord between this country and the British Empire, and I have no doubt that the coming visit of Premier McDougal was the underlying cause of the attempt. So much for the reason.

"As to how I came to suspect what was happening,

the explanation is very simple. When Carnes first told me of your malady, Mr. President, I happened to be checking Von Beyer's results in the alleged discovery of a new element, lunium. In the article describing his experiments, Von Beyer mentions that when he tried to observe the spectra, he encountered a mild form of opthalmia which was quite stubborn to treatment. He also mentions a peculiar mental unbalance and intense exhilaration which the rays seemed to cause both in himself and in his assistants. The analogy between his observations and your case struck me at once.

"For ages the moon has been an object of worship by various religious sects, and some of the most obscene orgies of which we have record occurred in the moonlight. The full moon seems to affect dogs to a state of partial hypnosis with consequent howling and evident pain in the eyes. Certain feeble minded persons have been known to be adversely affected by moonlight as well as some cases of complete mental aberration. In other words, while moonlight has no practical effect on the normal human in its usual

concentration, it does have an adverse effect on certain types of mentality and, despite the laughter of medical science, there seems to be something in the theory of 'moon madness.' This effect Von Beyer attributed to the emanations of lunium, which element he detected in the spectra of the moon, in the form of a wide band in the ultra-violet region.

"I obtained from Carnes a history of your case, and when I found that your attacks grew violent with the full moon and subsided with the new moon, I was sure that I was on the right track, although I had at that time no way of knowing whether it was from natural or artificial causes that the effect was being produced. I interviewed Admiral Clay and found that you were suffering from a form of dermatitis resembling sunburn, and that convinced me that an attack was being made on your sanity, for an excess of ultra-violet light will always tend to produce sunburn. I inquired about the windows of your solarium, for ultra-violet light will not pass through a lead glass. When the Admiral told me that the glass had been replaced with fused quartz, which is quite permeable

to ultra-violet and that the change had been almost coincident with the start of your malady, I asked him to get you out of the solarium and let me examine it.

"By means of certain fluorescent substances which I used, I found that your pillow was being bathed in a flood of ultra-violet light, and the fluoro-spectroscope soon told me that lunium emanations were present in large quantities. These rays were not coming to you directly from their source, but one of the windows of the State, War and Navy Building was being used as a reflector. I located the approximate source of the ray by means of an improvised apparatus, and we surrounded the place. Stokowsky was killed while attempting to escape. I guess that is about all there is to it."

"Thank you, Doctor," said the President. "I would be interested in a description of the apparatus which he used to produce this effect."

"The apparatus was quite simple, Sir. It was merely a large collector of moonlight, which was thrown after collection onto a lunium plate. The resultant

emanations were turned into a parallel beam by a parabolic reflector and focused, through a rock crystal lens with an extremely long focal length, onto your pillow."

"Then Stokowsky had isolated Von Beyer's new element?" asked the President.

"I am still in doubt whether it is a new element or merely an allotropic modification of the common element, cadmium. The plate which he used has a very peculiar property. When moonlight, or any other reflected light of the same composition falls on it, it acts on the ray much as the button of a Roentgen tube acts on a cathode ray. As the cathode ray is absorbed and an entirely new ray, the X-ray, is given off by the button, just so is the reflected moonlight absorbed and a new ray of ultra-violet given off. This is the ray which Von Beyer detected. I thought that I could catch traces of Von Beyer's lines in my spectroscope, and I think now that it is due to a trace of lunium in the cadmium plating of the barrels. Von Beyer could have easily made the same mistake. Von Beyer's work, together with Stokowsky's opens up an entirely new

field of spectroscopic research. I would give a good deal to go over to Baden and go into the matter with Von Beyer and make some plans for the exploitation of the new field, but I'm afraid that my pocketbook wouldn't stand the trip."

"I think that the United States owes you that trip, Dr. Bird," said the Chief Executive with a smile. "Make your plans to go as soon as you get your data together. I think that the Treasury will be able to take care of the expense without raising the income tax next year."

May 1930

#25 Murder Madness, By Murray Leinster:

Murder madness! Seven secret service men had completely disappeared. Another had been found a screaming, homicidal maniac, whose fingers writhed like snakes. So Bell, of the secret "Trade," plunges into South America after the master—the mighty, unknown octopus of power whose diabolical poison threatens a continent!

Aproximate word count: 63,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1

The engines of the *Almirante Gomez* were going dead slow. Away up beside her monster funnels her siren blew dismally, *Whoo-oo-oo-oo!* and was silent for the regulation period, and blew desolately again into the clinging gray mist that ringed her all about.

Her decks were wet and glistening. Droplets of water stood upon the deck-stanchions, and dripped from the outer edge of the roof above the promenade deck. A thin, swirling fog lay soggy upon the water and the big steamer went dead slow upon her course, sending dismal and depressing blasts from her horn from time to time. It was barely possible to see from one side of the ship to the other. It was surely impossible to see the bow from a point half astern.

Charley Bell went forward along the promenade deck. He passed Senor Ortiz, ex-Minister of the Interior of the Argentine Republic. Ortiz bowed to him punctiliously, but Bell had a sudden impression that the Argentine's face was gray and ghastly. He checked himself and looked back. The little man was climbing the companion-ladder toward the wireless room.

Bell slipped on toward the bow. He did not want to give an impression of furtiveness, but the *Almirante Gomez* was twelve days out of New York and Bell was still entirely ignorant of why he was on board. He had been called into the office of his chief in the State

Department and told curtly that his request for leave of absence had been granted. And Bell had not asked for a leave of absence. But at just that moment he saw a rubber band on the desk of his immediate superior, a fairly thick rubber band which had been tied into a certain intricate knot. And Bell had kept quiet. He went to his apartment, found his bags packed and tickets to Rio via the *Almirante Gomez* in an envelope on his dressing-table, and went out and caught a train to the ship.

And that was all he knew. The siren up above blared dolefully into the fog. It was damp, and soggy, and depressing. The other passengers were under cover, and the decks seemed to be deserted. From the saloon came the sound of music. Bell pulled the collar of his light topcoat about his throat and strolled on toward the bow.

He faced a row of steamer chairs. There was a figure curled up in one of them. Paula Canalejas, muffled up against the dampness and staring somberly out into the mist. Bell had met her in Washington and liked her a great deal, but he swore softly at sight of her in

his way.

The afternoon before, he had seen a stoker on the *Almirante Gomez* pick up a bit of rope and absently tie knots in it while he exchanged Rabelasian humor with his fellows. He had not looked at Bell at all, but the knots he tied were the same that Bell had last seen tied in a rubber band on a desk in the State Department in Washington. And Bell knew a recognition signal when he saw one. The stoker would be off watch, just now, and by all the rules of reason he ought to be out there on the forecastle, waiting for Bell to turn up and receive instructions.

But Bell paused, lit a cigarette carefully, and strolled forward.

"Mr. Bell."

He stopped and beamed fatuously at her. It would have been logical for him to fall in love with her, and it is always desirable to seem logical. He had striven painstakingly to give the impression that he had fallen in love with her—and then had striven even more

painstakingly to keep from doing it.

"Hullo," he said in bland surprise. "What are you doing out on deck?"

Brown eyes regarded him speculatively.

"Thinking," she said succinctly. "About you, Mr. Bell."

Bell beamed.

"Thinking," he confided, "is usually a bad habit, especially in a girl. But if you must think, I approve of your choice of subjects. What were you thinking about me?"

The brown eyes regarded him still more speculatively.

"I was wondering—" said Paula, glancing to either side, "I was wondering if you happen to be—er—a member of the United States Secret Service."

Bell laughed with entire naturalness.

"Good Lord, no!" he said amusedly. "I have a desk in

the State Department building, and I read consular reports all day long and write letters bedeviling the consuls for not including unavailable statistics in their communications. That's my work. I'm on leave now."

She looked skeptical and, it may be, disappointed.

"You look as if you didn't believe me," said Bell, smiling. "I give you my word of honor I'm not a member of the United States Secret Service. Will that do to relieve your suspicions?"

"I believe you," she said slowly, "but it does not relieve my mind. I shall think about other people. I have something important to tell a member of the United States Secret Service."

Bell shrugged.

"I'm sorry," he said amiably, "that I can't oblige you by tipping one of them off. That's what you wanted me to do, isn't it?"

She nodded, and the gesture was very much like a

dismissal. Bell frowned, hesitated, and went on. He was anxious to meet the stoker, but this....

The siren droned dismally over his head. Fog lay deep about the ship. The washing of the waves and dripping of water on the decks was depressing. It seemed to be getting thicker. Four stanchions ahead, the mist was noticeable. He found that he could count five, six, seven.... The eighth was indefinite. But a bar materialized in the fog before him, and the grayness drew away before him and closed in behind. When he was at the forward end of the promenade, looking down upon the forecastle deck, he was isolated. He heard footsteps some distance overhead. The watch officer up on the bridge. Bell glanced up and saw him as an indistinct figure. He waited until the officer paced over to the opposite side of the bridge. The air throbbed and shook with the roaring of the siren.

Bell slipped over the edge of the rail and swung swiftly down the little ladder of iron bars set into the ship's structure. In seconds he had landed, and was down upon that terra incognita of all passengers, the deck reserved for the use of the crew.

A mast loomed overhead, with its heavy, clumsy derrick-booms. A winch was by his side. Oddments of deck machinery, inexplicable to a landsman, formed themselves vaguely in the mist. The fog was thicker, naturally, since the deck was closer to the water's edge.

"Hey!" growled a voice close beside him. "Passengers ain't allowed down here."

An unshaven, soot-smeared figure loomed up. Bell could not see the man save as a blur in the mist, but he said cheerfully:

"I know it, but I wanted to look. Seafaring's a trade I'd like to know something about."

The figure grunted. Bell had just given his word of honor that he wasn't a member of the Secret Service. He wasn't. But he was in the Trade—which has no official existence anywhere. And the use of the word in his first remark was a recognition signal.

"What is your trade, anyways?" growled the figure

skeptically.

"I sharpen serpents' teeth from time to time," offered Bell amiably. He recognized the man, suddenly.

"Hullo, Jamison, you look like the devil."

Jamison drew nearer. He grunted softly.

"I know it. Listen closely, Bell. Your job is getting some information from Canalejas, Minister of War in Rio. He sent word up to Washington that he'd something important to say. It isn't treachery to Brazil, because he's a decent man. Seven Secret Service men have disappeared in South America within three months. They've found the eighth, and he's crazy. Something has driven him mad, and they say it's a devilish poison. He's a homicidal maniac, returning to the United States in a straight-jacket. Canalejas knows what's happened to the Service men. He said so, and he's going to tell us. His daughter brought the news to Washington, and then instead of going on to Europe as she was supposed to do, she started back to Rio. You're to get this formation and pass it on to me, then try to keep your skin whole and

act innocent. You were picked out because, as a State Department man, hell could be raised if you vanished. Understand?"

Bell nodded.

"Something horrible is going on. Secret Service can't do anything. The man in Asunción isn't dead—he's been seen—but he's cut loose. And Service men don't often do that. He don't report. That means the Service code may have been turned over, and hell to pay generally. It's up to the Trade."

"I've got it," said Bell. "Here are two items for you. Miss Canalejas just said she suspected I was Secret Service. I convinced her I wasn't. She says she has important information for a Service man."

The brawny figure of the stoker growled.

"Damn women! She was told somebody'd be sent to see her father. She was shown a recognition-knot with the outsider's variation. Given one, for father. That'll identify you to him. But she shouldn't have talked.

Now, be careful. As nearly as we know, that chap in the straight-jacket was given some poison that drove him insane. There are hellish drugs down there. Maybe the same thing happened to others. Look out for yourself, and give me the information Canalejas gives you as quickly as God will let you. If anything happens to you, we want the stuff to get back. Understand?"

"Of course," said Bell. He carefully did not shiver as he realized what Jamison meant by anything happening to him. "The other item is that Ortiz, ex-Minister of the Interior of the Argentine, is scared to death about something. Sending radios right and left."

"Umph," growled Jamison. "One of our men vanished in Buenos Aires. Watch him. You're friendly?"

"Yes."

"Get friendlier. See what he's got. Now shoo."

Bell swung up the ladder again. Mist opened before

him and closed again behind. He climbed over the rail to the promenade deck, and felt a little flare of irritation. There was a figure watching him.

He slipped to the deck and grinned sheepishly at Paula Canalejas. She stood with her hands in the pockets of her little sport coat, regarding him very gravely.

"I suppose," said Charley Bell sheepishly, "that I look like a fool. But I've always wanted to climb up and down that ladder. I suppose it's a survival from the age of childhood. At the age of seven I longed to be a fireman."

"I wonder," said Paula quietly. "Mr. Bell"—she stepped close to him—"I am taking a desperate chance. For the sake of my father, I wish certain things known. I think that you are an honorable man, and I think that you lied to me just now. Go and see Senor Ortiz. Your government will want to know what happens to him. Go and see him quickly."

Bell felt the same flare of irritation as before. Women

do not follow rules. They will not follow rules. They depend upon intuition, which is sometimes right, but sometimes leads to ungodly errors. Paula was right this time, but she could have been wholly and hopelessly wrong. If she had talked to anyone else....

"My child," said Bell paternally—he was at least two years older than Paula—"you should be careful. I did not lie to you just now. I am not Secret Service. But I happen to know that you have a tiny piece of string to give your father, and I beg of you not to show that to anyone else. And—well—you are probably watched. You must not talk seriously to me!"

He lifted his hat and started astern. He was more than merely irritated. He was almost frightened. Because the Trade, officially, does not exist at all, and everybody in the Trade is working entirely on his own; and because those people who suspect that there is a Trade and dislike it are not on their own, but have plenty of resources behind them. And yet it is requisite that the Trade shall succeed in its various missions. Always.

The Government of the United States, you understand, will admit that it has a Secret Service, which it strives to identify solely with the pursuit of counterfeiters, postal thieves, and violators of the prohibition laws. Strongly pressed, it will admit that some members of the Secret Service work abroad, the official explanation being that they work abroad to forestall smugglers. And at a pinch, and in confidence, it may concede the existence of diplomatic secret agents. But there is no such thing as the Trade. Not at all. The funds which members of the Trade expend are derived by very devious bookkeeping from the appropriations allotted to an otherwise honestly conducted Department of the United States Government.

Therefore the Trade does not really exist. You might say that there is a sort of conspiracy among certain people to do certain things. Some of them are government officials, major and minor. Some of them are private citizens, reputable and otherwise. One or two of them are in jail, both here and abroad. But as far as the Government of the United States is

concerned, certain fortunate coincidences that happen now and then are purely coincidences. And the Trade, which arranges for them, does not exist. But it has a good many enemies.

The fog-horn howled dismally overhead. Mist swirled past the ship, and an oily swell surged vaguely overside and disappeared into a gray oblivion half a ship's length away. Bell moved on toward the stern. It was his intention to go into the smoking-room and idle ostentatiously. Perhaps he would enter into another argument with that Brazilian air pilot who had so much confidence in Handley-Page wing-slots. Bell had, in Washington, a small private plane that, he explained, had been given him by a wealthy aunt, who hoped he would break his neck in it. He considered that wing-slots interfered with stunting.

He had picked out the door with his eye when he espied a small figure standing by the rail. It was Ortiz, the Argentine ex-Cabinet Minister, staring off into the grayness, and seeming to listen with all his ears.

Bell slowed up. The little stout man turned and

nodded to him, and then put out his hand.

"Senor Bell," he said quietly, "tell me. Do you hear airplane motors?"

Bell listened. The drip-drip-drip of condensed mist. The shuddering of the ship with her motors going dead slow. The tinkling, muted notes of the piano inside the saloon. The washing and hissing of the waves overside. That was all.

"Why, no," said Bell. "I don't. Sound travels freakishly in fog, though. One might be quite close and we couldn't hear it. But we're a hundred and fifty miles off the Venezuelan coast, aren't we?"

Ortiz turned and faced him. Bell was shocked at the expression on the small man's face. It was drained of all blood, and its look was ghastly. But the rather fine dark eyes were steady.

"We are," agreed Ortiz, very steadily indeed, "but I—I have received a radiogram that some airplane should fly near this ship, and it would amuse me to hear it."

Bell frowned at the fog.

"I've done a good bit of flying," he observed, "and if I were flying out at sea right now, I'd dodge this fog bank. It would be practically suicide to try to alight in a mist like this."

Ortiz regarded him carefully. It seemed to Bell that sweat was coming out upon the other man's forehead.

"You mean," he said quietly, "that an airplane could not land?"

"It might try," said Bell with a shrug. "But you couldn't judge your height above the water. You might crash right into it and dive under. Matter of fact, you probably would."

Ortiz's nostrils quivered a little.

"I told them," he said steadily, "I told them it was not wise to risk...."

He stopped. He looked suddenly at his hands,

clenched upon the rail. A depth of pallor even greater than his previous terrible paleness seemed to leave even his lips without blood. He wavered on his feet, as if he were staggering.

"You're sick!" said Bell sharply. Instinctively he moved forward.

The fine dark eyes regarded him oddly. And Ortiz suddenly took his hands from the railing of the promenade deck. He looked at his fingers detachedly. And Bell could see them writhing, opening and closing in a horribly sensate fashion, as if they were possessed of devils and altogether beyond the control of their owner. And he suddenly realized that the steady, grim regard with which Ortiz looked at his hands was exactly like the look he had seen upon a man's face once, when that man saw a venomous snake crawling toward him and had absolutely no weapon.

Ortiz was looking at his fingers as a man might look at cobras at the ends of his wrists. Very calmly, but with a still, stunned horror.

He lifted his eyes to Bell.

"I have no control over them," he said quietly. "My hands are useless to me, Senor Bell. I wonder if you will be good enough to assist me to my cabin."

Again that deadly pallor flashed across his face. Bell caught at his arm.

"What is the matter?" he demanded anxiously. "Of course I'll help you."

Ortiz smiled very faintly.

"If any airplane arrives in time," he said steadily, "something may be done. But you have rid me of even that hope. I have been poisoned, Senor Bell."

"But the ship's doctor...."

Ortiz, walking rather stiffly beside Bell, shrugged.

"He can do nothing. Will you be good enough to open this door for me? And"—his voice was hoarse for an

instant—"assist me to put my hands in my pockets. I cannot. But I would not like them to be seen."

Bill took hold of the writhing fingers. He saw sweat standing out upon Ortiz's forehead. And the fingers closed savagely upon Bell's hands, tearing at them. Ortiz looked at him with a ghastly supplication.

"Now," he said with difficulty, "if you will open the door, Senor Bell...."

Bell slid the door aside. They went in together. People were making the best of boresome weather within, frankly yawning, most of them. But the card-room would be full, and the smoking-room steward would be busy.

"My cabin is upon the next deck below," said Ortiz through stiff lips. "We—we will descend the stairs."

Bell went with him, his face expressionless.

"My cabin should be unlocked," said Ortiz.

It was. Ortiz entered, and, with his hands still in his pockets, indicated a steamer-trunk.

"Please open that." He licked his lips. "I—I had thought I would have warning enough. It has not been so severe before. Right at the top...."

Bell flung the top back. A pair of bright and shiny handcuffs lay on top of a dress shirt.

"Yes," said Ortiz steadily. "Put them upon my wrists, please. The poison that has been given to me is—peculiar. I believe that one of your compatriots has experienced its effects."

Bell started slightly. Ortiz eyed him steadily.

"Precisely." Ortiz, with his face a gray mask of horror, spoke with a steadiness Bell could never have accomplished. "A poison, Senor Bell, which has made a member of the Secret Service of the United States a homicidal maniac. It has been given to me. I have been hoping for its antidote, but—Quick! Senor Bell! Quick! The handcuffs!"

Chapter 2

The throbbing of the engines went on at an unvarying tempo. There was the slight, almost infinitesimal tremor of their vibration. The electric light in the cabin wavered rhythmically with its dynamo. From the open porthole came the sound of washing water. Now and then a disconnected sound of laughter or of speech came down from the main saloon.

Ortiz lay upon the bed, exhausted.

"It is perhaps humorous, Senor Bell," he said presently, in the same steady voice he had used upon the deck. "It is undoubtedly humorous that I should call upon you. I believe that you are allied with the Secret Service of your government."

Bell started to shake his head, but was still. He said nothing.

"I am poisoned," said Ortiz. He tried to smile, but it was ghastly. "It is a poison which makes a man mad in a very horrible fashion. If I could use my hands—and

could trust them—I would undoubtedly shoot myself. It would be entirely preferable. Instead, I hope—"

He broke off short and listened intently. His forehead beaded.

"Is that an airplane motor?"

Bell went to the port and listened. The washing of waves. The throbbing of the ship's engines. The dismal, long-drawn-out moaning of the fog-horn. Nothing else.... Yes! A dim and distant muttering. It drew nearer and died away again.

"That is a plane," said Bell. "Yes, It's out of hearing now."

Ortiz clamped his jaws together.

"I was about to speak," he said steadily, "to tell you—many things. Which your government should know. Instead, I ask you to go to the wireless room and have the wireless operator try to get in touch with that plane. It is a two-motored seaplane and it has a

wireless outfit. It will answer the call M.S.T.R. Ask him to use his directional wireless and try to guide it to the ship. It brings the antidote to the poison which affects me."

Bell made for the door. Ortiz raised his head with a ghastly smile.

"Close the door tightly," he said quietly. "I—I feel as if I shall be unpleasant."

Closing the door behind him, Bell felt rather like a man in a nightmare. He made for the stairway, bolted for the deck, and fairly darted up the ladder to the wireless room.

"Ortiz sent me," he said to the operator. "You heard that plane just now. See if you can get it."

The operator looked up at him beneath a green eyeshade and grinned crookedly.

"Talking to 'em now," he said.

The key flicked up and down, and a tiny dancing spark leaped into being and vanished beneath its contact-point. The wireless room was dark save for the bright, shaded light above the sending table. A file of sent messages by an elbow. A pad for messages received was by a hand. Stray wreaths of tobacco smoke floated about the room, leaping into view as they drifted beneath the lamp.

"Is he bad?" asked the operator fascinatedly, his eyes fixed on his key.

Bell felt his eyelids flicker.

"Very bad," he said shortly.

"They tell me," said the operator and shuddered, "your hands get working and you can't stop 'em.... I'm playing, I am! I'm playing The Master's game!"

The key stopped. He listened.

"They're going to try to swoop over the ship and drop it," he said a moment later. "I don't think they can.

But tell Ortiz they're going to try."

Bell's eyes were narrow. It is not customary for a radio operator on a passenger ship to speak of an ex-Cabinet Minister of the Argentine Republic by his surname only. It bespeaks either impertinence or a certain very peculiar association. Bell frowned imperceptibly for an instant, thinking.

"You've—had it?" he asked sharply.

"God, no! I never took the chance! I saw the red spots once, and I went to Rib—Say! You got a password?"

He was staring up at Bell. Bell shrugged.

"I'm trying to help Senor Ortiz now."

The operator continued to stare, his eyes full of suspicion. Then he grimaced.

"All right. Go tell him they're going to drop it."

Bell went out. Gray fog, and washing seas, and the

big ship ploughing steadily on toward the south.... The horn blared, startlingly loud and unspeakably doleful. Bell listened for other sounds. There were none.

Down the steep ladder to the promenade deck. Paula Canalejas nodded to him.

"I saw you speak to Senor Ortiz," she said quietly. "You see?"

Bell was beginning to have a peculiar, horrible suspicion. It was incredible, but it was inevitable.

"I think I see," he said harshly. "But I don't dare believe it. Keep quiet and don't speak to me unless I give you some sign it's safe! It's—hellish!"

He went inside and swiftly down the stairs. He found a steward hesitating outside the door of Ortiz's cabin. He touched Bell's arm anxiously as he was about to go in.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, and stammered. "I—I heard

Mr. Ortiz making some—very strange noises, sir. I—I thought he was sick...."

"He is," said Bell grimly. "He told me he does not want a doctor, though. I'm looking after him."

He closed the door behind him, and Ortiz grinned at him. It was a horrible, a terrible grin, and Ortiz fought it from his face with a terrific effort of will. There was foam about his lips.

"*Dios!* It was—it was devilish!" he gasped. "Senor Bell, *amigo mio*, for the love of the good God get my revolver from my trunk. Give it to me...."

Bell said shortly: "The airplane just radioed that it's going to try to swoop overhead and drop a package on board the steamer. It doesn't dare alight in this fog."

"I think," gasped Ortiz, "I think it would be well to tie my feet. Tie them fast! If—if the package comes, if I—if I am unpleasant, knock me unconscious and pour it into my mouth. I fear it is too late now. But try it...."

Through the port came the muttering of a seaplane's engines. The noise died away. Almost instantly the siren boomed hoarsely.

"Ah, *Dios!*" said Ortiz unsteadily. "There it is! Senor Bell, I think it is too late. Would you—would you assist me to go out on deck, where I might fling myself overboard? I—think I can control my legs so long."

"Steady!" said Bell, wrenched by the sight of the man before him fighting against unnameable horror. "Tell me—"

"It is poison," said Ortiz, his features fixed in a terrible effort of will. "A ghastly, a horrible poison of the *Indios* of Matto Grosso, in Brazil. It drives a man mad, murder mad. It is as if he were possessed by a devil. His hands first refuse to obey him. His feet next. And then his body. It is as if a devil had seized hold of his body and carried it about doing murder with it. A part of the brain is driven insane, and a man goes about shrieking with the horror of what crimes his body commits until the poison reaches that portion of his brain as well. Then he is mad forever.

That is what I face, *amigo mio*. That is why I beg you, I implore you, to kill me or assist me to the side of the ship so that I may fling myself overboard! The Master had it administered to me secretly, and demanded treason as the price of the antidote. He deman—"

Steady and strong, rising from a muttering to a steady roar, the sound of airplane motors came through the port. Bell started up.

"Hold fast," he snapped savagely. "I'll go get that package when it lands. Hold fast, I tell you! Fight it!"

He flung out of the cabin and raced up the stairs. The door to the deck was open. He crowded through a group of passengers who had discounted the dampness for the sake of a novelty—an airplane far out at sea—and raced up to the upper deck. The roaring noise was receding. The siren roared hoarsely. Then the noise came back.

For minutes, then, the ship seemed to play hide-and-seek with the invisible fliers. The roaring noise overhead circled about, now near, now seeming very

far away. And the siren sent its dismal blasts out into the grayness all about. Then, for an instant, a swiftly scudding shadow was visible overhead. It banked steeply and vanished, and seemed to have turned and come lower when it reappeared a moment later. It was not distinct, at first. It was merely a silhouette of darker gray against the all-enveloping mist. But its edges sharpened and became clear. One could make out struts, an aileron's trailing edge.

"Got nerve, anyhow," said Bell grimly.

It swept across the ship and disappeared, but the noise of its engines did not dwindle more than a little. The blast of the siren seemed to summon it back again. Once more it came in sight, and this time it dived steeply, flashed across the forecastle deck amid a hideous uproar, desperately, horribly close to the dangling derrick-cables, and was gone.

Bell had seen it more clearly than anyone else on the ship, perhaps. He saw a man in the pilot's cockpit between wings and tail reach high and fling something downward, something with a long

streamer attached to it. Bell had an instant's glimpse of the goggled face. Then he was darting forward, watching the thing that fell.

It took only a second. Two at most. But the thing seemed to fall with infinite deliberation, the streamer shivering out behind it. It fell at a steep slant, the forward momentum of the plane's speed added to its own drop. It swooped down, slanting toward the rail....

Bell groaned. It struck the rail itself, and bounced. A sailor flung himself toward it. The streamer slipped from his fingers and slithered over the side.

Bell was at the railing just in time to see it drop into the water. He opened his mouth to shout, and saw it sink. The last of the streamer followed the dropped object down into the green water when it was directly below him.

His hands clenched. Bell stared sickly at the spot where it had vanished. An instant later he had whirled and was thrusting wide the wireless room door. The

operator was returning to his key, grinning crookedly. He looked up sidewise.

"Tell them it went overside," snapped Bell. "Tell them to try it again. Ortiz is in hell! To try again! He's dying!"

The operator looked up fascinatedly, his fingers working his key.

"Is he—bad?" he asked with a shuddering interest.

"He's dying!" snarled Bell, in a rage because of his helplessness. He had forgotten everything but the fact that a man below decks was facing the most horrible fate that can overtake a man, and facing it with a steadfast gameness that made Bell's heart go out to him.

"They don't die," said the operator. He shuddered.

"They don't die of it."

His key stopped. He listened. His key clicked again.

"They only had two packages," he said a moment later. "They don't dare risk the other one. They say the fog ends twenty miles farther on. They're going to land up there and taxi back on the surface of the water. It shouldn't be more than half an hour."

He pushed himself back from the table with an air of finality.

"That's all. They've signed off."

Bell felt rage sweeping over him. The operator grinned crookedly.

"Better go down and tie him up," he said, and licked his lips with the fascinated air of one thinking of a known and terrifying thing. "Better tie him up tight. It'll be half an hour more."

Bell went down the companion-ladder. The promenade was crowded with passengers now, asking questions of each other. Some, frowning portentously, thought the plane an unscheduled ocean flier who had lost his way in the fog.

Paula Canalejas was close to Bell as he shouldered his way through the crowd.

"That was for him?" she asked, without moving her lips.

Bell nodded.

"Tell him," she said quietly, "I—pray for him."

Bell nodded abruptly and went into the saloon. It was nearly empty. He wiped the sweat off his face. It was horrible to have to go down to Ortiz and tell him that at best it would be half an hour more....

Then there was a sudden scream below him, and then a shot. Bell jumped for the stairs, his heart in his throat, and saw Ortiz coming out of his stateroom door. His eyes were wide and agonized. His body....

Even in the incredibly short time before he reached the bottom of the steps, Bell had time to receive the ghastly impression that Ortiz was sane, but that his body had gone mad. Ortiz's face was white and

horrified. His hands and arms were writhing savagely, working at the handcuffs on his wrists. His legs were carrying him at a curious, padding trot down the hallway. One of the hands held a glittering revolver. A steward was crouched behind a couch, his face white and filled with stark terror. And Ortiz held his head back, as if struggling to hold back and control his body, which was under the control of a malignant demon.

"Out of the way!" cried Ortiz in a voice of terrible despair. "Get someone to shoot me! Kill me! I cannot —ah, *Dios!*"

The hands leveled the revolver in spite of him, while he flung his head from side to side in a frantic attempt to disturb their aim.



[Image description start: A wide, black and white illustration showing Agent Bell, in a dark suit, stopping just at the base of a set of stairs, with another man crouching behind a couch in front of him. On the other side of the couch is Ortiz, standing with his back towards both of them, his hands twisting the gun he holds towards his own head.

Image description end.]

"Close your eyes!" panted Bell, and hurled himself upon—whom? It was not Ortiz. It was Ortiz's body, gone mad and raging. The manacled arms flailed about frenziedly. The gun went off. Again. Again....

Bell struck. He knocked the Thing that possessed Ortiz's body off its feet. The hands groped for him.

They clubbed at him with the revolver. The feet kicked....

"Keep your eyes closed," gasped Bell, struggling to get the gun away from those horrible hands. "It—it can't see when you keep your eyes closed!"

Fighting insanely as the Thing was fighting, he could not identify it with Ortiz himself. One of the hands unclosed from about the revolver and clawed at his throat. It seemed to abandon that effort and attacked Ortiz's face in a frenzy of rage, struggling to claw his eyes open. The other held the weapon fast with maniacal strength.

At the horror of feeling one of his own manacled hands attacking his face savagely as if it were itself a sensate thing, Ortiz opened his eyes. They were wide with despair.

The hand with the revolver made a sudden movement, and Bell flung his weight upon it as the clutching hand pulled the trigger. There was a deafening report....

The body seemed to weaken suddenly in Bell's grip. It fought less and less terribly, though with no lessening of its savagery. He managed to get the revolver away from the hands that shook with unspeakable rage. He flung it away and stood panting.

There was a crowd of people suddenly all about the place. Staring, stunned, incredulous people who regarded Bell with a dawning, damning suspicion.

Ortiz spoke suddenly. His voice was weak, but it was steady, and it was full of a desperate relief.

"I wish to make a statement," he said sharply. "I—I wished to commit suicide for personal reasons. Senor Bell tried to dissuade me. The handcuffs upon my wrists were placed there with my consent. Senor Bell is my friend and has done me no wrong. I shot myself, with intention."

Bell beckoned to the ship's doctor.

"Get him bandaged up," he ordered harshly. "There's no need for him to die."

The body was writhing only feebly, now. Ortiz looked up at him, and managed a smile. Again there was that incredible impression of the body not belonging to Ortiz, or Ortiz as a sane and whole and honorable, admirable man, and the feebly writhing body with its clutching hands as some evil thing that had properly been defeated and killed.

The doctor bent down. It was useless, of course. He made futile movements.

"I wish to speak to my friend, Senor Bell," said Ortiz weakly. "I—I have not long."

Bell knelt beside him.

"The Master's—deputy in Rio," panted Ortiz weakly, almost in a whisper, "is—is Ribiera. In Buenos Aires I—I do not know. There was a man—the one who poisoned me—but I killed him. Secretly. I do not think—the Master knows. I pray that—"

He stopped. He could not speak again. But he smiled, and a few seconds later Bell clenched his hands. Ortiz

was gone.

Someone touched his arm. Paula Canalejas. He stared down at her and managed to smile. It was not a very successful smile. He drew a deep breath.

"I would like," said Bell wryly, "to think that, when I die, I will die as well as this man did. But I'm afraid I shan't."

But Paula said:

"The airplane can be heard outside. It seems to be moving on the surface."

And ten minutes later the plane loomed up out of the mist, queerly ungainly on the surface of the water. Its motors roared impatiently as if held in leash. It swung clumsily about, heading off out of sight in the fog to turn. It came back, sliding along the top of the water with its wing-tip floats leaving alternate streaks of white foam behind them. A man stood up in its after cockpit.

Bell crowded to the rail. The man—goggled and masked—held up a package as if to fling it on board. Bell watched grimly. But he saw that the pilot checked himself and looked up at the upper deck. Bell craned his neck. The wireless operator was waving wildly to the seaplane. He writhed his hands, and held his hand to his head as if blowing out his brains, and waved the plane away, frantically.

The pilot of the plane sat down. A moment later its motors roared more thunderously. It is not safe to alight on either land or water when fog hangs low, but there is little danger in taking off.

The seaplane shot away into the mist, its motors bellowing. The sound of its going changed subtly. It seemed to rise, and grow more distant.... It died away.

Bell halted at the top of the companion-ladder and saw the wireless operator, with a crooked, nervous grin upon his face.

Chapter 3

Bell saw what he was looking for, out in the throng of traffic that filled the Avenida do Acre, in Rio. He'd seen it over the heads of the crowd, which was undersized, as most Brazilian crowds are, and he managed to get through the perpetual jam on the mosaic sidewalk and reach the curb.

He stood there and regarded the vehicles filling the broad avenue, wearing exactly the indifferent, half-amused air of a tourist with no place in particular to go and a great deal of time in which to go there. Taxis chuffed past, disputing right of way with private cars which were engaged in more disputes with other cars, all in the rather extraordinary bad temper and contentiousness which comes to the Latin-American when he takes the wheel of an automobile.

As if coming to an unimportant decision, Bell raised his hand to an approaching cab. It had two men on the chauffeur's seat. Of course. All taxis in Rio carry two men in front. One drives, and the other lights his cigarettes, makes witty comments upon passing

ladies, and helps in collecting the fares from recalcitrant passengers. The extra man is called the "secretary," and he assists materially in giving an impression of haughty pride.

The taxi ground to the curb. The secretary reached behind him indifferently and opened the door. Bell did not glance at him. He stepped inside and settled down languidly.

"The Beira Mar," he said listlessly.

The taxi started off with a jolt. It is the invariable custom in Rio de Janeiro. And besides, it reminds the passenger that he is merely a customer, admitted to the cab on sufferance, and that he must be suitably meek to those who will presently blandly ignore the amount registered by the meter and demand a fare of from eight to twenty-seven times the indicated amount.

The cab went shooting down the Avenida do Acre toward the harbor. The Avenida do Acre is officially the Avenida Rio Blanco, and it should be called by

that name, only people forget. The Beira Mar, however, is named with entire propriety. It is actually the edge of the sea, and it is probably one of the two or three most beautiful driveways in the world.

The cab whirled past the crowded sidewalks. Incredible numbers of people, with an incredible variation in the shades of their complexions, moved to and from with the peculiar aimlessness of a Brazilian crowd. A stout and pompous negro politician from Bahia, wearing an orchid in his button-hole, rubbed elbows with a striking blonde lady of the sidewalks on his left, and forced a wizened little silk-hatted *parda*—approximately an octoroon—to dodge about him in order to progress. A young and languid person, his clothes the very last expiring gasp of fashion, fingered his stick patiently. He wore the painstakingly cultivated expression of bored disillusionment your young Brazilian dandy considers aristocratic. It was very probable that he shared a particularly undesirable bedroom with four or five other young men in order to purchase such clothing, but then, *farenda fita*—making a picture—is the national

Brazilian sport.

Bell lighted a cigarette. It was not wise to regard the secretary of this particular taxi too closely, but if his face had been thickly smeared with coal dust, and if he had had a two weeks' beard, and if he had been seen on the forecastle of the *Almirante Gomez*, one would have deduced him to be a stoker who had not used the name of Jamison.

The cab reached the Beira Mar, and turned to take the long route about the bay. It is one of the most beautiful views to be found anywhere, and tall apartment houses have been built along its whole length to capitalize the scenery. True, the more brightly-colored ladies of the capital have established themselves in vast numbers among these apartment houses, but in their languid promenades they add—let us say—the beauties of art to those of nature.

A voice spoke from the chauffeur's seat.

"Bell."

"Right," said Bell without moving. His eyes flickered, however, and he found the device Jamison had inserted. A speaking-tube of sorts. Not especially efficient, but inconspicuous enough. He stirred listlessly and got his lips near it.

"All right to talk?" he asked briefly.

"Shoot," said Jamison from the secretary's seat beside the chauffeur. "This man doesn't understand English, and he thinks I'm in a smuggling gang. He expects to make some money out of me eventually."

Bell spoke curtly, while the taxi rolled past the Morro da Gloria with its quaint old church and went along the winding, really marvelous driveway past many beaches, with the incredibly blue water beyond.

"Canalejas is out of town," he said. "It isn't known when he'll be back. I met his daughter at a dance at our Embassy here, and she told me. We didn't dare to talk much, but she's frightened. Especially after what happened to Ortiz. And I've met Ribiera, whom Ortiz named."

"I've been looking him up," growled Jamison through the speaking-tube.

Bell flicked the ash from his cigarette out the door, and went on quietly.

"He's trying to get friendly with me. I've promised to call at his house and have him take me out to the flying field. He has two planes, he tells me, a big amphibian and a two-seater. Uses them for commuting between Rio and his place back inland. He went out of his way to cultivate me. I think he suspects I'm trying to find out something."

"Which you are," said Jamison dryly. "You've found out that Ortiz was right at least about—"

Bell nodded, and frowned at himself for having nodded. He spoke into the mouthpiece by his head with an expressionless face.

"He's practically fawned upon by a bunch of important officials and several high ranking army officers. Suspecting what I do, I think he's got hold of

a devil of a lot of power."

Jamison scowled in a lordly fashion upon a mere pedestrian who threatened to impede the movement of the taxicab by making it run over him.

"Ortiz," said Bell quietly, "told me he'd been poisoned, and treason asked as the price of the antidote. I've heard that the Brazilian Minister for Foreign Affairs went insane six months ago. I heard, also, that it was homicidal mania—murder madness. And I'm wondering if these people who fawn upon Ribiera aren't paying a price for—well—antidotes, or their equivalent. The Minister for Foreign Affairs may have refused."

"You're improving," said Jamison dryly. The taxi rounded a curve and a vista of sea and sand and royal palms spread out before it. "Yes, you're improving. But Ortiz spoke of Ribiera only as a deputy of The Master. Who is The Master?"

"God knows," said Bell. He stared languidly out of the window, for all the world to see. A tourist, regarding

the boasted beauties of the Biera Mar.

"A deputy," said Jamison without emotion, "of some unknown person called The Master poisoned Ortiz in Buenos Aires. And Ortiz was an important man in the Argentine. Ribiera is merely the deputy of that same unknown Master in Rio, and he has generals and state presidents and the big politicians paying court to him. If deputies in two countries that we know of have so much power, how much power has The Master?"

Silence. The taxi chugged steadily past unnoticed beauties and colorings. Rio is really one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

"It's like this," said Jamison jerkily. "Seven Service men vanish and one goes mad. You get two tips that the fate of Ortiz is the fate of the seven men—eight, in fact. We find that two men dispense a certain ghastly poison in two certain cities, at the orders of a man they call The Master. We find that those two men wield an astounding lot of power, and we know they're only deputies, only subordinates of the Master. We know, also, that the Service men vanished

all over the whole continent, not in just those two cities. How many deputies has The Master? What's it all about? He wanted treason of Ortiz, we know. What does he want of the other men his deputies have enslaved? Why did he poison the Service men? And why—especially why—do two honorable men, officials of two important nations, want to tip off the United States Government about the ghastly business? What's it got to do with our nation?"

Bell flung away his cigarette.

"That last question has occurred to me too," he observed, and carefully repressed a slight shiver. "I have made a guess, which is probably insane. I'm going to see Ribiera this afternoon."

"He already suspects you know too much," said Jamison without expression.

"I am"—Bell managed the ghost of a mirthless smile—"I am uncomfortably aware of it. And I may need an antidote as badly as Ortiz. If I do, and can't help myself, I'll depend on you."

Jamison growled.

"I simply mean," said Bell very quietly, "that I'd really rather not be—er—left alive if I'm mad. That's all. But Ortiz knew what was the matter with him before he got bad off. I know it's a risk. I'm goose-flesh all over. But somebody's got to take the risk. The guess I've made may be insane, but if it's right one or two lives will be cheap enough as a price for the information. Suppose you chaps turn around and take me to Ribiera's house?"

There was a long pause. Then Jamison spoke in Portuguese to his companion. The taxi checked, swerved, and began to retrace its route.

"You're a junior in the Trade," said Jamison painstakingly. "I can't order you to do it."

Bell fumbled with his cigarette case.

"The Trade doesn't exist, Jamison," he said dryly. "And besides, nobody gives orders in The Trade. There are only suggestions. Now shut up a while. I want to try

to remember some consular reports I read once, from the consul at Puerto Pachecho."

"What?"

"The consul there," said Bell, smiling faintly, "was an amateur botanist. He filled up his consular reports with accounts of native Indian medicinal plants and drugs, with copious notes and clinical observations. I had to reprove him severely for taking up space with such matters and not going fully into the exact number of hides, wet and dry, that passed through the markets in his district. His information will be entirely useless in this present emergency, but I'm going to try to remember as much of it as I can. Now shut up."

When the taxi swung off the Biera Mar to thread its way through many tree-lined streets—it is a misdemeanor, punishable by fine, to cut down a tree in Rio de Janeiro—it carried a young American with the air of an accomplished idler, who has been mildly bored by the incomparable view from the waterside boulevard. When it stopped at the foot of one of the slum covered *morros* that dot all Rio, and a liveried

doorman came out of a splendid residence to ask the visitor his name, the taxi discharged a young American who seemed to feel the heat, in spite of the swift motion of the cab. He wiped off his forehead with his handkerchief as he was assured that the Senhor Ribiera had given orders he was to be admitted, night or day. When the taxi drove off, it carried two men on the chauffeur's seat, of whom one had lost, temporarily, the manner of haughty insolence which is normally inseparable from the secretary of a taxicab chauffeur.

But though he wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, Bell actually felt rather cold when he followed his guide through ornately furnished rooms, which seemed innumerable, and was at last left to wait in an especially luxurious salon.

There was a pause. A rather long wait. A distinctly long wait. Bell lighted a cigarette and seemed to become mildly bored. He regarded a voluptuous small statuette with every appearance of pleased interest. A subtly decadent painting seemed to amuse him considerably. He did not seem to notice that no

windows at all were visible, and that shaded lamps lit this room, even in broad daylight.

Two servants came in, a footman in livery and the major-domo. Your average *Carioca* servant is either fawning or covertly insolent. These two were obsequious. The footman carried a tray with a bottle, glass, ice, and siphon.

"The Senhor Ribiera," announced the major-domo obsequiously, "begs that the Senhor Bell will oblige him by waiting for the shortest of moments until the Senhor Ribiera can relieve himself of a business matter. It will be but the shortest of moments."

Bell felt a little instinctive chill at sight of the bottle and glasses.

"Oh, very well," he said idly. "You may put the tray there."

The footman lifted the siphon expectantly. Bell regarded it indifferently. The wait before the arrival of this drink had been longer than would be required

merely for the announcing of a caller and the tending of a tray, especially if such a tray were a custom of the place. And the sending of a single bottle only, without inquiry into his preferences....

"No soda," said Bell. He poured out a drink into the tinier glass. He lifted it toward his lips, hesitated vaguely, and drew out his handkerchief again.

He sneezed explosively, and the drink spilled. He swore irritably, put down the glass, and plied his handkerchief vigorously. A moment later he was standing up and pouring the drink out afresh, from the bottle in one hand to the glass in the other. He up-tilted the glass.

"Get rid of this for me," he said annoyedly of the handkerchief.

He saw a nearly imperceptible glance pass between the footman and the major-domo. They retired, and Bell moved about the room exactly like a young man who has been discomfited by the necessity of sneezing before servants. Anywhere else in the world,

of course, such a pose would not have been convincing. But your Brazilian not only adopts *fazenda fita* as his own avocation, but also suspects it to be everybody else's too. And a young Brazilian of the leisure class would be horribly annoyed at being forced to so plebeian an exhibition in public.

He moved restlessly about the room, staring at the picture. Presently he blinked uncertainly and gazed about less definitely. He went rather uncertainly to the chair he had first occupied and sat down. He poured—or seemed to pour—another drink. Again he sneered, and looked mortified. He put down the glass with an air of finality. But he looked puzzledly about him. Then he sank back in his chair and gradually seemed to sink into a sort of apathetic indifference.

He looked, then, like a very bored young man on the verge of dozing off. But actually he was very much alert indeed. He had the feeling of eyes upon him for a while. Then that sensation ceased and he settled himself to wait. And meantime he felt a particular, peculiar gratitude to the late American consul at Puerto Pachecho for his interest in medicinal plants.

That gentleman had gone into the subject with the passionate enthusiasm of the amateur. He had described *icus*, *uirari* and *timbo*. He had particularized upon *makaka-nimbi* and *hervamoura*. And he had gone into a wealth of detail concerning *yagué*, on account of its probable value if used in criminology. As consul at Puerto Pachecho he was not altogether a success in some ways, but he had invented an entirely original method of experimentation upon those drugs and poisons which did not require to be introduced into the blood-stream. His method was simplicity itself. An alcoholic solution "carried" a minute quantity of the drug in its vapor, just as an alcoholic solution carries a minute quantity of perfuming essential oil. He inhaled the odor of the alcoholic solution. The effect was immediately, strictly temporary, and not dangerous. He was enabled to describe the odors, in some cases the tastes, and in a few instances the effects of the substances he listed, from personal experience.

And Bell had used his method as an unpromising but possible test for a drug in the drink that had been

brought him. He inhaled the strangling odor of the spilled liquor on his handkerchief. And there was a drug involved. For an instant he was dizzy, and for an instant he saw the room through a vivid blue haze. And something clicked in his brain and said "*It's yagué.*" And the relief of dealing with something which he knew—if only at second-hand—was so enormous that he felt almost weak.

Yagué, you see, is an extract from the leaves of a plant which is not yet included in *materia medica*. It has nearly the effect of scopolamine—once famous in connection with twilight sleep—and produces a daze of blue light, an intolerable sleepiness, and practically all the effects of hypnotism. A person under *yagué*, as under scopolamine or hypnosis, will seem to slumber and yet will obey any order, by whomever given. He will answer any question without reserve or any concealment. And on awakening he will remember nothing done under the influence of the potion. The effects are not particularly harmful.

Bell then, sat in an apparent half-daze, half-slumber, in the salon in which he waited for Ribiera to appear.

He knew exactly what he was expected to do. Ribiera wanted to find out what he knew or suspected about Ortiz's death. Ribiera wanted to know many things, and he would believe what Bell told him because he thought Bell had taken enough *yagué* to be practically an hypnotic subject. Let Ribiera believe what he was told!

When he came into the room, bland and smiling, Bell did not stir. He was literally crawling, inside, with an unspeakable repulsion to the man and the things for which he stood. But he seemed dazed and dull, and when Ribiera began to ask questions he babbled his answers in a toneless, flat voice. He babbled very satisfactorily, in Ribiera's view.

When Ribiera shook him roughly by the shoulder he started, and let his eyes clear. Ribiera was laughing heartily.

"Senhor! Senhor!" said Ribiera jovially. "My hospitality is at fault! You come to be my guest and I allow you to be so bored that you drop off to sleep! I was detained for five minutes and came in to find you

slumbering!"

Bell stared ruefully about him and rubbed his eyes.

"I did, for a fact," he admitted apologetically. "I'm sorry. Up late last night, and I was tired. I dropped in to see those planes you suggested I'd be interested in. But I daresay it's late, now."

Ribiera chuckled again. He was in his late and corpulent forties and was something of a dandy. If one were captious, one might object to the thickness of his lips. They suggested sensuality. And there was a shade—a bare shade—more of pigment in his skin than the American passes altogether unquestioned. And his hair was wavy.... But he could be a charming host.

"We'll have a drink," he said bluntly, "while the car's coming around to the door, and then go out to the flying field."

"No drink," said Bell, lifting his hand. "I feel squeamish now. I say! Haven't you changed the

lamps, or something? Everything looks blue...."

That was a lie. Things looked entirely normal to Bell. But he looked about him as if vaguely puzzled. If he had drunk the liquor Ribiera had sent him, things would have had a bluish tinge for some time after. But as it was....

Ribiera chaffed him jovially on the way to the flying field. And introducing him to fliers and officials of the field, he told with gusto of Bell's falling asleep while waiting for him. A very jolly companion, Ribiera.

But Bell saw two or three men looking at him very queerly. Almost sympathetically. And he noticed, a little later, that a surprising number of fliers and officials of the airport seemed to be concealing an abject terror of Ribiera. One or two of them seemed to hate him as well.

Chapter 4

Bell stepped out of a tall French window to a terrace, and from the terrace to the ground. There was a dull

muttering in the sky to the east, and a speck appeared, drew nearer swiftly, grew larger, and became a small army biplane. It descended steeply to earth behind a tall planting of trees. Bell lighted a cigarette and moved purposelessly down an elaborately formalized garden.

"More victims," he observed grimly to himself, of the plane.

Ribiera lifted a pigmented hand to wave languidly from a shaded chair. There were women about him, three of them, and it sickened Bell to see the frightened assiduity with which they flattered him. Bell had met them, of course. Madame the wife of the State President of Bahia—in the United States of Brazil the states have presidents instead of governors—preferred the title of "Madame" because it was more foreign and consequently more aristocratic than Senhora. And Madame the wife of the General—

"Senhor," called Ribiera blandly, "I have news for you."

Bell turned and went toward him with an air of pleased expectancy. He noticed for the first time the third of the women. Young, in the first flush of youthful maturity, but with an expression of stark terror lingering behind a palpably assumed animation.

"An acquaintance of yours, Senhor," said Ribiera, "is to be my guests."

Bell steeled himself.

"The Senhor Canalejas," said Ribiera, beaming, "and his daughter."

Bell seemed to frown, and then seemed to remember.

"Oh, yes," he said carelessly, "I met her in Washington. She was on the *Almirante Gomez*, coming down."

The next instant he saw Ribiera's expression, and cursed himself for a fool. Ribiera's eyes had narrowed sharply. Then they half-closed, and he smiled.

"She is charming," said Ribiera in drowsy contentment, "and I had thought you would be glad to improve her acquaintance. Especially since, as my friend, you may congratulate me. A contract of marriage is under discussion."

Bell felt every muscle grow taut. The fat, pigmented man before him....

"Indeed," said Bell politely, "I do congratulate you."

Ribiera looked at him with an expression in which a sardonic admiration mingled with something else less pleasant.

"You are clever, Senhor Bell," he said heavily, seeming to sink more deeply into his chair. "Very clever." He shifted his eyes to the women who stood about him. "You may go," he said indifferently. His tone was exactly that of a despot dismissing his slaves. Two of them colored with instinctive resentment. His eyes lingered an instant on the third. Her face had showed only a passionate relief. "You, Senhora," he said heavily, "may wait nearby."

The terror returned to her features, but she moved submissively to a spot a little out of earshot. Bell found his jaws clenched. There is a certain racial taint widespread in Brazil which leads to an intolerable arrogance when there is the slightest opportunity for its exercise. Ribiera had the taint, and Bell felt a sickening wrath at the terrified submission of the women.

"*Si*," said Ribiera, suddenly adverting to insolence. "You are clever, Senhor Bell. Where did you learn of *yagué*?"

Bell inhaled leisurely. His muscles were tense, but he gave no outward sign. Instead, he sat down comfortably upon the arm of a chair facing Ribiera's. The only way to meet insolence is with equal insolence and a greater calm.

"Ah!" said Bell pleasantly. "So you found out it didn't work, after all!"

Ribiera's eyes contracted. He became suddenly enraged.

"You are trifling with me," he said furiously. "Do you know the penalty for that?"

"Why, yes," said Bell, and smiled amiably. "A dose of—er—poison of The Master's private brand."

It was a guess, but based on a good deal of evidence. Ribiera turned crimson, then pale.

"What do you know?" he demanded in a deadly quietness. "You cannot leave this place. You are aware of that. The people here—guests and servants—are my slaves, the slaves of The Master. You cannot leave this place except also as my slave. I will have you bound and given *yagué* so that you cannot fail to tell me anything that I wish to know. I will have you tortured so that you will gladly say anything that I wish, in return for death. I will—"

"You will," said Bell dryly, "drop dead with seven bullets in your body if you give a signal for anyone to attack me."

Ribiera stared at him as his hand rested negligently in

his coat pocket. And then, quite suddenly Ribiera began to chuckle. His rage vanished. He laughed, a monstrous, gross, cackling laughter.

"You have been my guest for two days," he gasped, slapping his fat knees, "and you have not noticed that your pistol has been tampered with! Senhor Bell! Senhor Bell! My uncle will be disappointed in you!"

It seemed to impress him as a victory that Bell had been depending upon an utterly futile threat for safety. It restored his good humor marvelously.

"It does not matter," he said jovially. "Presently you will tell me all that I wish to know. More, perhaps. My uncle is pleased with you. You recall your little talk with the wireless operator on the *Almirante Gomez*? You tried to learn things from him, Senhor. He reported it. Of course. All our slaves report. He sent his report to my uncle, The Master, and I did not have it until to-day. I will admit that you deceived me. I knew you had talked with Ortiz, who was a fool. I thought that in his despair he might have spoken. I gave you *yagué*, as I thought, and informed my uncle

that you knew nothing. And he is very much pleased with you. It was clever to deceive me about the *yagué*. My uncle has high praise for you. He has told me that he desires your services."

Bell inhaled again. There was no question but that Ribiera was totally unafraid of the threat he had made. His gun must have been tampered with, the firing-pin filed off perhaps. So Bell said placidly:

"Well? He desires my services?"

Ribiera chuckled, in his gross and horrible good humor.

"He will have them. Senhor. He will have them. When you observe your hands writhing at the ends of your wrists, you will enter his service, through me. Of course. And he will reward you richly. Money, much money, such as I have. And slaves—such as I have. The Senhora...."

Ribiera looked at the terrified girl standing thirty or forty feet away. He chuckled again.

"My uncle desires that you should be induced to enter his service of your own will. So, Senhor, you shall see first what my uncle's service offers. And later, when you know what pleasures you may some day possess as my uncle's deputy in your own nation, why, then the fact that your hands are writhing at the ends of your wrists will be merely an added inducement to come to me. And I bear you no ill will for deceiving me. You may go."

Bell rose.

"And still," he said dryly, "I suspect that you are deceived. But now you deceive yourself."

He heard Ribiera chuckling as he walked away. He heard him call, amusedly, "Senhora." He heard the little gasp of terror with which the girl obeyed. He passed her, stumbling toward the gross fat man with the light brown skin and curly hair. Her eyes were literally pools of anguish.

Bell threw away his cigarette and began to fumble for another. He was beginning to feel the first twinges of

panic, and fought them down. Ribiera had not lied. Bell had been at this *fazenda* of his—which was almost a miniature Versailles three hundred miles from Rio—for two days. In all that time he had not seen one person besides himself who did not display the most abject terror of Ribiera. Ribiera had made no idle boast when he said that everyone about, guests and servants, were slaves. They were. Slaves of a terror vastly greater than mere fear of death. It—

"Senhor!... *Oh, Dios!*" It was the girl's voice, in despair.

Ribiera laughed. Bell felt a red mist come before his eyes.

He deliberately steadied his hands and lighted his cigarette. He heard stumbling footsteps coming behind him. A hand touched his arm. He turned to see the girl Ribiera had pointed out, her cheeks utterly, chalky white, trying desperately to smile.

"Senhor!" she gasped. "Smile at me! For the love of God, smile at me!"

In the fraction of a second, Bell was mad with rage. He understood, and he hated Ribiera with a corrosive hatred past conception. And then he was deathly calm, and wholly detached, and he smiled widely, and turned and looked at Ribiera, and Ribiera's whole gross bulk quivered as he chuckled. Bell took the girl's arm with an excessive politeness and managed—he never afterward understood how he managed it—to grin at Ribiera.

"Senhora," he said in a low tone, "I think I understand. Stop being afraid. We can fool him. Come and walk with me and talk. The idea is that he must think you are trying to fascinate me, is it not?"

She spoke through stiffened lips.

"Ah, that I could die!"

Bell had a horrible part to play while he walked the length of the formal garden with her, and found a pathway leading out of it, and led her out of sight. He stopped.

"Now," he said sharply, "tell me. I am not yet his slave. He has ordered you...."

She was staring before her with wide eyes that saw only despair.

"I—I am to persuade you to be my lover," she said dully, "or I shall know the full wrath of The Master...."

Bell asked questions, crisply, but as gently as he could.

"We are his slaves," she told him apathetically. "I and *mi Arturo*—my husband. Both of us...." She roused herself little under Bell's insistent questioning. "We were guests at his house at dinner. Our friends, people high in society and in the Republic, were all about us. We suspected nothing. We had heard nothing. But two weeks later Arturo became irritable. He said that he saw red spots before his eyes. I also. Then Arturo's hands writhed at the ends of his wrists. He could not control them. His nerves were horrible. And mine. And we—we have a tiny baby.... And Senhor Ribiera called upon my husband. He was

charming. He observed my husband's hands. He had a remedy, he said. He gave it to my husband. He became normal again. And then—my hands writhed. Senhor Ribiera told my husband that if he would bring me to him.... And I was relieved. We were grateful. We accepted the invitation of the Senhor Ribiera to this place. And he showed us a man, in chains. He—he went mad before our eyes. He was a member of the United States Secret Service.... And then the Senhor Ribiera told us that we faced the same fate if we did not serve him...."

Bell had thrust aside rage as useless, now. He was deliberately cold.

"And so?"

"It is a poison," she said unsteadily. "A deadly, a horrible poison which drives men murder mad in two weeks from the time of its administration. The Senhor Ribiera has an antidote for it. But mixed with the antidote, which acts at once, is more of the horrible poison, which will act in two weeks more. So that we are entrapped. If we disobey him...."

Bell began to smile slowly, and not at all mirthfully.

"I think," he said softly, "that I shall gain a great deal of pleasure from killing the Senhor Ribiera."

"*Dios—*" She strangled upon the word. "Do you not see, Senhor, that if he dies we—we—" She stopped and choked. "We—have a tiny baby, Senhor. We—we would...."

Again sick rage surged up in Bell. To kill Ribiera meant to drive his slaves mad, and mad in the most horrible fashion that can be imagined. To kill Ribiera meant to have these people duplicate the death of Ortiz, as their greatest hope, or to fill madhouses with snarling animals lusting to kill....

"It is—it is not only I, Senhor," said the girl before him. She was utterly listless, and in the agony of despair. "It is Arturo, also. The Senhor Ribiera has said that if I do not persuade you, that both Arturo and I.... And our little baby, Senhor!... Our families also will be entrapped some day. He has said so.... He will give that poison to our baby.... And it will grow up

either his slave, or—"

Her eyes were pools of panic.

"Oh, God!" said Bell very quietly. "And he's offering me this power! He's trying to persuade me to become like him. He's offering me pleasures!"

He laughed unpleasantly. And then he went sick with helplessness. He could kill Ribiera, perhaps, and let only God know how many people go mad. Perhaps. Or perhaps Ribiera would merely be supplanted by another man. Ortiz had said that he killed The Master's deputy in Buenos Aires, but that another man had taken his place. And the thing went on. And The Master desired a deputy in the United States....

"Somehow," said Bell very softly, "this has got to be stopped. Somehow. Right away. That devilish stuff! Can you get hold of a bit of the antidote?" he asked abruptly. "The merest drop of it?"

She shook her head.

"No, Senhor. It is given in food, in wine. One never knows that one has had it. It is tasteless, and we have only Senhor Ribiera's word that it has been given."

Bell's hands clenched.

"So devilish clever... What are we going to do?"

The girl stuffed the corner of her handkerchief into her mouth.

"I am thinking of my little baby," she said, choking. "I must persuade you, Senhor. I—I have been tearful. I—I am not attractive. I will try. If I am not attractive to you...."

Bell cursed, deeply and savagely. It seemed to be the only possible thing to do. And then he spoke coldly.

"Listen to me, Senhora. Ribiera talked frankly to me just now. He knows that so far I am not subdued. If I escape he cannot blame you. He cannot! And I am going to attempt it. If you will follow me...."

"There is no escape for me," she said dully, "and if he thinks that I knew of your escape and did not tell him...."

"Follow me," said Bell, smiling queerly. "I shall take care that he does not suspect it."

He gazed about for an instant, orienting himself. The plane that had just landed—the last of a dozen or more that had arrived in the past two days—had dipped down on the private landing field to the north.

There was a beautifully kept way running from the landing field to the house, and he went on through the thick shrubbery amid a labyrinth of paths, choosing the turnings most likely to lead him to it.

He came out upon it suddenly, and faced toward the field. There were two men coming toward the house, on foot. One was a flying pilot, still in his flying clothes. The other was a tall man, for a Brazilian, with the lucent clarity of complexion that bespeaks uncontaminated white descent. He was white-haired, and his face was queerly tired, as if he were

exhausted.

Bell looked sharply. He seemed to see a resemblance to someone he knew in the tall man. He spoke quickly to the girl beside him.

"Who is the man to the left?"

"Senhor Canalejas," said the girl drearily. "He is the Minister of War. I suppose he, too...."

Bell drew a deep breath. He walked on, confidently. As the two others drew near he said apologetically:

"Senhores."

They halted with the instinctive, at least surface, courtesy of the Brazilian. And Bell was fumbling with his handkerchief, rather nervously tying a knot in it. He held it out to Canalejas.

"Observe."

It was, of course, a recognition-knot such as may be

given to an outsider by one in the Trade. The tall man's face changed. And Bell swung swiftly and suddenly and very accurately to the point of the other man's jaw.

He collapsed.

"Senhor Canalejas," said Bell politely, "I am about to go and steal an airplane to take what I have learned to my companion for transmission. If you wish to go with me...."

Canalejas stared for the fraction of a second. Then he said quietly:

"But of course."

He turned to retrace his steps. Bell turned to the girl.

"If you are wise," he said gently, "you will go and give the alarm. If you are kind, you will delay it as much as you dare."

She regarded him in agonized doubt for a moment,

and nodded. She fled.

"Now," said Bell casually, "I think we had better hasten. And I hope, Senhor Canalejas, that you have a revolver. We will need one. Mine has been ruined."

Without a word, the white-haired man drew out a weapon and offered it to him.

"I had intended," he said very calmly, "to kill the Senhor Ribiera. His last demand is for my daughter."

They went swiftly. The plane Bell had seen alight some fifteen or twenty minutes before was just being approached by languid mechanics. It was, of course, still warm. Canalejas shouted and waved his arm imperiously. It is probable that he gave the impression of a man returning for some forgotten thing, left in the cockpit of the plane.

What happened then, happened quickly. A few crisp words in a low tone. A minor hubbub began suddenly back at the house. Canalejas climbed into the passenger's seat as if looking for something. And Bell

presented his now useless automatic pleasantly at the head of the nearest staring mechanic, and while he froze in horror, scrambled up into the pilot's cockpit.

"Contact!" he snapped, and turned on the switch. The mechanic remained frozen with fear. "Damnation!" said Bell savagely. "I don't know the Portuguese for 'Turn her over'!"

He fumbled desperately about in the cockpit. Something whirred. The propeller went over.... Canalejas shot with painstaking accuracy, twice. The motor caught with a spluttering roar.

As a horde of running figures, servants and guests, running with the same desperation, came plunging out on the flying field from the shrubbery. Bell gave the motor the gun. The fast little plane's tail came up off the ground as she darted forward. Faster and faster, with many bumpings. The bumpings ceased. She was clear.

And Bell zoomed suddenly to lift her over the racing, fear-ridden creatures who clutched desperately at the

wheels, and then the little ship shot ahead, barely cleared the trees to the east of the field, and began to roar at her topmost speed toward Rio.

Chapter 5

The Trade—which does not exist—has its obligations and its code, but also it has its redeeming features. When a man has finished his job, he has finished it. And as far as the Trade was concerned, Bell had but little more to do. But after that—and his eyes burned smokily in their depths—there was much that he intended to do. He sat in one of the *bondes* of the Botanical Garden half of the street railway system of Rio, and absent mindedly regarded the scenery. This particular *bonde* was headed out toward the Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, by which salty mass of water Bell would meet Paula Canalejas. He would receive a package from her, which he would deliver to Jamison. And then he would be free, and it was his private intention to engage in an enterprise which was very probably a form of suicide. But there are some things one cannot dismiss with a sage reflection that they are not one's business. This matter of Ribiera was

definitely one of them.

The escape from Ribiera's *fazenda* had been relatively easy, because so thoroughly unexpected. The little plane had climbed to five thousand feet and found a stratum of cloud that stretched for very many miles. Bell had emerged from it only twice in the first hour of flight, and the second time the sky was clear all about him. That he was pursued, he had no doubt. That Ribiera had wireless communications with Rio, he knew. And he knew that instant, and imperative orders would have gone out for his capture.

Rio would not be a healthy place for him. If Ribiera had power over high government officials, he had surely indirect power over the police, and a search for Bell would be in order at once. Yet Canalejas assuredly expected to return to Rio.

A shouted question with the motor cut out, and a nodded answer. Bell headed for Petropolis, which is Rio's only real summer resort and is high in the hills and only an hour and a half from it by train. It was surprisingly satisfactory to be handling a swift plane

again, and Bell allowed himself what he knew was about the only pleasure he was likely to have for some time to come.

Something of his hatred of Ribiera, however, came back as he prepared to land. He managed to crack the plane up very neatly, so that it would be of no use to Ribiera any more. And at the same time, of course, the cracking-up provided an excellent excuse for Canalejas to continue on by train.

They talked very briefly by the puffing engine.

"It is best," said Canalejas, "for you, Senhor, to remain here overnight. I believe Senhor Ribiera has given orders for us both to be looked for, yet as a Cabinet Minister I am still immune from arrest by the ordinary police. If I reach my home I shall be able to do all that is necessary."

"And you will prepare a message for me to carry," said Bell.

"It is ready," said Canalejas. He smiled faintly. "No,

Senhor. I have instructions to give my daughter. She will deliver the information to you to-morrow. Let me see. At the edge of the Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, at nine o'clock. She is the only messenger I can trust. I think that is all."

Bell hesitated uncomfortably.

"But you, sir," he said awkwardly. "You have been poisoned, as Senor Ortiz was."

"But certainly," said Canalejas. His smile was ironic as before. "But, unlike Senor Ortiz, I have no hope. I have arranged for my daughter to conceal herself and escape from Brazil. I have prepared for everything, Senhor. As you know, I had intended to kill Senhor Ribiera. In returning with you I have merely delayed my own death by a few hours."

Still smiling, and with the air of one entering a train for the most casual of journeys, Canalejas entered the coach.

And Bell, sitting in the *bonde* next morning, saw with

an uncanny clarity the one weak point in Ribiera's hold upon his subjects. When they had courage to fear nothing more than death, they could defy him. And not many could attain to that courage. But a few....

"I'll have some help, anyway," muttered Bell savagely to himself.

It is a long ride to the Botanical Gardens, from which one half the surface lines of Rio take their name. On the way out to the Lagao Rodrigo de Feitas, which, is close by the Garden itself, Bell had time to work over for the thousandth time the information he possessed, and realize its uselessness. Two things, only, might be of service. One was that Ribiera was the nephew of the person referred to as The Master, and yet was evidently as much subjected to him as his own victims to himself. The other was that the ultimate end of all the ghastly scheme was in some fashion political. If wealth alone had been Ribiera's aim, the gathering of his slaves would have had a different aspect. The majority of them would have been rich men, men of business, men who could pay out hundreds of

thousands a month in the desperate hope of being permitted to remain sane. There would not have been politicians and officials and officers of the army.

"The key men of the country," growled Bell inaudibly, "enslaved to Ribiera. They give him the power he's after more than cash. And it's those key men who have more to lose than money. There's such a thing as honor...."

Three times the conductor stopped beside him and suggestively rattled the coins in his box. Three times Bell absent mindedly paid the fare for the zone. But the ride is a long one, and he had had time to realize the hopelessness of any single-handed attack upon the thing he faced long before the end.

Then he absently moved through the amazing collection of tropic and near tropic growths that is the Botanical Garden until he came at once to Paula and the Lagoa Rodrico de Freitas.

It was alive with birds, and they hopped and pecked and squabbled without acrimony within feet of her

seated figure. Bell knew that she had been waiting for a long time. He looked quickly at her face. It was quite pale, but entirely tearless.

"Here is the message, Senhor Bell," she said quietly, "but I think I have been followed."

Bell growled in his throat.

"I did not discover it until I reached this spot," she said evenly. "And I did not know what to do. If I left, I would be seized and the message taken—and I think that someone would have waited here for you. So, in part to gain time, and in part because I hoped you might have some resource, I remained."

"How many of them?" asked Bell shortly.

"Two," she said quietly. She looked at him, her large eyes entirely calm and grave.

"Give me the package," said Bell briefly. "They'll be more anxious to get it back than to bother you. And I'll either knock them cold or hold them in a scrap

until you get away."

She reached in her pocket and handed him a small thick envelope. He stuffed it in the side pocket of his coat.

"I will walk away," he observed, "and they'll follow me. Can you arrange to give me some sign that you're safe?"

"By the gateway," she told him. "My handkerchief. I shall start as soon as you have vanished. If I am followed, I will drop this handkerchief, as it is. If I am not followed, I will tie a knot. But what can you do?"

"I'll do something," said Bell coldly. "Something!"

She smiled, with the same odd bitterness her father had shown.

"My father—shot himself," she said briefly. "I have no particular hope of doing better. But I shall not be Ribiera's slave."

She remained quite still. Bell moved away. He hurried. There was thick jungle ahead, a section of the Gardens that is painstakingly preserved untouched and undisturbed, that visitors to the capital of Brazil may observe a typical sample of the virgin interior. He dived into that jungle as if in flight.

And very shortly after, two men dived in after him. They hesitated, these men, because your policeman of Rio does not like to injure his uniform, and there are many thorns in jungle growths. But they entered it, having first drawn small glittering weapons. And then from the jungle came silence.

It seemed to be silence. But there may have been some small unusual noises. It would not be easy to tell if they were unusual or not, because there are peculiar flashes of charm in certain Brazilian institutions. The preservation of the spot of jungle itself is one. Another is the fact that in the Gardens all manner of wild things live at large and provide unexpected and delightful surprises to the usually foreign visitors.

So there were noises, after a bit. Such noises as some grunting wild thing might have made, perhaps. But they might also have been the gasping of a man as breath was choked out of him.... And there was a cracking sound a little later, which might—of course—have been any one of any number of accidental and perfectly natural causes. And it might have been a man upon whom another man had hurled himself, when the second man landed on his jaw. And thrashing noises a little later might have been anything.

But after what seemed a long time, Bell emerged. Alone. He was breathing quickly, and there were scratches on his face and hands which—well, which might have been made by thorns. He went swiftly back toward the spot where Paula had waited. He looked cautiously. She was gone.

And then Bell went leisurely, in the studious fashion of a person going through the Botanical Gardens because it was the thing to do, toward the gateway and the surface cars. As he neared the gate his eyes roved with apparent casualness all about. He saw a

tiny speck of white on the edge of the roadway. It looked as if it had been flung from a car. Bell picked it up. It was Paula's handkerchief, and there was no knot whatever in it. In fact, its lacy edge was torn.

"They've got her," said Bell, apparently unmoved.

He waited for a car. A bulky figure wearing thick spectacles came placidly from the Gardens. It waited, also, for the car. The car arrived, in its two sections of first and second class; the first reserved for *cavalhieros*, which is to say persons wearing coat, shirt, collar, necktie, hat, shoes and socks, and carrying no parcel larger than a brief case. Lesser folk who lacked any of the sartorial requirements for admission to the first class section, or wore *tomancos* instead of shoes, heaped themselves into the second section and paid one-third of the fare in the first.

Bell took his seat in the first section. It was comfortably filled. The bulky person with the thick spectacles wedged himself carefully into the space beside Bell. He unfolded a copy of the *Jornal do Commercio* and began to regard the advertisements.

Presently he found what he was looking for. "*O Bicho*," said medium-sized type. Beside it was a picture of a kangaroo. The gentleman with the thick spectacles resignedly fished into his pockets and found a lottery ticket. He tore it into scraps and threw them away. Then he began to gaze disinterestedly at the scenery and the other passengers in the car.

Bell drummed on his knee. With one's forefinger representing a dot, and one's second finger serving as a dash, it is surprising how naturally and absentmindedly one may convey a perfectly intelligible message to a man sitting within a reasonable distance. When the man is alongside, the matter is absurdly simple.

Presently the man with the thick lenses got out his paper again, as if bored by vistas such as no other city in the world can offer. His paper was in the pocket which pressed against Bell. If in getting out his newspaper he also abstracted a thick fat envelope from Bell's pocket and placed it in his own, and if all this took place under a sign—even in the section reserved for *cavalhieros* of approved raiment—

solemnly warning passengers against "*batadores de carteiras*," or pickpockets—well, it was an ironical coincidence whose humor Bell did not see.

He was busily tapping out on his knee the briefest possible account of what he had learned at Ribiera's *fazenda* up country.

"*One chance for me*," he tapped off at the end. "*If I can kidnap Ribiera I can make him talk. Somehow. He has big amphibian plane kept fueled and ready for long trip. I think he is back in Rio to direct hunt for me. Paula kidnapped. My job finished. On my own now.*"

The man with thick spectacles did not nod. He seemed to be looking idly at his paper, but it was folded at an article very discreetly phrased, beneath a photograph of Senhor Teixeira Canalejas, Minister of War, who had very unfortunately been found dead that morning. He had been depressed, of late, but there were certain circumstances which made it as yet impossible to determine whether he had killed himself or was the victim of an assassin.

"Getting set for me," tapped Bell grimly on his knee.
"Ribiera told me too much."

The man with thick spectacles yawned and turned the paper over. Under a smaller headline—which would only find a place on a Brazilian sheet—"A Regrettable Incident"—an item of more direct importance was printed. It told of an unnamed Senhor from the United States of the North America, who as the guest of a widely known Brazilian gentleman had behaved most boorishly, had stolen an airplane from his host and broken it to bits on landing unskilfully, and had vanished with priceless heirlooms belonging to his host. It read, virtuously:

No names are mentioned because the American Senhor has been widely introduced in Rio society as a person with an official status in Washington. It is understood that an inquiry is to be made of the Ambassador as to the status of the young man, before any action is taken by the police. It is to be expected, however, that he will at least be requested to leave the country.

Bell managed the barest flicker of a smile. Arrest, of course. Detention, most courteously arranged, while the Ambassador was communicated with. And Ribiera.

"*Give me dismiss,*" he tapped on his knee.

The gentleman in the thick spectacles ran his finger thoughtfully about the edge of his collar. In the Trade that is a signal of many varied meanings. A hand across the throat in any fashion means, "Clear out, your job is finished," "Save your skin as best you can," and "Get away without trying to help me," according to circumstances. In this case it relieved Bell of all future responsibility.

He yawned, tapping his lips with the back of his hand, signaled for a stop of the car, and got out. Five minutes later he had signaled a taxicab and given Ribiera's address. In six minutes he was being whirled toward the one house in all Rio de Janeiro from which his chance of a safe departure was slightest. In little more than half an hour he had dismissed the cab and was gazing placidly into the

startled eyes of the doorman. The doorman, like all of Rio where Ribiera was known and feared, knew that Bell was being hunted.

Bell handed over his card with an inscrutable air.

"The Senhor Ribiera," he said drily, "returned to the city last night. Present my card and say that I would like to speak to him."

The doorman ushered him inside and summoned the major-domo, still blinking his amazement. And the major-domo blinked again. But Bell followed with the air of an habitué, as he was again ushered into the luxurious salon in which he had once been offered a drugged drink.

Again he sank down in a softly padded chair and surveyed the pictures and the minor objects of decadent art about him. Again he lighted a cigarette with every appearance of ease, and again had the impression of eyes upon him. The major-domo appeared, somewhat agitated.

"The Senhor Ribiera," he said harshly, "will see you only if you are not armed. He requires your word of honor."

Bell smiled lazily.

"I'll do better than that," he said languidly. "I haven't had time to buy a revolver. But the automatic he had put out of commission is in my pocket. Present it to him with my compliments."

He handed over the weapon, butt first. The major-domo blinked, and took it. Bell sat down and smiled widely. He had been expected to be uproarious, to attempt to force the major-domo to lead him to Ribiera. And, of course, he would have been led past a perfectly planned ambush for his capture—but he might have killed the major-domo. Which would not disturb Ribiera, but had disturbed the servant.

Bell smoked comfortably. And suddenly hangings parted, and Ribiera came into the room. He smiled nervously, and then, as Bell blew a puff of smoke at him and nodded casually, he scowled.

"I came," said Bell deliberately, "to make a bargain. Frankly, I do not like to break my word. I was under obligations to deliver a package from Senhor Canalejas to a certain messenger who will take it to my government. I have done it. But I am not, Senhor Ribiera, a member of the Secret Service. I am entirely a free agent now, and I am prepared to consider your proposals, which I could not in honor do before."

He smiled pleasantly. Effrontery, properly managed, is one of the most valuable of all qualities. Especially in dealing with people who themselves are arrogant when they dare.

Ribiera purpled with rage, and then controlled it.

"Ah!" he rumbled. "You are prepared to consider my proposals. There are no proposals. The Master may be amused at your cleverness in escaping. I do not know. I do know that I am ordered to make you my slave and send you to The Master. That, I shall do."

"Perhaps," said Bell blandly: "but I can go without food and drink for several days, which will delay the

process. And while I cannot honorably tell you how to stop the man bearing Senhor Canalejas' package to my government, still ... If I willingly accepted a dose of *yagué* in token of my loyalty to The Master...."

Ribiera's good humor returned. He chuckled.

"You actually mean," he said jovially, "that you think you were given some of The Master's little compound, and that you wish to make terms before your hands begin to writhe at the ends of your wrists. Is not that your reason?"

Bell's eyes flickered. He had been horribly afraid of just that. But Ribiera's amusement was reassuring.

"Perhaps," said Bell. "Perhaps I am."

Ribiera sat down and stretched his fat legs in front of him. He surveyed Bell with an obscene, horrible amusement.

"Ah, Senhor," he chuckled, "some day we will laugh together over this! You yet hope, and do not yet know

how much better it will be for you if you cease to hope, and cultivate desires! The Master is pleased with you. You have just those qualities he knows are necessary in dealing with your nation. He is not angry with you. It is his intention to use you to extend his—ah—influence among the officials of your nation. You know, of course, that in but a little more time I will hold all Brazil—as I now hold this city—in the hollow of my hand. Four of the republics of this continent are already completely under the control of The Master's deputies, and of the rest, Brazil is not the most nearly subdued. A year or two, and The Master will become Emperor, and his deputies viceroys. And it is his whim to give you the opportunity of becoming the first deputy and the first viceroy of North America. And you come to me and offer—you, Senhor!—to make terms! I believe even The Master will laugh when he hears of it."

"But," said Bell practically, "do you accept my terms?"

Ribiera chuckled again.

"What are they, Senhor?"

"That you release the daughter of the Senhor Canalejas and pledge your word of honor that she will not be enslaved."

Ribiera's word of honor, of course, would be worth rather less than the breath that was used to give it. But his reception of the proposal would be informative.

He chuckled again.

"No, Senhor. I do not accept. But I will promise you as a favor, because my uncle The Master admires you, that within a few weeks you shall enjoy her charms. I do not," he added with amused candor, "find that any one woman diverts me for a very long time."

"Oh," said Bell, very quietly.

He sat still for an instant, and then shrugged, and looked about as if for an ash tray in which to knock the ashes from his cigarette. He stood up, carrying the tube of tobacco gingerly, and moved toward one by Ribiera's elbow. He knocked off the ash, and

crushed out the tiny coal. He fumbled in his pockets.

The next instant Ribiera choked with terror.

"Let me explain," said Bell softly. "I did not give your major-domo my word that I was unarmed. I merely gave him a weapon. I got these from two policemen who tried to arrest me an hour or so ago. And I also remind you, Senhor, that if the armed men you have posted to prevent my escape try to shoot me, that the inevitable contraction of my muscles will send two bullets into your heart—even if I am dead. I am a dead man, Senhor, if you give the word, but so are you if you give it."

Ribiera gasped. His eyes rolled in his head.

"Send for her," said Bell very gently. "Send for her, Senhor. I estimate that she has been in this house for less than half an hour. Have her brought here at once, and if she has been harmed the three of us will perish very promptly, and half of Rio will go mad after our death."

And the muzzles of two revolvers bored into the fat flesh of Ribiera's body, and a gasp that was almost a wail of terror came from the watchers—armed watchers—who dared not kill the man they had been posted to guard Ribiera against.

Ribiera lifted his hand and croaked an order.

In this room the electric lights were necessary at all times. And it occurred to Bell irrelevantly that perhaps there were no windows because there might be sometimes rather noisy scenes within these walls. And windows will convey the sound of screaming to the outside air, while solid walls will not.

He stood alert and grim, with his revolvers pressing into Ribiera's flabby flesh. His fingers were tensed upon the triggers. If he killed Ribiera, he would be killed. Of course. And men and women he had known and liked might be doomed to the most horrible of fates by Ribiera's death. Yet even the death or madness of many men was preferable to the success of the conspiracy in which Ribiera seemed to figure largely.

Ribiera looked up at him with the eyes of a terrified snake. There was a little stirring at the door.

"Your friends," said Bell softly, "had better not come close."

Ribiera gasped an order. The stirrings stopped. Paula came slowly into the room quite alone. She smiled queerly at Bell.

"I believed that you would come," she said quietly. "And yet I do not know that we can escape."

"We're going to try," said Bell grimly. To Ribiera he added curtly, "You'd better order the path cleared to the door, and have one of your cars brought around."

Ribiera croaked a repetition of the command.

"Now stand up—slowly," said Bell evenly. "Very slowly. I don't want to die, Ribiera, so I don't want to kill you. But I haven't much hope of escape, so I shan't hesitate very long about doing it. And I've got these guns' hammers trembling at full cock. If I get a bullet

through my head, they'll go off just the same and kill you."

Ribiera got up. Slowly. His face was a pasty gray.

"Your major-domo," Bell told him matter-of-factly, "will go before us and open every door on both sides of the way to the street. Paula"—he used her given name without thought, or without realizing it—"Paula will go and look into each door. If she as much as looks frightened, I fire, and try to fight the rest of the way clear. Understand? I'm going to get down to a boat I have ready in the harbor if I have to kill you and every living soul in the house!"

There was no boat in the harbor, naturally. But the major-domo moved hesitantly across the room, looking at his master for orders. For Ribiera to die meant death or madness to his slaves. The major-domo's face was ghastly with fear. He moved onward, and Bell heard the sound of doors being thrust wide. Once he gave a command in the staccato fashion of a terrified man. Bell nodded grimly.

"Now we'll move. Slowly, Ribiera! Always slowly.... Ah! That's better! Paula, you go on before and look into each room. I shall be sorry if any of your servants follow after you, Ribiera.... Through the doorway. Yes! All clear, Paula? I'm balancing the hammers very carefully, Ribiera. Very delicate work. It is fortunate for you that my nerves are rather steady. But really, I don't much care.... Still all clear before us, Paula? With the servants nerve-racked as they are, I believe we'll make it through, even if I do kill Ribiera. There'll be no particular point in killing us then. It won't help them. Don't stumble, please, Ribiera.... Go carefully, and very slowly...."

Ribiera's face was a gray mask of terror when they reached the door. A long, low car with two men on the chauffeur's seat was waiting.

"Only one man up front, Ribiera," said Bell dryly. "No ostentation, please. Now, I hope your servants haven't summoned the police, because they might want to stop me from marching you out there with a gun in the small of your back. And that would be deplorable, Ribiera. Quite deplorable."

With a glance, he ordered Paula into the tonneau. He followed her, driving Ribiera before him. There seemed to be none about but the stricken, terrified servant who had opened the door for their exit.

"My friend," Bell told the major-domo grimly, "I'll give you a bit of comfort. I'm not going to try to take the Senhor Ribiera away with me. Once I'm on board the yacht that waits for me, I'll release him so he can keep you poor devils sane until my Government has found a way to beat this devilish poison of his. Then I'll come back and kill him. Now you can tell the chauffeur to drive us to the Biera Mar."

He settled back in his seat. There were beads of perspiration on his forehead, but he could not wipe them off. He held the two revolvers against Ribiera's flabby body.

The car turned the corner, and he added dryly:

"Your servants, Ribiera, will warn your more prominent slaves of my intention of going on board a yacht. Preparations will be made to stop every

pleasure boat and search it for me. So ... tell your chauffeur to swing about and make for the flying field. And tell him to drive carefully, by the way. I've still got these guns on a very fine adjustment of the trigger-pressure."

Ribiera croaked the order. Bell was exactly savage enough to kill him if he did not escape.

For twenty minutes the car sped through the residential districts of Rio. The sun was high in the air, but clouds were banking up above the Pao d'Assucar—the Sugarloaf—and it looked as if there might be one of the sudden summer thunderstorms that sometimes sweep Rio.

Then the clear road to the flying field. Rio has the largest metropolitan district in the world, but a great deal of it is piled on end, and Rio itself built on most of the rest. The flying field is necessarily some miles from even the residential districts, for the sake of a level plain of sufficient area.

The car shot ahead through practically untouched

jungle, interspersed with tiny clearings in which were patchwork houses that might have been a thousand miles in the interior instead of so near the center of all civilization in Brazil. Up smooth gradients. Around beautifully engineered curves.

Bell put aside one revolver long enough to search Ribiera carefully. He found a pearl-handled automatic, and handed it to Paula.

"Worth having," he said cheerfully. "I wonder if you'd mind searching the chauffeur: with that gun at his head I think he'd be peaceful. You needn't have him stop."

Paula stood up, smiling a little.

"I did not think I lacked courage, Senhor," she observed, "but you have taught me more."

"*Nil desperandum*," said Bell lightly. He relaxed deliberately. Matters would be tense at the flying field, and he would need to be wholly calm. There was little danger of an attempt at rescue here, and the

necessity of being ready to shoot Ribiera at any instant was no longer a matter of split seconds.

He watched, while, bent over the back of the front seat, she extracted two squat weapons from the chauffeur's pockets.

"Quite an arsenal," said Bell as he pocketed them. He turned pleasantly to Ribiera. "Now, Ribiera, you understand just what I want. That big amphibian plane of yours is fairly fast, and once when I was merely your guest you assured me that it was always kept fueled and even provisioned for a long flight. When we reach the flying field I want it rolled out and warmed up, over at the other end of the field from the flying line. We'll go over to it in the car.

"And I've thought of something. It worried me, before, because sometimes if a man's shot he merely relaxes all over. So while we're at the flying field I'm going to be holding back the triggers of these guns with my thumbs. I don't have to pull the trigger at all—just let go and they'll go off. It isn't so fine an adjustment as I had just now, but it's safer for you as long as you

behave. And you might urge your chauffeur to be cautious. I do hope, Ribiera, that you won't look as if you were frightened. If there's any hitch, and delay for letting some fuel out of the tanks or messing up the motors, I'll be very sorry for you."

The car swooped out into bright sunshine. The flying field lay below, already in the shadow of the banking clouds above. Hangars lay stretched out across the level space.

Through the gates. Ribiera licked his lips. Bell jammed the revolver muzzles closer against his sides. The chauffeur halted the car. Paula spoke softly to him. He stiffened. Bell found it possible to smile faintly.

Ribiera gave orders. There was a moment's pause—the revolver muzzles went deeper into his side—and he snarled a repetition. The official cringed and moved swiftly.

"You have chosen your slaves well, Ribiera," said Bell coolly. "They seem to occupy all strategic positions.

We'll ride across."

The gears clashed. The car swerved forward and went deliberately across the wide clear space that was the flying field. It halted near the farther side. In minutes the door of a hangar swung wide. There was the sputtering of a not-yet-warmed-up motor. The big plane came slowly out, its motors coughing now and then. It swung clumsily across the field, turned in a wide circle, and stopped some forty or fifty feet from the car.

"Send the mechanic back, on foot," said Bell softly.

Again Ribiera found it expedient to snarl. And Bell added, gently, while the throttled-down motors of the big amphibian boomed on:

"Now get out of the car."

Tiny figures began to gaze curiously at them from the row of hangars. The mechanic, starting back on foot, the four people getting out of the car, the big plane waiting....

With his revolver ready and aimed at Ribiera's bulk, Bell reached in the front of the car and turned off the switch. The motor died abruptly. He put the key in his pocket.

"Just to get a minute or two extra start," he said dryly. "Climb up in the plane, Paula."

She obeyed, and turned at the top.

"I will cover them until you are up," she said quietly.

Bell laughed, now. A genuine laugh, for the first time in many days.

"We do work together!" he said cheerfully.

But he backed up the ladder. There was a stirring over by the hangars. The mechanic who had taxied the plane to this spot was a dwindling speck, no more than a third of the way across the field. But even from the distant hangars it could be seen that something was wrong.

"Close the door, Paula," said Bell. He had seated himself at the controls, and scanned the instruments closely.

This machine was heavy and large and massive. The boat-body between the retractable wheels added weight to the structure, and when Bell gave it the gun it seemed to pick up speed with an irritating slowness, and to roll and lurch very heavily when it did begin to approach flying speed. The run was long before the tail came up. It was longer before the joltings lessened and the plane began to rise slowly, with the solid steadiness that only a large and heavily loaded plane can compass.

Up, and up.... Bell was three hundred feet high when he crossed the hangars and saw tiny faces staring up at him. Some of the small figures were pointing across the field. The big plane circled widely, gaining altitude, and Bell gazed down. Ribiera was gesticulating wildly, pointing upward to the soaring thing, shaking his fist at it, and making imperious, frantic motions of command.

Bell took one quick glance all about the horizon. Toward the sea the sun shone down brilliantly upon the city. Inland a broad white wall of advancing rain moved toward the coastline. And Bell smiled frostily, and flung the big ship into a dive and swooped down upon Ribiera as a hawk might swoop at a chicken.

Ribiera saw the monster thing bearing down savagely, its motors bellowing, its nose pointed directly at him. And there is absolutely nothing more terrifying upon the earth than to see a plane diving upon you with deadly intent. A panic that throws back to non-human ancestors seizes upon a man. He feels the paralysis of those ancient anthropoids who were preyed upon by dying races of winged monsters in the past. That racial, atavistic terror seizes upon him.

Bell laughed, though it sounded more like a bark, as Ribiera flung himself to the ground and screamed hoarsely when the plane seemed about to pounce upon him. The shrill timbre of the shriek cut through the roaring of the motors, even through the thick padding of the big plane's cabin walls that reduced that roaring to a not intolerable growl.

But the plane passed ten feet or more above his head. It rose, and climbed steeply, and passed again above the now buzzing, agitated hangars, and climbed above the hills behind the flying field as some men went running and others moved by swifter means toward the shaken, nerve-racked Ribiera, on whose lips were flecks of foam.

Bell looked far below and far behind him. The incredible greenness of tropic verdure, of the jungle which rings Rio all about. The many glitterings of sunlight upon glass, and upon the polished domes of sundry public buildings, and the multitudinous shimmerings of the tropic sun upon the bay. The deep dark shadow of the banking clouds drew a sharp line across the earth, and deep in that shadow lay the flying field, growing small and distant as the plane flew on. But specks raced across the wide expanse. In a peculiar, irrational fashion those specks darted toward a nearly invisible speck, and encountered other specks darting away from that nearly invisible speck, and gradually all the specks were turned about and racing for the angular, toy-block squares which

were the hangars of the aeroplanes of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Little white things appeared from those hangars—planes being thrust out into the open air while motes of men raced agitatedly about them. One of them was suddenly in motion. It moved slowly and clumsily across the ground, and then abruptly moved more swiftly. It seemed to float upward and to swing about in mid-air. It came floating toward the amphibian, though apparently nearly stationary against the sky. Another moved jerkily, and another....

Just before the big plane dived into the wide white wall of falling water, the air behind it seemed to swarm with aircraft.

In the cabin of the amphibian, of course, the bellowing of the motors outside was muffled to a certain degree. Paula clung to the seats and moved awkwardly up to the place beside Bell. She had just managed to seat herself when the falling sheet of water obliterated all the world.

"Strap yourself in your seat," he said in her ear above the persistent tumult without. "Then you might adjust my safety-belt. We'll be flying blind in this rain. I hope the propellers hold."

She fumbled, first at the belt beside his upholstered chair, and only afterward adjusted her own. He sent a quick glance at her.

"Shouldn't have done that," he said quietly. "I can manage somehow."

The plane lurched and tumbled wildly. He kicked rudder and jerked on the stick, watching the instrument board closely. In moments the wild gyrations ceased.

"The beginning of this," he said evenly, "is going to be hectic. There'll be lightning soon."

Almost on his words the gray mist out the cabin windows seemed to flame. There was thunder even above the motors. But the faint, perceptible trembling of the whole plane under the impulse of its engines

kept on. Bell kept his eyes on the bank and turn indicator, glancing now and then at the altimeter.

"We've got to climb," he said shortly, "up where the lightning is, too. We want to pass the Serra da Carioca with room to spare, or we'll crash on it."

There was no noticeable change in the progress of the plane, of course. Rain was dashing against the windows of the cabin with an incredible velocity. Rain at a hundred miles an hour acts more like hail than water, anyhow, and Bell was trusting grimly to the hope that the propellers were of steel, which will withstand even hail, and a hope that the blast through the engine cowlings would keep the wiring free of water-made short circuits.

But the air was bad beyond belief. At times the plane spun like thistledown in a vast and venomous flood that crashed into the windows with a vicious rattling. Lightning began and grew fiercer. It seemed at times as if the plane were whirling crazily in sheer incandescent flame. The swift air-currents at the beginning of a tropic thunderstorm were here

multiplied in trickiness and velocity by the hills of the Serra da Carioca, and Bell was flying blind as well. The safety-belts were needed fifty times within twenty minutes, as the big ship was flung about by fierce blasts that sometimes blew even the rain upward for a time. And over all, as the amphibian spun madly, and toppled crazily and fought for height, there was the terrific, incessant crashing of thunder which was horribly close, and the crackling flares of lightning all about.

"I'm going to take a chance," said Bell curtly above the uproar, with the windows seeming to look out upon the fires of hell. "I think we're high enough. The compass has gone crazy, but I'm going to risk it."

Again there was no perceptible alteration in the motion of the ship, but he fought it steadily toward the west. And it seemed that he actually was passing beyond the first fierce fringe of the storm, because the lightning became—well, not less frequent, but less continuous.

And suddenly, in a blinding flare of light that made

every separate raindrop look like a speck of molten metal, he saw another airplane. It was close. Breathtakingly close. It came diving down out of nowhere and passed less than twenty yards before the nose of the amphibian. It glistened with wet, and glittered unbearably in the incredible brightness of the lightning. Every spot and speck and detail showed with an almost ghastly distinctness. But it dived on past, its pilot rigid and tense and unseeing, plunging like a meteor straight downward. The golden, iridescent mist of rain closed over its body. And it was gone.

Ten minutes later Bell was driving onward through a gray obscurity, which now was no more than tinted pink by receding lightning-flashes. The air was still uneven and treacherous. The big plane hurtled downward hundreds of feet in wild descending gusts among the hills, and was then flung upward on invisible billows of air for other hundreds of feet. But it was less uncontrollable. There were periods of minutes when the safety-belts did not come into use.

And later still, half an hour perhaps, the steadiness of

the air gave assurance that the plane was past the range of the Serra da Carioca and was headed inland. He drove on, watching his instruments and flying blind, but with a gathering confidence in an ultimate escape from the swarm of aircraft Ribiera had sent aloft in the teeth of the storm to hunt for him. The motors hummed outside the padded cabin. The girl beside him was very quiet and very still and very pale.

"We want to get out of this before long," he said in her ear, "and then we can find out where we are, and especially begin to make some plans for ourselves."

Her eyes turned to him. There was a curious stiffness in her manner. It might have seemed reserve, but Bell recognized the symptoms of a woman whose self-control is hanging by a thread. He smiled.

"Hold on a while yet," he said gently. "I know you want to cry. But please hold on a while yet. When we reach friends...."

Her hands went to her throat, and he could feel the effort of will that kept her voice steady.

"Friends? We have no friends." She managed a smile. "The Senhor Ribiera explained to me when I arrived at his house how it was that no questions would be asked about my disappearance. My father is dead. The newspapers this morning said that it was not known whether he killed himself or was assassinated. The Senhor Ribiera has given orders to his slaves. The newspapers of this afternoon will inform a horrified world that you and I, together, murdered my father that we might flee together with such of his riches as he had actually gathered together for me to take away. We are murderers, my friend. Cables and telegraph wires are reporting the news. The daughter of the Minister of War of the Republic of Brazil was assisted by her lover to murder her father. She has fled with him. Now—where are we still to find friends?"

Bell stared, for the fraction of an instant. One thought came to him, and was checked. The Trade does not exist, anywhere. The Trade would not help. And murderers are always duly handed over when the Government of the United States is requested politely

to do so by another nation. Always. And so far as the whole civilized world was concerned they were murderers. Even the employees of the flying field who were not subject to The Master would swear to the strictly accurate story of their escape together.

"It is just scandalous enough and horrible enough," said Bell quietly, "to be reprinted everywhere as news. You're right. We haven't any friends. We're up against it. And so I think we'll have to hunt down and kill The Master. Then we'll be believed. And there are just two of us, with what weapons we have in our pockets, to attack. How many thousands of slaves do you suppose The Master has by now?"

And, quite suddenly, he laughed.

Chapter 7

The sun was sinking slowly when the plane appeared above the valley. There was only jungle below. Jungle, and the languid river which now flowed sluggishly into a wide and shallow pool in which drowned trees formed a mass of substance neither land nor marsh

nor river. The river now contracted to a narrow space and showed signs of haste, and even foaming water, and then again flowed placidly onward, sometimes even a hundred yards in breadth. Shadows of the mountains to the west were creeping toward the opposite hill-flanks, darkening the thick foliage and sending flocks of flying things home to their chosen roosts.

The sound of the plane was a buzzing noise, which grew louder to a sharp drone as it seemed to increase in size, and became a dull monotonous roar as it dipped toward the waters of the stream. It floated downward, very gently, and circled as if regarding a certain spot critically, and resumed its onward flight. Again it circled, anxiously, now, as if the time for alighting were short.

It seemed to hesitate in mid-air, and dived, and circled up-stream and came down the valley again. It sank, and sank, lower and lower, until the white of its upper wings was hidden by the tall trees on either side.

A *jabiru* stork saw it from downstream, solemnly squatting on four eggs which eventually would perpetuate the race. The *jabiru* was about forty feet above the water and had a clear view of the stream. The stork squatted meditatively, with its long, naked neck projecting above the edge of its nest.

The plane dipped ever lower, its reflection vivid and complete upon the waveless stream below it. Ten feet above the water. Five—and swift ripples from the rush of air disturbed the unbroken reflections behind. It was almost a silhouette against the mirrored appearance of the sunset sky. And then a clumsy-seeming boat body touched water with a vast hissing sound, and settled more and more heavily, while the speed of the plane checked markedly and its motors roared on senselessly.

Then, abruptly, the plane checked and partly swung around. The *jabiru* half-rose from its eggs. The motors were bellowing wildly again. As if tearing itself free, the plane sheered off from some invisible obstacle, one of its wing tip floats splashed water wildly, and, with the motors thundering at their fullest speed, it

went toward the shore with a dragging wing, like some wounded bird.

It beached, and the *jabiru* heard a sudden dense silence fall. A man climbed out of the boatlike body. He walked to the bow and dropped to the shore. He peered under the upward slanting nose of the boat-thing. The *jabiru*, listening intently, heard words.

Then, quite suddenly and quite abruptly, and generally with the unostentatious efficiency with which Nature manages such things in the tropics, night fell. It was dark within minutes.

The noise of Bell's scrambling back onto the deck of the amphibian's hull could be heard inside the cabin. He opened the door and slipped down inside.

"There ought to be some lights," he said curtly.

"Ribiera did himself rather well, as a rule."

He struck a match. Paula's eyes shone in the match-flame, fixed upon his face. He looked about, frowning. He found a switch and pressed it, and a dome-light

came into being. The cabin of the plane, from a place of darkness comparable to that of the jungle all about, became suddenly a cosy and comfortable place.

"Well?" said Paula quietly.

Bell hesitated, and took a deep breath.

"We're stuck," he said wryly. "We must have struck a snag or perhaps a rock, just under water. Half the bottom of the hull's torn out. There's no hope of repair. If I hadn't given her the gun and beached her, we'd have sunk in mid-stream."

Paula said nothing.

"Things are piling on us," said Bell grimly. "In the morning I'll try to make a raft. We can't stay here indefinitely. I'll hunt for maps and we'll try to plan something out. But I'll admit that this business worries me—the plane being smashed."

He passed his hand harassedly over his forehead. To have escaped from Rio was something, but since

Paula had told him Ribiera's plans, it was clearly but the most temporary of successes. Cabinet ministers are not so commonplace but that the scandalous and horrifying crime that was imputed to Bell and Paula would be printed in every foreign country.

Newspapers in Tokio would include the supposed murder in their foreign news, and in Bucharest and even Constantinople it would merit a paragraph or two. Assuredly every South American country would discuss the matter editorially, even where The Master's deputies did not order it published far and wide. There would be pictures of Bell and of Paula, labeled with an infamy. In every town of all Brazil their faces would be known, and those who were The Master's slaves would hunt them desperately, and all honorable men would seek them for a crime. Even in America there would be no safety for them. The Trade does not exist, officially, and a member of the Trade must get out of trouble as he can. As an accused murderer, Bell would be arrested anywhere. As worse than a mere murderess, Paula....

She was watching his face.

"This morning," she said queerly, "you—you quoted '*Nil desperandum*.'"

Bell ground his teeth, and then managed to smile.

"If I looked like I needed you say that," he said coolly, "I deserve to be kicked. Let's look for something to eat, and count up our resources. The thing to do is, when you fall down—bounce!"

He managed a nearly genuine grin, then, and to his intense amazement, she sobbed suddenly and bent her head down and began to weep. He stared at her in stupefaction for an instant, then swore at himself for a fool. Her father....

Half an hour later he roused her as gently as he could. It was helplessness, as much as anything else, that had made him leave her alone; but a woman needs to weep now and then. And Paula assuredly had excuse.

"Here's a cup of coffee," he said practically, "which you must drink. You can't have had anything to eat all

day. Have you?"

That question had haunted him too. She had been a prisoner in Ribiera's house for half an hour, possibly more. And Ribiera had in his possession, and used, a deadly, devilish poison from some unknown noxious plant. Its victim took the poison unknowingly, in a morsel of food or a glass of water or of wine. And for two weeks there was no sign of evil. And then the poison drove its victim swiftly mad—unless the antidote was obtained from Ribiera. And Ribiera administered the antidote with a further dose of poison.

If Paula had eaten one scrap of food or drunk one drop of water while Ribiera's captive....

She understood. She looked up suddenly, and read the awful anxiety in his eyes.

"No. Nothing." She caught her breath and steadied herself with an effort of the will. "I understand. You tried not to let me fear. But I ate nothing, touched nothing. I have not that to fear, at least."

"Drink this coffee," said Bell, smiling. "Ribiera was a luxurious devil. There's canned stuff and so on in a locker. He was prepared for a forced landing anywhere. Flares and rockets will do us no good, but there are a pair of machetes and a sporting rifle with shells. We don't need to die for a bit, anyhow."

Paula obediently took the coffee. He watched her anxiously as she drank.

"Now some soup," he urged, "and the rest of this condensed stuff. And I've found some maps and there's a radio receiving outfit if—"

Paula managed to smile.

"You want to know," she said, "if I can endure listening to it. Yes. I—I should not have given way just now. But I can endure anything."

Bell still hesitated, regarding her soberly.

"I've heard," he said awkwardly, "that in Brazil the conventions...."

She waited, looking at him with her large eyes.

"I hoped," said Bell, still more unhappily, "to find this place Moradores, where you said you had some relatives. I hoped to find it before dark. But before I landed I knew I'd missed it and couldn't hope to locate it to-night. I thought—"

"You thought," said Paula, smiling suddenly, "that my reputation would be jeopardized. And you were about to offer—"

Bell winced.

"Of course I don't mean to act like an ass," he said apologetically, "but some people...."

"You forget," said Paula, with the same faint smile, "what the newspapers will say of us, Senhor. You forget what news of us the cables have carried about the world. I think that we had better forget about the conventions. As the daughter of a Brazilian, that remark is heresy. But did you know that my mother came from Maryland?"

"Thank God!" said Bell relievedly. "Then you can believe that I'm not thinking exclusively of you, and maybe we'll get somewhere."

Paula put out her hand. He grasped it firmly.

"Right!" he said, more cheerfully than ever before. "Now we'll turn on the radio and see what news we get."

Into the deep dark jungle night, then, a strange incongruity was thrust. Tall trees loomed up toward the stars. A nameless little stream flowed placidly through the night and, beached where impenetrable undergrowth crowded to the water's edge, a big amphibian plane lay slightly askew, while a light glowed brightly in its cabin. More, from that cabin there presently emerged the incredible sound of music, played in Rio for *os gentes* of the distinctly upper strata of society by a bored but beautifully trained orchestra.

The *jabiru* stork heard it, and craned its featherless neck to stare downward through beady eyes. But it

was not frightened. Presently, instead of music, there was a man's voice booming in the disconnected sounds of human speech. And still the *jabiru* was unalarmed. Like most of the birds whose necks are bald, the *jabiru* is a useful scavenger, and so is tolerated in the haunts of men. And if man's gratitude is not enough for safety, the *jabiru* smells very, very badly, and no man hunts his tribe.

Bell had been listening impatiently, when a sudden whining, whistling noise broke into the program of very elevated music, played utterly without rest. The sound came from the speaker, of course.

He frowned thoughtfully. The whistling changed in timbre and became flutelike, then changed again, nearly to its original pitch and tone.

Paula was not listening. Her mind seemed very far away, and on subjects the reverse of pleasurable.

"Listen!" said Bell suddenly. "You hear that whistle? It came on all at once!"

Paula waited. The whistling noise went on. It was vaguely discordant, and it was monotonous, and it was more than a little irritating. Again it changed timbre, going up to the shrillest of squealings, and back nearly to its original sound an instant later.

Bell began to paw over maps. The plane had been intended for flight over the vast distances of Brazil, and there was a small supply of condensed food and a sporting rifle and shells included in its equipment. Emergency landing fields are not exactly common in the back country of South America.

"Here," said Bell sharply. "Here is where we are. It must be where we are! No towns of any size nearby. No railroad. No boat route. Nothing! Nothing but jungle shown here!"

He frowned absorbedly over the problem.

"What is it?" asked Paula.

"Someone near," said Bell briefly. "That's another radio receiver, an old fashioned regenerative set,

sensitive enough and reliable enough, but a nuisance to everyone but its owner—except when it's a godsend, as it is to us."

The music ended, and a voice announced in laboriously classic Portuguese, with only a trace of the guttural tonation of the *carioca*, that the most important news items of the day would be given.

Paula paled a little, but listened without stirring. The voice read—the rustling of sheets of paper was abnormally loud—a bit of foreign news, and a bit of local news, and then....

She was deathly pale when the announcement of her father's death was finished, and she had heard the official view of the police reported—exactly what Ribiera had told her it would be. When the voice added that a friend of the late Minister of War, the Senhor Ribiera, had offered twenty contos for the capture of the fugitive pair, who had escaped in an airplane stolen from him, she bit her lip until it almost bled.

"I know," he said abstractedly. "It's as you said. But listen to that whistle."

The news announcement ceased. Music began again. The whistling abruptly died away.

"I just found some coils," said Bell feverishly, "that plug in to take the place of the longer-wave ones. I'm going to try them. It's a hunch, and it's crazy, but...."

There were sharp clickings. The radio receiver was one of those extraordinarily light and portable ones that are made for aircraft. In seconds it was transformed into a short-wave receiver. Bell began to manipulate the dials feverishly. Two minutes. Three. Four.

The speaker suddenly began to whine softly and monotonously.

"Regeneration," said Bell feverishly, "on a carrier-wave. It can't be far off, that receiving set."

Suddenly a voice spoke. It was blurred and guttural.

Infinitely delicate adjustments cleared it up. And then....

Bell listened eagerly, at first in triumph, then in amazement, and at last in a grim satisfaction. Reports from Rio on a short-wave band of radio frequencies were passing from Ribiera to some other place apparently inland. It was Ribiera's own voice, which quivered with rage as he reported Bell's escape.

"I do not think," he snapped in Portuguese, "that full details should be spoken even on beam wireless. I shall come to the fazenda to-morrow and communicate with The Master direct. In the meantime I have warned all sub-deputies in Brazil. I urge that all deputies be informed and instructed as The Master may direct."

Another voice replied that The Master would be informed. In the meantime the deputy for Brazil was notified.

This list of bits of information chilled Bell's blood. This man, of Venezuela, had been denied the grace of

The Master by the deputy in Caracas. He would probably use the passwords and demand the grace of The Master of sub-deputies in the State of Pará. To be seized and Caracas informed. The deputy in Colombia desired that the son of Colonel García—upon a hunting-party with friends in the Amazon basin—should be attached to the service of The Master. His father had been so attached, and it was believed had smuggled a letter into the foreign mail warning his son. If possible, that letter should be intercepted. And from Paraguay the deputy requested that the family of Senor Gomez, visiting relatives in Rio, should be induced to regard the service of The Master as desirable....

The orders ceased abruptly. Ribiera acknowledged them. The whining whistle cut off. And Bell turned to Paula very grimly indeed.

"Pretty, isn't it?" he asked in a vast calmness.

"Apparently every nation on the continent has some devil like Ribiera in charge of the administration of this fiendish poison. Every republic has some fiend at work in it. And they're organized. My God! They're

organized! The Master seems to supply them with the mixture of poison and its antidote, and they report to him...."

Paula nodded.

"That was what my father had written down for you," she said quietly. "Any man who can be lured to eat or drink anything these men have prepared is lost. He gains no pleasure, as a drug might give. He is entrapped into a lifetime of awful fear, knowing that a moment's disobedience, a moment's reluctance to obey whatever command they give, will cause his madness."

"I'm trying to think what we can work out of this," said Bell shortly. "Some things are clear. There's a radio receiving set nearby, which listened to those short-wave reports. Within five or six miles, at most. We're going to find that to-morrow. And there's a central point, a *fazenda*, where one may talk direct with The Master, whoever and wherever he may be. And—judging by Ribiera—my guess is that The Master has the same hold upon them that they have

on their underlings. Ribiera is too arrogant a scoundrel to make obsequious reports if he were not afraid to omit them." He was silent for a moment, thinking. Then he said abruptly, "Try to get some sleep, if you can. That pistol of Ribiera's—you have it handy? Keep it where you can reach it in the dark. I'm going to watch, though."

Paula settled herself comfortably, and looked queerly across the dimly lit little cabin at him.

"My friend," she said with the faintest of quavering smiles, "Please do not reassure me. I have the courage of endurance, at least. And—I do not fear you."

It seemed to Bell, listening in the darkness that fell when he turned off the switch, that she stayed awake for a long time. But when she did sleep, she slept heavily.

Bell had a raft of canes afloat beside the amphibian when she waked. He was sweat-streaked and bitten by many insects. He was tired, and his clothes were

rag. But the raft was nearly twenty feet long, it would easily float two persons and what small supplies the plane carried, and it could be handled by a long pole.

"Hullo," he said cheerfully when she climbed on top of the waterlogged hull of the plane. "We're nearly ready to start off. I'm sorry I can't advise you to try to refresh yourself in the river. There are some fish in it that are fiends. One of them took a slice out of the side of my hand."

"*Piranhas!*" she exclaimed, and was pale. "You should have known!"

Piranhas are small fresh-water fish of the Brazilian rivers, never more than a foot and a half long, which prove the existence of a devil. Where they swarm in schools they will tear every morsel of flesh from a swimmer's body as he struggles to reach shore, and leave a clean-stripped skeleton of a mule or horse if an animal should essay to swim a stream.

"I'll ask, next time," said Bell ruefully. "I'd planned a

swim. But if you'll fix some coffee while I finish up this raft, we'll get going. I don't think we're far from some place or other. I heard what sounded suspiciously like a motor boat, about dawn."

She looked at him anxiously.

"Of course," said Bell, smiling, "if the boat belonged to whoever listened in on the Rio broadcast *and* the short-wave news, he won't be especially friendly, though he should be glad to see us. But I've been studying the map, and I have a rather hopeful idea. Let's have coffee."

He grinned as long as she was in sight, and when he went into the cabin of the plane he seemed more cheerful still. But the idea of floating down this nameless little jungle stream upon a raft of canes was not one that he would have chosen. It was forced upon him. To travel through the jungle itself was next to impossible with a girl, especially as they were dressed for city streets and not at all for battling with dense and thorn-studded undergrowth. And to stay with the plane was obviously absurd. Sooner or later

they had to abandon it, though the moment they did desert it they would be encountering not only the impersonal menace of the jungle, but the actual enmity of all the human race. The raft was the only possibility.

It floated smoothly enough when they started off, with Bell working inexpertly with his long pole to keep it in mid-stream. He was, of course, acutely apprehensive. In country like this a rapid could be expected anywhere. The jungle life loomed high above their heads on either side, and the life of the jungle went on undisturbed by their passage. Monkeys gaped at them and exchanged undoubtedly witty comments upon their appearance. Birds flew overhead with raucous and unpleasant cries. Toucans, in particular, made a most discordant din. Once they disturbed a tiny herd of peccaries, drinking, which regarded them pugnaciously and trotted sturdily out of sight as they came abreast.

But for one mile, for two, the stream flowed smoothly. A third.... And Paula pointed ahead in silence. A dug-out projected partly from the shoreline. Bell wielded

his long pole cautiously now, and drew closer and ever closer to the stream bank. Paula pointed again. There was even a small dock—luxury unthinkable in these wilds.

The raft touched bottom. And suddenly from somewhere out of sight there came a horrible and a bestial sound. It was a scream of blood-lust, of madness, of overpowering and unspeakable rage. Following it came cackling laughter.

Paula went white.

"The *fazenda*," said Bell softly, "of the sub-deputy who was listening in on Ribiera last night. And it sounds as if someone were very much amused. Some poor devil...."

Paula shuddered.

"I'm going ashore," said Bell, smiling frostily. "There's nothing else to do."

Chapter 8

Crouched at the edge of the jungle, where the clearing began, Paula heard four shots. Two in quick succession, and a wait of minutes. Then a third, and another long wait, and then the last. Then silence. Paula began to shiver. Bell had helped her ashore from the raft and insisted on her waiting at the edge of the jungle.

"Not that you'll be any safer," he had told her grimly, "but that I may be. One person can move more quickly than two. And if I'm chased I'll plunge for the place you're hidden, and you can open fire. Then the two of us might hold them off."

"Why?" Paula said slowly.

And Bell caught at her wrist.

"Don't let me hear you talk like that!" he said sharply. "We're going to beat this thing! We've got to! And being desperate helps, but being in despair doesn't help a bit. Buck up!"

He frowned at her until she smiled.

"I will not despair again without your permission," she told him. "Really. I will not."

He found her a hiding-place and went cautiously out into the clearing, still frowning.

He had been gone five minutes before the first shot sounded, and quite ten before the last rang out dully, and was echoed and re-echoed hollowly by the jungle trees. And Paula lay waiting by the edge of the clearing, Ribiera's pearl-handled automatic in her hand—Bell had carried the rifle from the plane. Small insects moved all about her, and she heard soft rustlings as the life of the jungle went on over her head and under her feet, and terror welled up in her throat.

She was trembling almost uncontrollably when Bell came back. He walked openly toward her hiding-place.

"Paula."

She came out, trying to steady her quivering lips.

"We're all right," said Bell grimly. "This is the *fazenda* of a sub-deputy. I suspect, also, it's an emergency landing field for Ribiera on the way to that place he talked to last night. There's a two-place plane here with both wheels and floats, in a filthy little shed. It seems to be all right. We're going to take off in it and try to make Moradores, where your people are. What's the matter?"

Her face was deathly pale.

"I thought," she said with some difficulty, "when I heard the shots—I thought you were killed."

Bell shook his head.

"I wasn't," he said grimly. "It was four other men who were killed."

He led her carefully past the house. It was a fairly typical *fazenda* dwelling, if more substantial than most. It was wholly unpretentious, with whitewashed

walls, and the effect of grandeur it would give to natives of this region would come solely from the number of buildings. There were half a dozen or more.

"I killed four men," repeated Bell coldly. "And I'm damned glad of it. That scream we heard.... I know pretty well what happened here last night.

Remember, Ribiera spoke of using a beam-wireless to make his report. He must have had a short-wave beam set somewhere on the outskirts of Rio, aimed at whatever headquarters he reports to. He's going up to that headquarters some time to-day, by plane, of course. He needed emergency landing fields along the route, and here he picked out a native and made him a sub-deputy. Charming...."

Moving past the buildings, Paula caught sight of massive wooden bars set in the side of a building. Something crumpled up and limp lay before them.

"Don't look over there," said Bell harshly. "There was a woman in this house and she told me what happened, though I'd guessed it before. The sub-

deputy was here last night with a party of friends. Newly enslaved, some of them. He entertained them.... Up at Ribiera's place a girl told me she and her husband had been shown a Secret Service man. He went mad before their eyes. It was an object-lesson for them, a clear illustration of what would happen to them if they ever disobeyed. I imagine that something of the sort is used by all The Master's deputies to convince their slaves of the fate that awaits them for disobedience. The local man had brought a party up to watch two men go mad. After that sight they'll be obedient."

He reached a shed, huge, but in disrepair. Monster doors were ajar. Bell heaved at them and swung them wide. A small, trim, two-seated plane showed in the shadowy interior.

"This is for emergency use," said Bell grimly, "and we face an emergency. I'll get it out and load it up. There's a dump of gas and so on here. You might look around outside the door, in case the one man who got away can find someone to help stop me."

He set to work checking on fuel and oil. He loaded extra gas in the front cockpit, a huge tin of it. Another would crowd him badly in the pilot's cockpit in the rear, but he stowed it as carefully as he could.

"The local sub-deputy," he added evenly, "has added to the thrill by having the two men put in one cage. He let his guests observe the progress of the madness the damned poison produces. And presently, as the madness grew, the two men fought. They were murder mad.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration of two men in a cage with palm trees around them, lock together in a fight to the death.

Image description end.]

“The local sub-deputy gave his guests the thrill of watching maniacs battling to the death. He left early this morning with his party, and I imagine that everyone was suitably submissive to his demands for the future. There were four men and a woman left as

caretakers here. I found the four men before the cage, baiting the poor devil who'd killed the other last night. That's why we heard the scream. When I came up with my rifle they stared at me, and ran.

"I got one then, and as a matter of mercy I put a bullet through the man who'd gone murder mad. The"—Bell sounded as if he were acutely nauseated—"the man he'd killed was still in the cage. My God!... Then I went looking for the other three men. Wasting time, no doubt, but I found them. I was angry. I got one, and the others ran away again. A little later the third man jumped me with a knife. He slit my sleeve. I killed him. Didn't find the fourth man." Bell moved to the front of the plane. "I'll see if she catches."

He swung on the stick. It went over stiffly. Again, and again. With a bellow, the motor caught. Bell shouted in Paula's ear.

"We'll get in. Use the warming-up period to taxi out. We want to get away as soon as we can."

He helped her up into the seat, then remembered. He

rummaged about and flung a tumbled flying suit up in the cockpit with her.

"If you get a chance, put it on!" he shouted. He stepped into a similar outfit, reached up and throttled down the motor, and kicked away the blocks under the wheels. He vaulted up into place. And slowly and clumsily the trim little ship came lurching and rolling out of the shed.

The landing field was not large, but Bell took the plane to its edge. He faced it about, and bent below the cockpit combing to avoid the slip stream and look at his maps again, brought from the big amphibian. Something caught his eye. Another radio receiving set.

"Amphibian planes," he muttered, "for landing on earth or water. And radios. I wonder if he has directional for a guide? It would seem sensible, and if a plane went down the rest of them would know about where to look."

Paula reached about and touched his shoulder. She

pointed. There was a movement at the edge of the jungle and a puff of smoke. A bullet went through the fusilage of the plane, inches behind Bell. He frowned, grasped the stick, and gave the motor the gun.

It lifted heavily, like all amphibians, but it soared over the group of buildings some twenty or thirty feet above the top of the wireless mast and went on, rising steadily, to clear even the topmost trees on the farther side of the stream by a hundred feet or more.

It went on and on, roaring upward, and the jungle receded ever farther below it. The horizon drew back and back. At two thousand feet the earth began to have the appearance of a shallow platter. At three thousand it was a steep sided bowl, and Bell could look down and trace the meandering of the stream on which he had landed the night before. Not too far downstream—some fifteen miles, perhaps—were the squalid, toy sized structures of a town of the far interior of Brazil. He never learned its name, but even in his preoccupation with the management of the plane and a search for landmarks, he wondered very grimly indeed what would be the state of things in

that town. If in Rio, where civilization held sway, Ribiera exercised such despotic though secret power, in a squalid and forgotten little village like this the rule of a sub-deputy of The Master could be bestial and horrible beyond belief.

Eastward. Bell had overshot the mark the night before. Before he had located himself he was quite fifty miles beyond the spot Paula had suggested as a hiding place. Now he retraced his way. A peak jutting up from far beyond the horizon was a guiding mark. He set the plane's nose for it, and relaxed.

The motor thundered on valorously. Far below was a vast expanse of thick jungle, intercepted but nowhere broken by occasional small streams and now and then the tiny, angular things which might be houses. But houses were very infrequent. In the first ten miles—with a view of twenty miles in every direction—Bell picked out no more than four small groups of buildings which might be the unspeakably isolated *fazendas* of the folk of this region.

"Ribiera was coming this way," he muttered.

He fumbled the headphone of the radio set into place. The set seemed to be already arbitrarily tuned. He turned it on. There was a monotonous series of flashes, with the singing note of a buzzer in them. A radio direction signal.

"Ribiera's on the way."

Bell stared far ahead, without reason. And it seemed to him that just then, against that far distant guiding peak, he saw a black speck floating in mid-air.

He pulled back the joy stick. Detached, feathery clouds spread across the sky, and he was climbing for them. Paula looked behind at him, and he pointed. He saw her seem to stiffen upon sight of the other aircraft.

In minutes Bell's plane was tearing madly through sunlit fleecy monsters which looked soft and warm and alluring, and were cold and damp and blinding in their depths. Bell kept on his course. The two planes were approaching each other at a rate of nearly two hundred miles an hour.

And then, while the harsh, discordant notes of the radio signal sounded monotonously in his ears, Bell stared down and, through a rift between two clouds, saw the other plane for an instant, a thousand feet below.

The sun shone upon it fiercely. Its propeller was a shimmering, cobwebby disk before it. It seemed to hang motionless—so short was Bell's view of it—between earth and sky: a fat glistening body as of a monstrous insect. Bell could even see figures in its cockpits.

Then it was gone, but Bell felt a curious hatred of the thing. Ribiera was almost certainly in it, headed for the place to which he had spoken the night before. And Bell was no longer able to think of Ribiera with any calmness. He felt a personal, gusty hatred for the man and all he stood for.

His face was grim and savage as his own plane sped through the clouds. But just as the two aircraft had approached each other with the combined speed of both, so they separated. It seemed only a moment

later that Bell dipped down below the clouds and the other plane was visible only as a swiftly receding mote in the sunlight.

"I wonder," said Bell coldly to himself, with the thunder of the motor coming through the singing of the air route signal, "I wonder if he'll see the ship I cracked up last night?"

Paula was pointing. The shoulder of a hill upthrust beneath the jungle. The tall trees were cleared away at its crest. Small, whitewashed buildings appeared below.

"Good landing field," said Bell, his eyes narrowing suddenly. "On the direct route. Fifty miles back there's another landing field. I wonder...."

He was already suspicious before he flattened out above the house, while dogs fled madly. He noticed, too, that horses in a corral near the buildings showed no signs of fright. And horses are always afraid of landing aircraft, unless they have had much opportunity to grow accustomed to them.

The little plane rolled and bumped, and gradually came to a stop. Bell inconspicuously shifted a revolver to the outer pocket of his flying suit. Figures came toward them, with a certain hesitating reluctance that changed Bell's suspicions even while it confirmed them.

"Paula," he said grimly, "this is another landing field for Ribiera's emergency use. It sticks out all over the place. Relatives or no relatives, you want to make sure of them. You understand?"

Her eyes widened in a sudden startled fear. She caught her breath sharply. Then she said quietly, though her voice trembled:

"I understand. Of course."

She slipped out of the plane and advanced to meet the approaching figures. There were surprised, astounded exclamations: A bearded man embraced her and shouted. Women appeared and, after staring, embraced. Paula turned to wave her hand reassuringly to Bell, and vanished inside the house.

Bell looked over his instruments, examined the gas in the tank, and began to work over his maps in the blaring sunlight. He cut out the switch and the motor stopped with minor hissings of compression. The maps held his attention, though he listened keenly as he worked for any signs of trouble that Paula might encounter.

He was beginning to have a definite idea in his mind. Ribiera had talked to a headquarters somewhere, by beam radio from Rio. Beam wireless, of course, is nothing more or less than a concentration of a radio signal in a nearly straight line, instead of allowing it to spread about equally on all sides of the transmitting station. It makes both for secrecy and economy, since nearly all the power used at the sending apparatus is confined to an arc of about three degrees of a circle. Directed to a given receiving station, receiving outfits to one side or the other of that path are unable to listen in, and the signal is markedly stronger in the chosen path. Exactly the same process, of course, is used for radio directional signals, one of which still buzzed monotonously in

Bell's ears until he impatiently turned it off. A plane in the path hears the signal. If it does not hear the signal, it is demonstrably off the straight route.

Bell, then, was in a direct line from Rio to the source of a radio direction signal. Fifty miles back, where the big amphibian had crashed, he was in the same air line. To extend that line on into the interior would give the destination of Ribiera, and the location of the headquarters where direct communication with The Master was maintained.

He worked busily. His maps were in separate sheets, and it took time to check the line from Rio. When he had finished, he computed grimly.

"At a hundred miles in hour...." He was figuring the maximum distance which could plausibly be accepted as a day's journeying by air. He surveyed the maps again. "The plateau of Cuyaba, at a guess. Hm.... Fleets of aircraft could practise there and never be seen. An army could be maneuvered without being reported. Certainly the headquarters for the whole continent could be there. Striking distance of Rio,

Montevideo, Buenos Aires, La Paz, and Asunción. Five republics."

Certainly, from his figures, it seemed plausible that somewhere up on the Plateau of Cuyaba—where no rails run, no boats ply, and no telegraph line penetrates; which juts out ultimately into that unknown region where the Rio Zingu and the Tapajoz have their origins—certainly it seemed plausible that there must lie the headquarters of the whole ghastly conspiracy. There, it might be, the deadly plants from which The Master's poison was brewed were grown. There the deadly stuff was measured out and mixed with its temporary antidote....

Paula came back, a young man with her. Her eyes were wide and staring, as if she had looked upon something vastly worse than death.

"He—Ribiera," she gasped. "My uncle, he owned this place. They—have him here—alive—and mad! And all the rest...."

Bell fumbled in the pocket of his flying suit. The

young man with Paula was looking carefully at the plane. And there was a revolver in a holster at his side. An air of grim and desperate doggedness was upon him.

"This is—my cousin," gasped Paula. "He—and his wife—and—and—"

The young man took out his weapon. He fired. There was a clanging of metal, the screech of tortured steel. Bell's own revolver went off the fraction of a second too late.

"You may kill me, Senhor," said the young man through stiff lips. His revolver had dropped from limp fingers. He pressed the fingers of his left hand upon the place where blood welled out, just above his right elbow. "You may kill me. But if you and my cousin Paula escaped.... I have a wife, Senhor, and my mother, and my children. Kill me if you please. It is your right. But I have seen my father go mad." Sweat, the sweat of agony and of shame, came out upon his face. "I fought him, Senhor, to save the lives of all the rest. And I have spoiled your engine, and I have

already sent word that you and Paula are here. Not for my own life, but...."

He waited, haggard and ashamed and desperate and hopeless. But Bell was staring at the motor of the airplane.

"Crankcase punctured," he said dully. "Aluminum. The bullet went right through. We can't fly five miles. And Ribiera knows we're here—or will."

Chapter 9

There was the sound of weeping in the house, the gusty and hopeless weeping of women. Bell had been walking around and around the plane, staring at it with his hands clenched. Paula watched him.

"I am thinking," she said in an attempt at courage, "that you said I must not despair without your permission. But—"

"Hush!" said Bell impatiently. He stared at the engine. "I'd give a lot for a car. Bolts.... How many hours have

we?"

"Four," said Paula drearily. "Perhaps five. You have smashed the radio in the house?"

Bell nodded impatiently. He had smashed the radio, a marvelously compact and foolproof outfit, arbitrarily tuned to a fixed short wave-length. It was almost as simple to operate as a telephone. There had been no opposition to the destruction. Paula's cousin had disabled their plane and reported their presence. He was inside the house now, sick with shame—and yet he would do the same again. In one of the rooms of the house, behind strong bars, a man was kept who had been an object-lesson....

"Is there any machinery?" asked Bell desperately.

"Any at all about the place?"

Paula shook her head.

"It may be that there is a pump."

Bell went off savagely, hunting it. He came back and

dived into the cockpit of the plane. He came out with a wrench, and his jaws set grimly. He worked desperately at the pump. He came back with two short, thick bolts.

He crawled into the plane again, tearing out the fire wall impatiently, getting up under the motor.

"We have one chance in five thousand," he said grimly from there, "of getting away from here to crash in the jungle. Personally, I prefer that to falling into Ribiera's hands. If your cousin or anybody else comes near us, out here, call me, and I'll be much obliged."

There was the sound of scraping, patient, desperate, wholly unpromising scraping. It seemed to go on for hours.

"The wrench, please, Paula."

She passed it to him. The bullet had entered the aluminum crankcase of the motor and pierced it through. By special providence it had not struck the crankshaft, and had partly penetrated the crankcase

on the other side. Bell had cut it out, first of all. He had two holes in the crankcase, then, through which the cylinder oil had drained away. And of all pieces of machinery upon earth, an aircraft motor requires oil.

Bell's scraping had been to change the punctured holes of the bullet into cone shaped bores. The aluminum alloy was harder than pure aluminum, of course, but he had managed it with a knife. Now he fitted the short bolts in the bores, forced the threads on them to cut their own grooves, and by main strength screwed them in to a fit. He tightened them.

He came out with his eyes glowing oddly.

"The vibration will work them loose, sooner or later," he observed grimly, "and they may not be oil tight. Also, the crankshaft may clear them, and it may not. If we go up in the ship in this state we may get five miles away, or five hundred. At any minute it may fail us, and sooner or later it will fail us. Are you game to go up, Paula?"

She smiled at him.

"With you, of course."

He began to brush off his hands.

"There ought to be oil and gas here," he said briefly.

"Another thing, there'll probably be some metal chips in the crankcase, which may stop an oil line at any minute. It's a form of committing suicide, I imagine."

He went off, hunting savagely for the supplies of fuel and lubricant which would be stored at any emergency field. He found them. He was pouring gasoline into the tanks before what he was doing was noticed. Then there was stunned amazement in the house. When he had the crankcase full of oil the young man came out. Bell tapped his revolver suggestively.

"With no man about this house," he said grimly,

"Ribiera will put in one of his own choice. And you have a wife and children and they'll be at that man's mercy. Don't make me kill you. Ribiera may not blame you for my escape if you tell him everything—and you're hurt, anyway. Either we get away, and you do

that, or you're killed and we get away anyhow."

He toppled two last five gallon tins of gasoline into the cockpits—crowding them abominably—and swung on the prop. The engine caught. Bell throttled it down, kicked away the stones with which he had blocked its wheels, and climbed up into the pilot's cockpit. With his revolver ready in his lap he taxied slowly over to a favorable starting point.

The ship rose slowly, and headed west again. At three thousand feet he cut out the motor to shout to Paula.

"One place is as good as another to us, now. The whole continent is closed to us by now. I'm going to try to find that headquarters and do some damage. Afterwards, we'll see."

He cut in the motor again and flew steadily westward. He rose gradually to four thousand feet, to five.... He watched his instruments grimly, the motor temperature especially. There were flakes of metal in the oil lines. Twice he saw the motor temperature rise to a point that brought the sweat out on his face. And

twice he saw it drop again. Bits of shattered metal were in the oiling system, and they had partly blocked the stream of lubricant until the engine heated badly. And each time the vibration had shifted them, or loosened them....

They had left the big amphibian no earlier than nine o'clock. It was noon when they took off for the *fazenda* of Paula's kin. But it was five o'clock and after when they rose from there with an engine which might run indefinitely and might stop at any second.

Bell did not really expect it to run for a long time. He had worked as much to cheat Ribiera of the satisfaction of a victory as in hopes of a real escape. But an hour, and the motor still ran. It was consistently hotter than an aero engine should run. Twice it had gone up to a dangerous temperature. One other time it had gone up for a minute or more as if the oiling system had failed altogether. But it still ran, and the sun was sinking toward the horizon and shadows were lengthening, and Bell began to look almost hopefully for a clearing in which to land before the dark hours came.

Then it was that he saw the planes that had been sent for him and for Paula.

There were three of them, fast two-seaters very much like the one he drove. They were droning eastward, with all cockpits filled, from that enigmatic point in the west. And Bell had descended to investigate a barely possible stream when they saw him.

The leader banked steeply and climbed upward toward him. The others gazed, swung sharply, and came after him, spreading out as they came. And Bell, after one instant's grim debate, went into a maple leaf dive for the jungle below him. The others dived madly in his wake. He heard a sharp, tearing rattle. A machine-gun. He saw the streaks of tracers going very wide. Gunfire in the air is far from accurate. A machine-gun burst from a hundred yards, when the gun has to be aimed by turning the whole madly vibrating ship, is less accurate than a rifle at six hundred, or even eight. Most aircraft duels are settled at distances of less than a hundred yards.

It was that fact that Bell counted on. With a motor

that might go dead at any instant and a load of passengers and gas at least equaling that of any of the other ships, mere flight promised little. The other ships, too, were armed, at any rate the leader was, and Bell had only small arms at his disposal. But a plane pilot, stunting madly to dodge tracer bullets, has little time to spare for revolver work.

Bell had but one advantage. He expected to be killed. He looked upon both Paula and himself as very probably dead already. And he infinitely preferred the clean death of a crash to either the life or death that Ribiera would offer them. He flattened out barely twenty yards above the waving branches that are the roof of the jungle. He went scudding over the tree tops, rising where the jungle rose, dipping where it dropped, and behind him the foliage waved wildly as if in a cyclone.

The other planes dared not follow. To dive upon him meant too much chance of a dash into the entrapping branches. One plane, indeed, did try it, and Bell scudded lower and lower until the wheels of the small plane were spinning from occasional, breath taking

contacts with the feathery topmost branches of jungle giants. That other plane flattened out not less than a hundred feet farther up and three hundred yards behind. To fire on him with a fixed gun meant a dive to bring the gun muzzle down. And a dive meant a crash.

A stream flashed past below. There was the glitter of water, reflecting the graying sky. A downward current here dragged at the wings of the plane. Bell jerked at the stick and her nose came up. There was a clashing, despite her climbing angle, of branches upon the running gear, but she broke through and shot upward, trying to stall. Bell flung her down again into his mad careering.

It was not exactly safe, of course. It was practically a form of suicide. But Bell had not death, but life to fear. He could afford to be far more reckless than any man who desired to live. The plane went scuttling madly across the jungle tops, now rising to skim the top of a monster *ceiba*, now dipping deliberately.

The three pursuing planes hung on above him

helplessly while the short, short twilight of the tropics fell, and Bell went racing across the jungle, never twenty feet above the tree top and with the boughs behind him showing all the agitation of a miniature hurricane. As darkness deepened, the race became more suicidal still, and there were no lighted fields nearby to mark a landing place. But as darkness grew more intense, Bell could dare to rise to fifty, then a hundred feet above the tops, and the dangers of diving to his level remained undiminished. And then it was dark.

Bell climbed to two hundred feet. To two hundred and fifty. With more freedom, now, he could take one hand from the controls. He could feel the menace of the tumultuously roaring motors in his wake, but he was smiling very strangely in the blackness. He reached inside his flying suit and tore away the front of his shirt. He reached down and battered in the top of one of the five gallon gasoline tins in the cockpit with the barrel of his revolver. He stuffed the scrap of cloth into the rent. It was wetted instantly by the splashing. Another savage blow, unheard in the thunder of the

motor. In the peculiarly calm air of the cockpit the reek of gasoline was strong, but cleared away. And Bell, with the frosty grim smile of a man who gambles with his life, struck a light. The cloth flared wildly, and he reached his hands into the flame and heaved the tin of fuel overside.

The cloth was burning fiercely, and spilled gasoline caught in mid-air. A fierce and savage flame dropped earthward. Spark on the cloth, and the cloud of inflammable vapor that formed where the leaking tin fell plummetlike, carried the flame down when the wind of its fall would have blown it out.

The following planes saw a flash of light. They saw a swiftly descending conflagration tracing a steep arch toward the tree tops. They saw that flaming vanish among the trees. And then they saw a vast upflaring of fire below. Flames licked upward almost to the tree tops....

Bell looked back from two thousand feet. Wing-tip lights were on, below, and disks of illumination played upon the roof of the jungle above the fire. The three

planes were hovering over the spot. But a thick dense column of smoke was rising, now. Green things shriveling in the heat, and dried and rotted underbrush. Altogether, the volume of smoke and flame was very convincing evidence that an airplane had burst into flame in mid-air and crashed through the jungle top to burn to ashes beneath.

But Bell climbed steadily to five thousand feet. He cut out the motor, there, and in the shrieking and whistling of wind as the plane went into a shallow glide, he spoke sharply.

"Paula?"

"I am all right," she assured him unsteadily. "What now?"

"There's a seat pack under you," said Bell. "It's a parachute. You'd better put it on. God only knows where we'll land, but if the motor stops we'll jump together. And I think we'll have to jump before dawn. This plane won't fly indefinitely. There's just one chance in a million that I know of. There'll be a moon

before long. When it comes up, look for the glitter of moonlight on water. With the wing-tip lights we may—we may—manage to get down. But I doubt it."

He moved his hand to cut in the motor again. She stopped him.

"If we head south," she said unsteadily, "we may reach the Paraguay. It is perhaps two hundred miles, but it is broad. We should see it. Perhaps even the stars...."

"Good work!" said Bell approvingly. "*Nils desperandum!* That's our motto, Paula."

He swung off his course and headed south. He was flying high, now, and an illogical and incomprehensible hope came to him. There was no hope, of course. He had had, more than once, a despairing conviction that the utmost result of all his efforts would be but the delaying of their final enslavement to The Master, whose apparent impersonality made him the more terrible as he remained mysterious. So far they seemed like

struggling flies in some colossal web, freeing themselves from one snaring spot to blunder helplessly into another.

But the moon came up presently, rounded and nearly full. The sky took on a new radiance, and the jungle below them was made darker and more horrible by the contrast.

And when there were broad stretches of moonlit foliage visible on the rising slopes beneath, Bell felt the engine faltering. He switched on the instrument board light. One glance, and he was cold all over. The motor was hot. Hotter than it had ever been. The oil lines, perhaps the pump itself....

Paula's hand reached back into the glow of the instrument board. He leaned over and saw her pointing. Moonlight on rolling water, far below. He dived for it, steeply. The wing-lights went on. Faint disks of light appeared far below, sweeping to and fro with the swaying of the plane, bobbing back and forth.

It seemed to Bell that there had been nothing quite as horrible as the next minute or two. He felt the overheated, maltreated motor laboring. It was being ruined, of course—and a ruined motor meant that they were marooned in the jungle. But if it kept going only until they landed. And if it did not....

White water showed below in the disks of the landing lights' glow. It tumbled down a swift and deadly *raudal*—a rapid. And then—black, deep water, moving swiftly between tall cliffs of trees.

Bell risked everything to bank about and land toward the white water. The little plane seemed to be sinking into a canyon as the trees rose overhead on either side. But the moonlit rapid gave him his height, approximately, and the lights helped more than a little.

He landed with a terrific crash. The plane teetered on the very verge of a dive beneath the surface. Bell jerked back the stick and killed the engine, and it settled back.

A vast, a colossal silence succeeded the deafening noise of twelve cylinders exploding continuously. There were little hissing sounds as the motor cooled. There was the smell of burnt oil.

"All right, Paula?" asked Bell quietly.

"I—I'm all right."

The plane was drifting backward, now. It spun around in a stately fashion, its tail caught in underbrush, and it swung back. It drifted past cliffs of darkness for a long time, and grounded, presently, with a surprising gentleness.

"Do you know," said Bell dryly, "this sort of thing is getting monotonous. I think our motor's ruined. I never knew before that misfortunes could grow literally tedious. I've been expecting to be killed any minute since we started off, but the idea of being stuck in the jungle with a perfectly good plane and a bad motor...."

He fished inside his flying suit and extracted a

cigarette. Then he lit it.

"Let's see.... We haven't a thing to eat, have we?"

There was a little slapping noise. Bell became suddenly aware of a horde of insects swarming around him. Smoke served partially to drive them off.

"Look here," he said suddenly, "we could unfold a parachute and cover the cockpits for some protection against these infernal things that are biting me."

"We may need the parachute," said Paula unsteadily.

"Does—does that smoke of yours drive them away?"

"A little." Bell hesitated. "I say, it would be crowded, but if I came up there, or you here...."

"I—I'll come back there," she said queerly. "The extra cans of gasoline here...."

She slipped over the partition, in the odd flying suit which looks so much more odd when a girl wears it. She settled down beside him, and he tried

painstakingly to envelope her in a cloud of tobacco smoke. The plague of insects lessened.

There was nothing to do but wait for dawn. She was very quiet, but as the moon rose higher he saw that her eyes were open. The night noises of the jungle all about them came to their ears. Furtive little slitherings, and the sound of things drinking greedily at the water's edge, and once or twice peculiar little despairing small animal cries off in the darkness.

The jungle was dark and sinister, and all the more so when the moon rose high and lightened its face and left them looking into weird, abysmal blackness between moonlit branches. Bell thought busily, trying not to become too conscious of the small warm body beside him.

He moved, suddenly, and found her fingers closed tightly on the sleeve of his flying suit.

"Frightened, Paula?" he asked quietly. "Don't be. We'll make out."

She shook her head and looked up at him, drawing away as if to scan his face more closely.

"I am thinking," she said almost harshly, "of biology. I wonder—"

Bell waited. He felt an intolerable strain in her tensed figure. He put his hand comfortingly over hers. And, astoundingly, he found it trembling.

"Are all women fools?" she demanded in a desperate cynicism. "Are we all imbeciles? Are—"

Bell's pulse pounded suddenly. He smiled.

"Not unless men are imbeciles too," he said dryly.

"We've been through a lot in the past two days. It's natural that we should like each other. We've worked together rather well. I—well"—his smile was distinctly a wry and uncomfortable one—"I've been the more anxious to get to some civilized place where The Master hasn't a deputy because—well—it wouldn't be fair to talk about loving you while—" he shrugged, and said curtly, "while you had no choice but to

listen."

She stared at him, there in the moonlight with the jungle moving about its business of life and death about them. And very, very slowly the tenseness left her figure. And very, very slowly she smiled.

"Perhaps," she said quietly, "you are lying to me, Charles. Perhaps. But it is a very honorable thing for you to say. I am not ashamed, now, of feeling that I wish to be always near you."

"Hush!" said Bell. He put his arm about her shoulder and drew her closer to him. He tilted her face upward. It was oval and quite irresistibly pretty. "I love you," said Bell steadily. "I've been fighting it since God knows when, and I'm going to keep on fighting it—and it's no use. I'm going to keep on loving you until I die."

Her fingers closed tightly upon his. Bell kissed her.

"Now," he said gruffly, "go to sleep."

He pressed her head upon his shoulder and kept it there. After a long time she slept. He stirred, much later, and she opened her eyes again.

"What is it?"

"Damn these mosquitos," growled Bell. "I can't keep them off your face!"

Chapter 10

For four hours after sunrise Bell worked desperately. With the few and inadequate tools in the plane he took apart the oiling system of the motor. It was in duplicate, of course, like all modern air engines, and there were three magnetos, and double spark plugs. Bell drained the crankcase beneath a sun that grew more and more hot and blistering, catching the oil in a gasoline can that he was able to empty into the main tanks. He washed out innumerable small oil pipes with gasoline, and flushed out the crankcase itself, and had at the end of his working as many small scraps of metal as would half fill a thimble. He showed then to Paula.

"And the stars in their courses fought against Sisera," he quoted dryly. "Any one of these, caught in just the right place, would have let us down into the jungle last night."

She smiled up at him.

"But they didn't."

"No.... God loves the Irish," said Bell. "What's that thing?"

Paula was fishing, sitting on a fallen tree in the cloud of smoke from a smudge fire Bell had built for her. She was wearing the oily flying suit he had found in the shed with the plane, and had torn strips from her discarded dress to make a fishing line. The hook was made out of the stiff wire handle of one of the extra gasoline tins. "Hook and leader in one," Bell had observed when he made it.

He was pointing to a flat bodied fish with incredible jaws that lay on the grass, emitting strange sounds even in the air. It flapped about madly. Its jaws closed

upon a stick nearly half an inch thick, and cut it through.

"It is a *piranha*," said Paula. "The same fish that bit your hand. It can bite through a copper wire fastened to a hook, but this hook is so long...."

"Pleasant," said Bell. Something large and red passed before his eyes. He struck at it instinctively.

"Don't!" said Paula sharply.

"Why?"

"It's a *maribundi* wasp," she told him "And its sting.... Children have died of it. A strong man will be ill for days from one single sting."

"Still more pleasant," said Bell. "The jungle is a charming place, isn't it?" He wiped the sweat off his face. "Any more little pets about?"

She looked about seriously.

"There." She pointed to a sapling not far distant. "The *palo santo* yonder has a hollow trunk, and in it there are usually ants, which are called fire-ants. They bite horribly. It feels like a drop of molten metal on your flesh. And it festers afterwards. And there is a fly, the *berni* fly, which lays its eggs in living flesh. The maggot eats its way within. I do not know much about the jungle, but my father has—had a *fazenda* in Matto Grosso and I was there as a child. The *camaradas* told me much about the jungle, then."

Bell winced, and sat down beside her. She had Ribiera's pearl handled automatic within easy reach. She saw him looking at it.

"I do not think there is any danger," she said with a not very convincing smile, "but there are *cururus*—water snakes. They grow very large."

"And I asked you to fish!" said Bell. "Stop it!"

She hauled the line ashore, with a flapping thing on the end of it. Bell took the fish off and regarded her catch moodily.

"I'd been thinking," he said moodily, "that Ribiera suspects we're dead. I'd been envisioning ourselves as marooned, yes, but relatively safe as long as we were thought to be dead. And I'd thought that if we lived a sort of castaway existence for a few weeks we'd be forgotten, and would have a faint chance of getting out to civilization without being noticed. But this...."

"I will stay," she said steadily. "I will stay anywhere or go anywhere, with you."

Bell's hand closed on her shoulder.

"I believe it," he said heavily. "And—if you noticed—I had been thinking of letting down the Trade. I'd been thinking of not trying to fight The Master any longer, but only of getting you to safety. In a sense, I was thinking of treason to my job and my government. I suspect"—he smiled rather queerly—"I suspect we love each other rather much, Paula. I'd never have dreamed for anyone else. Go over to the plane and don't fish any more. I'll rustle the food for both of us."

She stood up obediently, smiling at him.

"But kill that *piranha* before you try to handle it," she advised seriously.

Bell battered the savage thing until it ceased to move. He picked it up, then, and sniffed the air. Paula had been in a cloud of acrid smoke. She could not have detected the taint in the air he discovered. He went curiously, saw a broken branch overhead, and then saw something on the ground.

He came back to the plane presently, looking rather sick.

"Give me one of the machetes, Paula," he said quietly.
"We brought them, I think."

"What is the matter?"

He took the wide-bladed woods knife.

"A man," he said, nauseated. "He either fell or was thrown from somewhere high above. From a plane. He was United States Secret Service. There's a badge in his clothes. Don't come."

He went heavily over to the spot beyond the smudge fire. He worked there for half an hour. When he came back there were earth stains on his hands and clothing, and he carried a very small brown package in his hand.

"He had a report ready to send off," said Bell grimly. "I read it. It's in code, of course, but in the Trade...."

He set to work savagely on the engine, reassembling it. As he worked, he talked in savage, jerky sentences.

"The Service man at Asunción. One of the seven who vanished. He'd learned more than we have. He was caught—poisoned, of course—and pretended to surrender. Told a great deal that he shouldn't, in order to convince The Master's deputy. The key men in nearly every republic in South America are in The Master's power. Paraguay belongs to him, body and soul. Bolivia is absolutely his. Every man of the official class from the President down knows that he has two weeks or less of sanity if The Master's deputy shuts down on him—and he knows that at the crook of the deputy's finger he'll be assassinated before then. If

they run away, they go murder mad. If they stay, they have to obey him. It's hellish!"

He stopped talking to make a fine adjustment. He went on, somberly.

"Chile's not so bad off, but the deputy has slaves nearly everywhere. Ecuador—well, the President and half of Congress have been poisoned. The man I found was trying to get a sample of the poison for analysis. He'd learned it was unstable. Wouldn't keep. The Master has to send fresh supplies constantly all over the continent. That accounts for the deputies remaining loyal. If The Master had reason to suspect them, he had only to stop their supply.... They couldn't stock up on the deadly stuff for their own use. So they're as abjectly subject to The Master as their slaves are to them. No new slaves are to be made in Paraguay or Bolivia, except when necessary. It's believed that in six months the other republics will have every influential man subjected. Every army officer, every judge, every politician, every outstanding rich man.... And then, overnight, South America will become an empire, with that devil of a

Master as its overlord."

He lifted one of the oil pumps in place and painstakingly tightened the bolts that held it.

"Picture it," he said grimly. "Beasts as viceroys, already taking their pleasure. Caligulas, Neros, on viceregal thrones all over the continent.... And every man who shows promise, or shows signs of honor or courage or decency, either killed or sent mad or...."

Paula was watching his face closely.

"I think," she said soberly, "that there is something worse."

Bell was silent for an instant.

"For me," he said bitterly, "it is. Before The Master dares to make his coup public, he must be sure that there will be no foreign interference. So, he must establish a deputy in Washington. A relatively few chosen men, completely enslaved, could hold back our Government from any action. Leaders in

Congress, and members of the Cabinet, working, in defense of The Master because his defeat would mean their madness.... He would demand no treason of them at first. He would require simply that he should not be interfered with. But his plans include the appointment of deputies in the United States later on. I don't think he can subdue America. I don't think so. But he could—and I think he would—send whole cities mad. And if you think of that...."

He was silent, working. A long, long time later he swung on the propeller. The motor caught. He throttled it down and watched it grimly. The motor warmed up to normal, and stayed there.

"It will run," he said coldly. "Those two plugs in the crankcase may come out at any time. I've tightened them a little. They'd worked loose from the vibration. But—well.... That Service man was heading for Asunción. He'd been found out. They probably shot him down in mid-air after he'd gotten away. His plane may be crashed anywhere in the jungle within a mile or so. And I've two bearings on the *fazenda* where Ribiera went, now. One from Asunción through here

and one from Rio. I want to go back there to-night and dump burning gasoline on the buildings, to do enough damage to disorganize things a little. Then I'm going to try to make it to a seaport. We can stow away, perhaps."

He shut off the motor.

"We'll start at dusk. There'll be lights there. This report says it's nearly a city—of slaves. We want the darkness for our getaway."

Paula looked at the sky.

"We have three hours," she said quietly. "Let us cook and eat. You must keep up your strength, Charles."

She said it in all seriousness, with the air of one who has entire confidence and is merely solicitous. And Bell, who knew of at least three excellent reasons why neither of them should survive until dawn—Bell looked at her queerly, and then grinned, and then took her in his arms and kissed her. She seemed to like it.

And they lunched quite happily on *piranha* and *pacu*—which is smaller—and drank water, and for dessert had more *piranha*.

The long afternoon wore away slowly. It was hot, and grew blistering. Insects came in swarms and tormented them until Bell built a second and larger smudge fire. But they fastened upon his flesh when he went out of its smoke for more wood.

They talked, as well as they could for smoke, and looked at each other as well as they could for smarting eyes. It was not at all the conventional idea of romantic conversation, but it was probably a good deal more honest than most, because they both knew quite well that their chance of life was small. A plane whose motor was precariously patched, flying over a jungle without hope of a safe landing if that patched-up motor died, was bad enough. But with the three nearest nations subservient to The Master, whose deputy Ribiera was, and all those nations hunting them as soon as they were known to be yet alive....

"Would it not be wise, Charles," asked Paula wistfully,

"just for us to try to escape, ourselves, and not try—"

"Wise, perhaps," admitted Bell, "but I've got to strike a blow while I can." He was staring somberly at the little plane, fast upon a mud bank, with the tall green jungle all about. "The deputies and all their slaves have their lives hanging by a thread—the thread of a constant supply of the antidote to the poison that's administered with the antidote. The deputies—Ribiera, for instance—don't realize that. Else they wouldn't dare do the things they do. But let them realize that the thread can be broken, and what their slaves would do to them before they all went mad.... You see? Let them learn that a blow has been struck at the center of all the ghastly thing, and they'll be frightened. They'll be close to mutiny through sheer panic. And there may be slip-ups."

It was vague, perhaps, but it was true. The subjection of the poisoned men and women was due not only to terror of what would happen if they disobeyed the deputies, but to a belief that that thing would not happen if they did obey. If Bell could do enough damage to the *fazenda* of The Master to shake the

second belief, he would have shaken the whole conspiracy. And a conspiracy that is not a complete success is an utter failure.

It was close to sunset when they heard a droning noise in the distance. Bell went swiftly to the cockpit of the plane and searched the sky.

"Don't see it," he said grimly, "and it probably doesn't see us. We're all right, I suppose."

But he was uneasy. The droning noise grew to a maximum and slowly died away again. It diminished to a distant muttering.

"What say," said Bell suddenly, "we get aloft now? We'll follow that damned thing home. It's going from Asunción to that place we want to find. This is on that route. Whoever's in it won't be looking behind, and it's close to darkness."

Paula stood up.

"I am ready, Charles."

Bell swung out on the floats and tugged at the prop. The motor caught and roared steadily. While it was warming up, he stripped off the rest of his shirt and tore it into wide strips, and tied the rags in the handles of the gasoline tins in the two cockpits.

"For our bombs," he explained, smiling faintly. "You'll want to wear your chute pack, Paula. You know how to work it? And we'll divide the guns and what shells we have, and stick them in the flying suit pockets."

He made her show him a dozen times that she knew how to pull out the ring that would cause the parachute to open. She climbed into the front cockpit and smiled down at him. He throttled down the motor to its lowest speed and shoved off from the mud bank. Clambering up, while the plane moved slowly over the water under the gentle pull of the slow-moving propeller, he bent over and kissed her.

"For luck," he said in her ear.

The next instant he settled down at the controls, glanced a last time at the instruments, and gave the

motor the gun.

The plane lifted soggily but steadily and swept upstream toward the rolling water of the *raudal*, which tumbled furiously about an obstacle half of stones and shallows, and half of caught and rotting tree trunks. It rose steadily until the trees dropped away on either side and the jungle spread out on every hand. It rose to a thousand feet and went roaring through the air to northward, while Bell strained his eyes for the plane on ahead.

It was ten minutes or more before he sighted it, winging its way steadily into the misty distance above the jungle. Bell settled down to follow. The engine roared valorously. For half an hour Bell watched it anxiously, but it remained cool and had always ample power. Paula's head showed above the cockpit combing. Mostly she looked confidently ahead, but once or twice she turned about to smile at him.

The sun seemed high when they rose from the water, but as it neared the horizon its rate of descent seemed to increase. They had been in the air for no

more than three-quarters of an hour when it was twice its own disk above the far distant hills. Almost immediately, it seemed, it had halved that distance. And then the lower limb of the blaring circle was sharply cut off by the hill crests and the sun sank wearily to rest behind the edge of the world.

It seemed as if a swift chill breeze blew over the jungle, in warning of the night. The trees became dark. A shadowy dusk filled the air even up to where the plane flew thunderously on. And then, quite abruptly, stars were shining and it was night.

Bell remembered, suddenly, and switched on the radio as an experiment. The harsh, discordant dashes sounded in his ears through the roaring of the motor. A beam of short waves was being sent out from his destination. While he was on the direct path the monotonous signals could be heard. When they weakened or died he would have left the way.

But they continued, discordant and harsh and monotonous, while the last faint trace of the afterglow died away and night was complete, and a roof of

many stars glittered overhead, and the jungle lay dark and deadly below him.

For nearly half an hour more he kept on. Twice he switched on the instrument board light to glance at the motor temperature. The first time it appeared a little high. The second time it was normal again. But there was little use in watching instruments. If the motor failed there was no landing field to make for.

A sudden faint glow sprang into being, many miles ahead. The pinkish glare of many, many lights turned on suddenly. As the plane thundered on the glow grew brighter. An illuminated field, for the convenience of messengers who carried the poison for The Master to all the nations which were to be subjected.

The glow went out as Bell was just able to distinguish long rows of twinkling bulbs, and he saw the harsher, fiercer glow of floodlights. He reached forward and touched Paula's shoulder. Conversation was impossible over the motor's roar. Her hand reached up and pressed his.

Then he saw other lights. Bright lights, as from houses. Arc lights as from storage warehouses, or something of the sort. A long, long row of lighted windows, which might be dormitories or perhaps sheds in which The Master's enslaved secretaries kept the record of his victims.

The earth flung back the roaring of the little plane's motor. Bell had but little time to act before other planes would dart upward to seek him out. He dived, and the wing tip landing lights went on, sending fierce glares downward. Twin disks of light appeared upon the earth. Sheds, houses, a long row of shacks as if for laborers. A drying field, on which were spread out plants with their leaves turning brown. A wall about it....

"The damned stuff," said Bell grimly.

He swept on. Jungle, only jungle. He banked steeply as lights flicked on and off below and as—once—the wing tip lights showed men running frantically two hundred feet below.

Then a stream of fire shot earthward, and Bell held up his hand and arm into the blast of the slip stream. It blew out the blaze that had licked at his flesh. He stared down. The gas can had left a trailing stream of fluid behind it as it went spinning down to earth. All that stream of inflammable stuff was aflame. The can itself struck earth and seemed to explode, and the trailing mass of fire was borne onward by the wind and lay across a row of thatch-roofed buildings. An incredible sheet of fire spread out. The stuff in the drying yard was burning.

Bell laughed shortly, and flung over another of his flaming bombs, and another, and the fourth....

He climbed for the skies, then, as rectangles of light showed below and planes were thrust out of their lighted hangars. Four huge conflagrations were begun. One was close by a monster rounded tank, and Bell watched with glistening eyes as it crept closer. Suddenly—it seemed suddenly, but it must have been minutes later—flame rushed up the sides of that tank, there was a sudden hollow booming, and fire was flung broadcast in a blazing, pouring flood.

"Their fuel tank!" said Bell, his eyes gleaming in the ruddy light from below. He shut off his landing lights and went upward, steeply. "I've played hell with them now!"

A thousand feet up. Two thousand. Two thousand five hundred.... And suddenly Bell felt cold all over. The instrument board! The motor was hot. Hot! Burning!

He shut it off before it could burst into flames, but he heard the squealing of tortured, unlubricated metal grinding to a stop. He leveled out. It was strangely, terribly silent in the high darkness, despite the roaring of wind about the gliding plane. The absence of the motor roar was the thing that made it horrible.

"Paula," said Bell harshly, "one of those plugs came out, I guess. The motor's ruined. Dead. The ship's going to crash. Ready with your parachute?"

It was dark, up there, save for the glare of fires upon the under surface of the wings. But he saw her hand, encased by that glare, upon the combing of the cockpit. A moment later her face. She turned, light-

dazzled, to smile back at him.

"All right, Charles." Her voice quavered a little, but it was very brave. "I'm ready. You're coming, too?"

"I'm coming," said Bell grimly. Below them was the city of The Master, set blazing by their doing. If their chutes were seen descending.... And if they were not.... "Count ten," said Bell hoarsely, "and pull out the ring. I'll be right after you."

He saw the slim little black-clad figure drop, plummetlike, and prayed in an agony of fear. Then a sudden blooming thing hid it from sight. Thick clouds of smoke lay over the lights and fires below.

Bell stepped over the side and went hurtling down toward the earth in his turn.

Bell was falling head-first when the 'chute opened, and the jerk was terrific, the more so as he had counted not the customary ten, but fifteen before pulling out the ring. But very suddenly he seemed to be floating down with an amazing gentleness, with

the ruddy blossom of a parachute swaying against a background of lustrous stars very far indeed over his head. Below him were masses of smoke and at least one huge dancing mass of flame, where the storage tank for airplane gas had exploded. It was unlikely in the extreme, he saw now, that anyone under that canopy of smoke could look up to see plane or parachute against the sky.

Clumsily enough, dangling as he was, Bell twisted about to look for Paula. Sheer panic came to him before he saw her a little above him but a long distance off. She looked horribly alone with the glare of the fires upon her parachute, and smoke that trailed away into darkness below her. She was farther from the flames than Bell, too. The light upon her was dimmer. And Bell cursed that he had stayed in the plane to make sure it would dive clear of her before he stepped off himself.

The glow on the blossom of silk above her faded out. The sky still glared behind, but a thick and acrid fog enveloped Bell as he descended. Still straining his eyes hopelessly, he crossed his feet and waited.

Branches reached up and lashed at him. Vines scraped against his sides. He was hurled against a tree trunk with stunning force, and rebounded, and swung clear, and then dangled halfway between earth and the jungle roof. It was minutes before his head cleared, and then he felt at once despairing and a fool. Dangling in his parachute harness when Paula needed him.

The light in the sky behind him penetrated even the jungle growth as a faint luminosity. Presently he writhed to a position in which he could strike a match. A thick, matted mass of climbing vines swung from the upper branches not a yard from his fingertips. Bell cursed again, frantically, and clutched at it wildly. Presently his absurd kickings set him to swaying. He redoubled his efforts and increased the arc in which he swung. But it was a long time before his fingers closed upon leaves which came away in his grasp, and longer still before he caught hold of a wrist-thick liana which oozed sticky sap upon his hands.

But he clung desperately, and presently got his whole

weight on it. He unsnapped the parachute and partly let himself down, partly slid, and partly tumbled to the solid earth below.

He had barely reached it when, muffled and many times reechoed among the tree trunks, he heard two shots. He cursed, and sprang toward the sound, plunging headlong into underbrush that strove to tear the flesh from his bones. He fought madly, savagely, fiercely.

He heard two more shots. He fought the jungle in the darkness like a madman, ploughing insanely through masses of creepers that should have been parted by a machete, and which would have been much more easily slipped through by separating them, but which he strove to penetrate by sheer strength.

And then he heard two shots again.

Bell stopped short and swore disgustedly.

"What a fool I am!" he growled. "She's telling me where she is, and I—"

He drew one of the weapons that seemed to bulge in every pocket of his flying suit and fired two shots in the air in reply. A single one answered him.

From that time Bell moved more sanely. The jungle is not designed, apparently, for men to travel in. It is assuredly not intended for them to travel in by night, and especially it is not planned, by whoever planned it, for a man to penetrate without either machete or lights.

As nearly as he could estimate it afterward, it took Bell over an hour to cover one mile in the blackness under the jungle roof. Once he blundered into fire-ants. They were somnolent in the darkness, but one hand stung as if in white-hot metal as he went on. And thorns tore at him. The heavy flying suit protected him somewhat, but after the first hundred yards he blundered on almost blindly, with his arms across his face, stopping now and then to try to orient himself. Three times he fired in the air, and three times an answering shot came instantly, to guide him.

And then a voice called in the blackness, and he

ploughed toward it, and it called again, and again, and at last he struck a match with trembling fingers and saw her, dangling as he had dangled, some fifteen feet from the ground. She smiled waveringly, with a little gasp of relief, and he heard something go slithering away, very furtively.

She clung to him desperately when he had gotten her down to solid earth. But he was savage.

"Those shots—though I'm glad you fired them—may have been a tip-off to the town. We've got to keep moving, Paula."

Her breath was coming quickly.

"They could trail us, Charles. By daylight we might not leave signs, but forcing our way through the night...."

"Right, as usual," admitted Bell. "How about shells? Did you use all you had?"

"Nearly. But I was afraid, Charles."

Bell felt in his pockets. Half a box. Perhaps twenty-five shells. With the town nearby and almost certainly having heard their signals to each other. Black rage invaded Bell. They would be hunted for, of course. Dogs, perhaps, would trail them. And the thing would end when they were at bay, ringed about by The Master's slaves, with twenty-five shells only to expend.

The dim little glow in the sky between the jungle leaves kept up. It was bright, and slowly growing brighter. There was a sudden flickering and even the jungle grew light for an instant. A few seconds later there was a heavy concussion.

"Something else went up then," growled Bell. "It's some satisfaction, anyway, to know I did a lot of damage."

And then, quite abruptly, there was an obscure murmuring sound. It grew stronger, and stronger still. If Bell had been aloft, he would have seen the planes from The Master's hangars being rushed out of their shelters. One of the long row of buildings had caught.

And the plateau of Cuyaba is very, very far from civilization. Tools, and even dynamos and engines, could be brought toilsomely to it, but the task would be terrific. Buildings would be made from materials on the spot, even the shelters for the planes. It would be much more practical to carry the parts for a saw mill and saw out the lumber on the spot than to attempt to freight roofing materials and the like to Cuyaba. So that the structures Bell had seen in the wing lights' glow were of wood, and inflammable. The powerhouse that lighted the landing field was already ablaze. The smaller shacks of the laborers perhaps would not be burnt down, but the elaborate depot for communication by plane and wireless was rapidly being destroyed. The reserve of gasoline had gone up in smoke almost at the beginning, and in spreading out had extended the disaster to nearly all the compact nerve-center of the whole conspiracy.

Presently the droning noise was tumultuous. Every plane in a condition to fly was out on the landing field, now brightly lighted by the burning buildings all about. There was frantic, hectic activity everywhere.

The secretaries of The Master were rescuing what records they could, and growing cold with terror. In the confusion of spreading flames and the noise of roaring conflagrations the stopping of the motor up aloft had passed unnoticed. In the headquarters of The Master there was panic. An attack had been made upon The Master. A person who could not be one of his slaves had found his stronghold and attacked it terribly. And if one man knew that location and dared attack it, then....

The hold of The Master upon all his slaves was based on one fact and its corollary. The fact was, that those who had been given his poison would go murder mad without its antidote. The corollary was that those who obeyed him would be given that antidote and be safe. True, the antidote was but a temporary one, and mixed with it for administration was a further dosage of the poison itself. But the whole power of The Master was based on his slaves' belief that as long as they obeyed him abjectly there would be no failure of the antidote's supply. And Bell had given that belief a sudden and horrible shock.

Orders came from one frightened man, who cursed much more from terror than from rage. Ribiera had advised him. To do him justice, Ribiera felt less fear than most. Nephew to The Master, and destined successor to The Master's power, Ribiera dared not revolt, but at least he had little fear of punishment for incompetence. It was his advice that set the many aircraft motors warming up. It was his direction that assorted out the brainwork staff. And Ribiera himself curtly took control, indifferently abandoned the enslaved workers to the madness that would come upon them, and took wing in the last of a stream of roaring things that swept upward above the smoke and flame and vanished in the sky.

Bell and Paula were huddled in between the buttress roots of a jungle giant, protected on three sides by the monster uprearings of solid wood, and Bell was absorbedly feeding a tiny smudge fire. The smoke was thick and choking, but it did keep off the plague of insects which make jungle travel much less than the romantic adventure it is pictured. Bell heard the heavy, thunderous buzzing from the town change

timbre suddenly. A single note of it grew loud and soared overhead.

He stared up instinctively, but saw nothing but leaves and branches and many climbing things above him, dimly lighted by the smoky little blaze. The roaring overhead went on, and dimmed. A second roaring came from the town and rose to a monstrous growling and diminished. A third did likewise, and a fourth.

At stated, even intervals the planes at headquarters of The Master took off from the landing field, ringed about with blazing buildings, and plunged through the darkness in a straight line. The steadier droning from the town grew lighter as the jungles echoed for many miles with the sounds of aircraft motors overhead.

At last a single plane rose upward and thundered over the jungle roof. It went away, and away.... The town was silent, then, and only a faint and dwindling murmur came from the line of aircraft headed south.

"They've deserted the town, by God!" said Bell, his

eyes gleaming. "Scared off!"

"And—and we—" said Paula, gazing at him.

"You can bet that every man who could crowd into a plane did so," said Bell grimly. "Those that couldn't, if they have any brains, will be trying to make it some other way to where they can subject themselves to one of The Master's deputies and have a little longer time of sanity. The poor devils that are left—well—they'll be *camaradas*, *peons*, laborers, without the intelligence to know what they can do. They'll wait patiently for their masters to come back. And presently their hands will writhe.... And the town will be a hell."

"Then they won't be looking for us?"

Bell considered. And suddenly he laughed.

"If the fire has burned out before dawn," he said coldly, "I'll go looking for them. It's going to be cold-blooded, and it's going to be rather pitiful, I think, but there's nothing else to do. You try to get some rest.

You'll need it."

And for all the rest of the dark hours he crouched in the little angle formed by the roots of the forest giant, and kept a thickly smoking little fire going, and listened to the noises of the jungle all about him.

It was more than a mile back to the town. It was nearer two. But it was vastly less difficult to force a way through the thick growths by daylight, even though then it was not easy. With machetes, of course, Bell and Paula would have had no trouble, but theirs had been left in the plane. Bell made a huge club and battered openings by sheer strength where it was necessary. Sweat streamed down his face before he had covered five hundred yards, but then something occurred to him and he went more easily. If there were any of the intelligent class of The Master's subjects left in the little settlement, he wanted to allow time enough for them to start their flight. He wanted to find the place empty of all but laborers, who would be accustomed to obey any man who spoke arrogantly and in the manner of a deputy of The Master. Yet he did not want to wait too long.

Panic spreads among the *camarada* class as swiftly as among more intelligent folk, and it is even more blind and hysterical.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before they emerged upon a cleared field where brightly blooming plants grew hugely. Bell regarded these grimly.

"These," he observed, "will be The Master's stock."

Paula touched his arm.

"I have heard," she said, and shuddered, "that the men who gather the plants that go to make the poisons of the *Indios* do not—do not dare to sleep near the fresh-picked plants. They say that the odor is dangerous, even the perfume of the blossoms."

"Very probably," said Bell. "I wish I could destroy the damned things. But since we can't, why, we'll go around the edge of the field."

He went upwind, skirting the edge of the planted things. A path showed, winding over half-heartedly

cleared ground. He followed it, with Paula close behind him. Smoke still curled heavily upward from the heaps of ashes which he reached first of all. He looked upon them with an unpleasant satisfaction. He had to pick his way between still smoking heaps of embers to reach the huts about which laborers stood listlessly, not working because not ordered to work, not yet frightened because not yet realizing fully the catastrophe that had come upon them.

He was moving toward them, deliberately adopting an air of suppressed rage, when a voice called whiningly.

"Senhor! Senhor!" And then pleadingly, in Portuguese, "I have news for The Master! I have news for The Master!"

Bell jerked his head about. Bars of thick wood, cemented into heavy timbers at top and bottom. A building that was solid wall on three sides, and the fourth was bars. A white man in it, unshaven, haggard, ragged, filthy. And on the floor of the cage....

There had been another such cage on a *fazenda* back

toward Rio. Bell had looked into it, and had shot the gibbering Thing that had been its occupant, as an act of pure mercy. But this man had been through horrors and yet was sane.

"Don't look," said Bell sharply to Paula. He went close.

The figure pressed against the bars, whining. And suddenly it stopped its fawning.

"The devil!" said the white man in the cage. "What in hell are you doing here, Bell? Has that fiend caught you too?"

"Oh, my God!" gasped Bell. He went white with a cold rage. He'd known this man before. A Secret Service man—one of the seven who had vanished. "How's this place opened? I'll let you out."



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing Agent Bell recoiling in horror from a row of bars, on the other side of which a man lays on his stomach, reaching through the bars in desperation. Image description end.]

"It may be dangerous," said the white man with a ghastly grin. "I'm one of The Master's little victims. I've been trying to work a little game in hopes of getting within arm's reach of him. How'd you get here? Has he got you too?"

"I burned the damned town last night," snarled Bell, "and crashed up after it. Where's that door?"

He found it, a solid mass of planks with a log bar fitted in such a way that it could not possibly be opened from within. He dragged it wide. The white man came out, holding to his self-control with an obvious effort.

"I want to dance and sing because I'm out of there," he told Bell queerly, "but I know you've done me no good. I've been fed The Master's little medicine. I've been in that cage for weeks."

Bell, quivering with rage, handed him a revolver.

"I'm going to get some supplies and stuff and try to make it to civilization," he said shortly. "If you want to help...."

"Hell, yes," said the white man drearily. "I might as well. Number One-Fourteen was here.... He's The Master's little pet, now. Turned traitor. Report it, if you ever get out."

"No," said Bell briefly. "He didn't turn." He told in a very few words of the finding of the body of a man who had fallen or been thrown from a plane into the jungle.

They were moving toward the rows of still standing shacks, then, and faces were beginning to turn toward them, and there was a little stir of apathetic puzzlement at sight of the white man who had been set free.

That white man looked suddenly at Paula, and then at Bell.

"I've been turned into a beast," he said wryly. "Look here, Bell. There were as many as ten and fifteen of us in that cage at one time—men the deputies sent up for the purpose. We were allowed to go mad, one and two at a time, for the edification of the populace, to keep the *camaradas* scared. And those of us who weren't going mad just then used to have to band together and kill them. That cage has been the most awful hell on earth that any devil ever contrived. They put three women in there once, with their hands

already writhing.... Ugh!..."

Bell's face was cold and hard as if carved from marble.

"I haven't lived through it," said the white man harshly, "by being soft. And I've got less than no time to live—sane, anyhow. I was thinking of shooting you in the back, because the young lady—"

He laughed as Bell's revolver muzzle stirred.

"I'm telling you," said the white man in ghastly merriment, "because I thought—I thought One-Fourteen had set me the example of ditching the Service for his own life. But now it's different."

He pointed.

"There's a launch in that house, with one of these outboard motors. It was used to keep up communication with the boat gangs that sweat the heavy supplies up the river. It'll float in three inches of water, and you can pole it where the water's too shallow to let the propeller turn. This rabble will mob

you if you try to take it, because it'll have taken them just about this long to realize that they're deserted. They'll think you are a deputy, at least, to have dared release me. I'm going to convince them of it, and use this gun to give you a start. I give you two hours. It ought to be enough. And then...."

Bell nodded.

"I'm not Service," he said curtly, "but I'll see it's known."

The white man laughed again.

"Some sigh for the glories of this world, and some for a prophet's paradise to come," he quoted derisively. "I thought I was hard, Bell, but I find I prefer to have my record clean in the Service—where nobody will ever see it—than to take what pleasure I might snatch before I die. Queer, isn't it? Old Omar was wrong. Now watch me bluff, flinging away the cash for credit of doubtful value, and all for the rumble of a distant drum—which will be muted!"

They were surrounded by swarming, fawning, frightened *camaradas* who implored the Senhor to tell them if he were a deputy of The Master, and if he were here to make sure nothing evil befell them. They worked for The Master, and they desired nothing save to labor all their lives for The Master, only—only—The Master would allow no evil to befall them?

The white man waved his arms grandiloquently.

"The Senhor you behold," he proclaimed in the barbarous Portugese of the hinterland of Brazil, "has released me from the cage in which you saw me. He is the deputy of The Master himself, and is enraged because the landing lights on the field were not burning, so that his airplane fell down into the jungle. He bears news of great value from me to The Master, which will make me finally a sub-deputy of The Master. And I have a revolver, as you see, with which I could kill him, but he dares not permit me to die, since I have given him news for The Master. I shall wait here and he will go and send back an airplane with the grace of The Master for me and for all of you."

Bell snarled an assent, in the arrogant fashion of the deputies of The Master. He waited furiously while the Service man argued eloquently and fluently. He fingered his revolver suggestively when a wave of panic swept over the swarming mob for no especial reason. And then he watched grimly while the light little metal-bottomed boat was carried to the water's edge and loaded with food, and fuel, and arms, and ammunition, and even mosquito bars.

The white man grinned queerly at Bell as he extended his hand in a last handshake.

"I, who am about to die, salute you!" he said mockingly. "Isn't this a hell of a world, Bell? I'm sure we could design a better one in some ways."

Bell felt a horrible, a ghastly shock. The hand that gripped his was writhing in his grasp.

"Quite so," said the white man. "It started about five minutes ago. In theory, I've about forty-eight hours. Actually, I don't dare wait that long, if I'm to die like a white man. And a lingering vanity insists on that. I

hope you get out, Bell.... And if you want to do me a favor,"—he grinned again, mirthlessly—"you might see that The Master and as many of his deputies as you can manage join me in hell at the earliest possible moment. I shan't mind so much if I can watch them."

He put his hands quickly in his pockets as the little outboard motor caught and the launch went on down-river. He did not even look after them. The last Bell saw of him he was swaggering back up the little hillside above the river edge, surrounded by scared inhabitants of the workmen's shacks, and scoffing in a superior fashion at their fears.

Chapter 12

It took Bell just eight days to reach the Paraguay, and those eight days were like an age-long nightmare of toil and discomfort and more than a little danger. The launch was headed downstream, of course, and with the current behind it, it made good time. But the distances of Brazil are infinite, and the jungles of Brazil are malevolent, and the route down the Rio Laurenço was designed by the architect of hell.

Raudales lay in wait to destroy the little boat. Insects swarmed about to destroy its voyagers. And the jungle loomed above them, passively malignant, and waited for them to die.

And as if physical sufferings were not enough, Bell saw Paula wilt and grow pale. All the way down the river they passed little clearings at nearly equal distances. And men came trembling out of the little houses upon those *fazendas* and fawned upon the Senhor who was in the launch that had come from up-river and so must be in the service of The Master himself. The clearings and the tiny houses had been placed upon the river for the service of the terribly laboring boat gangs who brought the heavier supplies up the river to The Master's central depot. Men at these clearings had been enslaved and ordered to remain at their posts, serving all those upon the business of The Master. They fawned abjectly upon Bell, because he was of *os gentes* and so presumably was empowered, as The Master had empowered his more intelligent subjects, to exact the most degraded of submission from all beneath him in the horrible

conspiracy. Once, indeed, Bell was humbly implored by a panic stricken man to administer "the grace of The Master" to a moody and irritable child of twelve or so.

"She sees the red spots, Senhor. It is the first sign. And I have served The Master faithfully...."

And Bell could do nothing. He went on savagely. And once he passed a gang of *camaradas* laboring to get heavily loaded dugouts up a fiendish *raudal*. They had ropes out and were hauling at them from the bank, while some of their number were breast-deep in the rushing water, pushing the dugouts against the stream.

"They're headed for the plantation," said Bell grimly, "and they'll need the grace of The Master by the time they get there. And it's abandoned. But if I tell them...."

Men with no hope at all are not to be trusted. Not when they are mixtures of three or more races—white and black and red—and steeped in ignorance and

superstition and, moreover, long subject to such masters as these men had had. Bell had to think of Paula.

He could have landed and haughtily ordered them to float or even carry the light boat to the calmer waters below. They would have obeyed and cringed before him. But he shot the rapids from above, with the little motor roaring past rocks and walls of jungle beside the foaming water, at a speed that chilled his blood.

Paula said nothing. She was white and listless. Bell, himself, was being preyed upon by a bitter blend of horror and a deep-seated rage that consumed him like a fever. He had fever itself, of course. He was taking, and forcing Paula to take, five grains of quinine a day. It had been included among his stores as a matter of course by those who had loaded his boat. And with the fever working in his brain he found himself holding long, imaginary conversations, in which one part of his brain reproached the other part for having destroyed the plantation of The Master. The laborers upon that plantation had been abandoned to the murder madness because of his deed. The caretakers

of the tiny *fazenda* on the river bank were now ignored. Bell felt himself a murderer because he had caused The Master's deputies to cast them off in a callous indifference to their inevitable fate.

He suffered the tortures of the damned, and grew morose and bitter, and could only escape that self torture by coddling his hatred of Ribiera and The Master. He imagined torments to be inflicted upon them which would adequately repay them for their crimes, and racked his feverish brain for memories of the appalling atrocities which can be committed upon the human body without destroying its capacity to suffer.

It was not normal. It was not sane. But it filled Bell's mind and somehow kept him from suicide during the horrible passage of the river. He hardly dared speak to Paula. There was a time when he counted the days since he had been a guest at Ribiera's estate outside of Rio, and frenziedly persuaded himself that he saw red spots before his eyes and soon would have the murder madness come upon him. And then he thought of the supplies in Ribiera's plane, in which

they had escaped from Rio. They had eaten that food.

It was almost unconsciously, then, that he saw the narrow water on which the launch floated valiantly grow wider day by day. When at last it debouched suddenly into a vast stream whereon a clumsy steamer plied beneath a self made cloud of smoke, he stared dully at it for minutes before he realized.

"Paula," he said suddenly, and listened in amazement to his voice. It was hoarse and harsh and croaking. "Paula, we've made it. This must be the Paraguay."

She roused herself and looked about like a person waking from a lethargic sleep. And then her lips quivered, and she tried to speak and could not, and tears fell silently from her eyes, and all at once she was sobbing bitterly.

That sign of the terrific strain she had been under served more than anything else to jolt Bell out of his abnormal state of mind. He moved over to her and clumsily put his arm about her, and comforted her as best he could. And she sat sobbing with her head on

his shoulder, gasping in a form of hysterical relief, until the engine behind them sputtered, and coughed, and died.

When Bell looked, the last drop of gasoline was gone. But the motor had served its purpose. It had run manfully on an almost infinitesimal consumption of gasoline for eight days. It had not missed an explosion save when its wiring was wetted by spray. And now....

Bell hauled the engine inboard and got out the oars from under the seats. He got the little boat out to mid-stream, and they floated down until a village of squalid huts appeared on the eastern bank. He landed, there, and with much bargaining and a haughty demeanor disposed of the boat to the skipper of a *batelao* in exchange for passage down-river as far as Corumba. The rate was outrageously high. But he had little currency with him and dared go no farther on a vessel which carried a boat of The Master's ownership conspicuously towed behind.

At Corumba he purchased clothes less obviously of *os gentes*, both for himself and for Paula, and that same

afternoon was able to arrange for their passage to Asunción as deck passengers on a river steamer going downstream.

It was as two peasants, then, that they rode in sweltering heat amid a swarming and odorous mass of fellow humanity downstream. But it was a curious relief, in some ways. The people about them were gross and unwashed and stupid, but they were human. There was none of that diabolical feeling of terror all about. There were no strained, fear haunted faces upon the deck reserved for deck passengers and other cattle. The talk was ungrammatical and literal and of the earth. The women were stolid-faced and reserved. But when the long rows of hammocks were slung out in the open air, in the casual fashion of sleeping arrangements in the back-country of all South America, it was blessedly peaceful to realize that the folk who snored so lustily were merely human; human animals, it might be, with no thought above their *farinha* and *feijos* on the morrow, but human.

And the second day they passed the old fort at

Coimbra, and went on. The passage into Paraguayan territory was signalized by an elaborate customs inspection, and three days later Asunción itself displayed its red-tiled roofs and adobe walls upon the shore.

Bell had felt some confidence in his ability to pass muster with his Spanish, though his Portuguese was limited, and it was a shock when the captain of the steamer summoned him to his cabin with a gesture, before the steamer docked. Bell left Paula among the other deck passengers and went with the peasant's air of suspicious humility into the captain's quarters. But the captain's pose of grandeur vanished at once when the door closed.

"Señor," said the steamer captain humbly, "I have not spoken to you before. I knew you would not wish it. But tell me, senor! Have you any news of what The Master plans?"

Bell's eyes flickered, at the same time that a cold apprehension filled him.

"Why do you speak to me of The Master?" he demanded sharply.

The steamer captain stammered. The man was plainly frightened at Bell's tone. Bell relaxed, his flash of panic for Paula gone.

"I know," said the captain imploringly, "that the great *fazenda* has been deserted. On my last trip, down, senor, I brought many of the high deputies who had been there. They warned me not to speak, senor, but I saw that you were not what you seemed, and I thought you might be going about to see who obeyed The Master's orders...."

Bell nodded.

"That is my mission," he said curtly. "Do not speak of it further—not even to the deputy in Asunción."

The captain stammered again.

"But I must see the Señor Francia," he said humbly. "I report to him after every trip, and if he thought that I

did not report all that I learn...."

"It is my order," snapped Bell angrily. "If he reproaches you, say that one who has orders from The Master himself gave them to you. And do not speak of the destruction of the *fazenda*. I am searching especially for the man who caused it. And—wait! I will take your name, and you shall give me—say—a thousand pesos. I had need of money to bribe a fool I could not waste time on, up-country. It will be returned to you."

And again the captain stammered, but Bell stared at him haughtily, and he knelt abjectly before the ship's safe.

Asunción, as everybody knows, is a city of sixty thousand people, and the capital of a republic which enjoyed the rule of a family of hereditary dictators for sixty years; which rule ended in a war wherein four-fifths of the population was wiped out. And since that beginning it has averaged eight revolutions to Mexico's three, has had the joy of knowing seven separate presidents in five years—none of them

elected—and now boasts a population approximately two-thirds illegitimate and full of pride in its intellectual and artistic tastes.

Bell and Paula made their way along the cobbled streets away from the river, surrounded by other similarly peasant-seeming folk. Bell told her curtly what had happened with the steamer captain.

"It's the devil," he said coldly, "because this whole republic is under The Master's thumb. Except among the peasants we can count on nearly everybody being on the lookout for us, if they so much as suspect we're alive. And they may because I burned their damned *fazenda*. So...."

Paula smiled at him, rather wanly.

"What are you going to do, Charles?"

"Get a boat," said Bell curtly. "One with three or four men, if I can. If I can buy it with the skipper's money, I will. But I can't take you to go bargaining. It would look suspicious."

They had reached the central plaza of the town. The market swarmed with brown skinned folk and seemed to overflow with fruits. A man was unconcernedly shoveling oranges out of a cart with a shovel, as if they had been so much coal. A market woman as unconcernedly dropped some of the same golden fruit within a small pen where a piglet awaited a purchaser. To the left, there were rows of unshaded stalls where the infinitely delicate handmade Paraguayan lace was exposed for sale.

"I—think," said Paula, "I think I will go in the cathedral. I will be very devout, Charles, and you will find me there when you return. I will be safe there, certainly."

He walked with her across the crowded plaza. He should have known that your peasant does not stride with head up, but regarding the ground. That a man who works heavily droops his shoulders with weariness at the end of a day. And especially he should have realized that Paraguay is not, strictly speaking, a Latin-American nation. It is Latin-Indian, in which the population graduates very definitely

from a sub-stratum of nearly or quite pure Indian race to an aristocracy of nearly or quite pure Spanish descent, and that the color of a man's skin fixes his place in society. Both Bell and Paula were too light of skin for the peasant's clothes they wore. They aroused curiosity at once. If it was not an active curiosity, it was nevertheless curiosity of a sort.

But Bell left her in the shadowy, cool interior of the cathedral which seems so pitifully small to be the center of religion for a nation. He saw her move toward one of the little candle-lit niches in the wall and fall quite simply on her knees there.

And he moved off, to wander aimlessly down to the river shore and stare about and presently begin a desultory conversation with sleepy boatmen.

It was three hours and more before he returned to the Cathedral, and Paula was talking to someone. More, talking to a woman in the most discreet of mantilla'd church-going costumes. Paula saw him in the doorway, and uttered a little cry of relief. She came hurrying to him.

"Charles! I have found a friend! Isabella Ybarra. We were schoolmates in the United States and she has just come back from Paris! So you see, she cannot—"

"I see," said Bell very quietly.

Paula was speaking swiftly and very softly.

"We went to school together, Charles. I trust her. You must trust her also. There is no danger, this time. Isabella has never even heard of The Master. So you see...."

"I see that you need someone you can trust," said Bell grimly. "*I* found that the captain of the steamer had gone to The Master's deputy here. While I was talking to some boatmen a warning was given to look out for a man and woman, together, who may try to buy a boat. We're described, and only the fact that I was alone kept me from being suspected. Police, soldiers—everybody is looking out for us. Paraguay's under The Master's thumb more completely than any other nation on the continent."

The figure to which Paula had been talking was moving slowly toward them. A smiling, brown-eyed face twinkled at them.

"You must be Charles!" said a warm and cluckling voice. "Paula has raved, Señor. Now I am going to take her off in my carriage. She is my maid. And you will follow the carriage on foot and I will have the major-domo let you in the servants' entrance, and the three of us will conspire."

It was incongruous to hear the English of a girl's finishing school from the mantilla'd young woman who beamed mischievously at him. She had the delighted air of one aiding a romance. It was doubly incongruous because of the dark and shadowy Cathedral in which they were, and the raucous noises of the market in the plaza without. Bell had a sense of utter unreality as Isabella's good humored voice went on:

"Do you remember, Paula, the time the French teacher caught us in the pantry? I shall feel just like that time."

"This is dangerous," said Bell, steadily, "and it is very serious indeed."

"Pooh!" said Isabella comfortably. "Paula, you didn't even know I was married! A whole year and a half! And he's a darling, really. I'm the Señora Isabella Ybarra de Zuloaga, if you please! Bow gracefully!" She chuckled. "Jaime came all the way to Rio to meet me last month. I'm wild about him, Paula.... But come on! Follow me humbly, like a nice little *mestizo* girl who wants to be my maid, and I'll let you ride with the *cochero* and Charles shall follow behind us."

She swept out of the Cathedral with the air of a grande dame suppressing a giggle, and Paula went humbly behind her.

And Bell trudged through the dust and the blistering sun while the highly polished carriage jolted over cobble stones and the youthful Señora Isabella Ybarra de Zuloaga beamed blissfully at the universe which did not realize that she was a conspirator, and Paula sat modestly beside the brown skinned *cochero*.

It was not a long ride nor a long walk, though the sun was insufferable. The capital of Paraguay is not large. It is a sleepy, somnolent little town in which the most pretentious building was begun as the Presidential Palace and wound up as the home of a bank. But there are bullet marks on the façade of the *Museo Nacional*, and there is still an empty pedestal here and there throughout the city where the heroes of last year's revolution, in bronze, have been pulled down and the heroes of this year's uprising of the people have not yet been set up. Red tiled roofs give the city color, and the varying shades of its populace give it variety, and the fact that below the whiter class of inhabitants *Guarani* is spoken instead of Spanish adds to the individuality of its effect.

But the house into which the carriage turned could have been built in Rio or Buenos Aires without comment on its architecture. It had the outer bleakness of most private homes of South America, but if it was huge and its windows were barred, the patio into which Bell was ushered by a bewildered and suspicious major-domo made up in color and in

charm for all that the exterior lacked.

A fountain played amid flowers, and macaws and parrots and myriad other caged birds hung in their cages about the colonnade around the court, and Bell found Paula being introduced to a pale young man in the stiff collar and unspeakably formal morning clothes of the South American who is of the upper class.

"Jaime," said Isabella, beaming. "And this is Charles, whom Paula is to marry! It is romantic! It is fascinating! And I depend on you to give him clothes so that all our servants won't stare goggle-eyed at him, and I am going to take Paula off at once and dress her! They are our guests! And, Jaime, you must threaten all the servants terribly so they will keep it very secret—that we have two such terrible people with us."

Paula smiled at Bell, and he saw that she felt utterly safe and wholly at peace. Something was hammering at Bell's brain, warning him, and he could not understand what it was. But he exchanged the

decorous limp handshake which is conventional south of Panama, and followed his unsmiling host to rooms where a servant laid out a bewildering assortment of garments. They were all rather formal, the sort of clothing that is held to be fitting for a man of position where Spanish is the official if not the common tongue.

His host retired, without words, and Bell came out later to find him sipping moodily at a drink, waiting for him. He wiped his forehead.

"Be seated, Señor," he said heavily, "until the ladies join us."

He wiped his forehead again and watched somberly while Bell poured out a drink.

"Isabella...." He seemed to find it difficult to speak.

"She has told me a little, but there has been no time for more than a little: I do not wish to have her tell me too much. She does not understand. She was educated in North America, where customs are different. She demands that I assist you and the

senorita—it is the senorita?"

Bell stiffened. In all Spanish America the conventions are strict. For a man and woman to travel together, even perforce and for a short distance, automatically damns the woman.

"Go on," said Bell grimly.

His host was very pale indeed.

"She demands that I assist you and the senorita to escape the police and the government. Provided that you do not tell me who you are, I will attempt it. But —"

"I wonder," said Bell quietly, "if you have ever seen red spots dancing before your eyes."

His host went utterly livid.

Zuloaga looked down at his hands, as if expecting unguessable things of them. And then he shrugged, and said harshly:

"I have, Señor. So you see that Isabella, who does not know, is asking me to risk, not only my life, but her honor."

Bell said nothing for a moment. He was a little pale.

"And your honor?" he asked quietly.

The pallor on the face of the Señor Jaime Zuloaga was horrible. He tried to speak, and could not. He stood up, and managed to say:

"So much I will risk, because you have been my guest. Until to-morrow morning you are safe, unless the Señor Francia has his spies within my own house. I—I will attempt, even to procure a boat. But—"

Something made Bell turn. The major-domo was moving quickly out of sight. Like a flash Bell was upon him, and like a flash a knife came out.

Bell's host gasped. The fact that his servant had spied was more than obvious, and he had spoke treason against The Master. He leaned against the table, sick

and trembling and mumbling of despair, while there were crashes in the room into which Bell had plunged, while bodies thrashed about on the floor, and while stertorous breathing grew less, and stopped....

Bell came back, breathing hard. The front of his coat was slashed open.

"He's dead," he said harshly. "He'd have reported what you said, so I killed him.... And now we've got to do something with his body."

He helped in the horrible task, while his host grew more and more shaken. No other servants came near. And Bell could almost read the thoughts that went through Zuloaga's brain. One servant had spied, to report his treason. And that meant assassination for himself, as the least of punishments, and for his wife....

But there would be no punishment if he went first to the deputy and said that Bell had killed the major-domo.

Bell left the house before dusk, desperately determined to steal a craft of some sort, return for Paula, and get away from Asunción before dawn.

He returned after an hour. In the morning a man would be found bound and gagged, with five hundred pesos stuffed into his pockets. His boat would have vanished.

But there was a commotion before the house where Paula waited fearfully. A carriage stood there, with a company of mounted soldiers about it. Someone was being put into it. As Bell broke into a run toward the house the carriage started up and the soldiers trotted after it.

Paula was taken.

Chapter 13

That night Bell turned burglar. To attempt a rescue of Paula was simply out of the question. He was entirely aware that he would be expected to do just such a thing, and that it would be adequately guarded

against. Therefore he prepared for a much more desperate enterprise by burglarizing a bookstore in the particularly neat method in which members of The Trade are instructed. The method was invented by a member of The Trade who was an ex-cabinet maker, and who perished disreputably. He killed a certain courier of a certain foreign government, thereby preventing a minor war and irritating two governments excessively, and was hanged.

The method, of course, is simplicity itself. One removes the small nails which hold the molding of a door panel in place. The molding comes out. So does the panel. One enters through the panel, commits one's burglary, and comes out, replacing the molding and the nails with reasonable care. Depending upon the care with which the replacing is done, the means of entrance is more or less undiscoverable. But it is usually used when it is not intended that the burglary ever be discussed.

Bell abstracted two books, wrapping paper and twine. He departed, using great care. He walked three miles out of town and to the banks of the Paraguay. There

he carefully saturated the pages of both books in water, carefully keeping the bindings from being wetted. Then he tore one book to pieces, saving the leaves and inserting them between the leaves of the other book. Then, with a brazil nut candle for illumination, he began to write.

You see, when two thoroughly wetted pieces of paper are placed one above the other with a hard surface such as the cover of another book under them, you can write upon the top one with a stick. The writing will show dark against the gray of the saturated paper. You then remove the top sheet and end the writing reproduced on the bottom sheet. And then you can dry the second sheet and find the marking vanished—until it is wetted again. It is, in fact, a method of water-marking paper. And it is the simplest of all methods of invisible writing.

Bell wrote grimly for hours. The book he had chosen was an old one, an ancient copy of one of Lope de Vega's plays, and the pages were wrinkled and yellow from age alone. When, by dawn, the last page was dried out, there was no sign that anything other than

antiquity had affected the paper. And Bell wrapped it carefully, and addressed it to an elderly senora of literary tastes in San Juan, Porto Rico, and enclosed an affectionate letter to his very dear aunt, and signed it with an entirely improbable name.

It was mailed before sunrise, the necessary stamps having been filched from the burglarized bookstore and the price thereof being carefully inserted in the till. Bell had made a complete and painstaking report of every fact he had himself come upon in the matter of The Master and his slaves and appended to it a copy of the report of the dead Secret Service operative Number One-Fourteen. He destroyed that after copying it. And he concluded that since he had been given dismissal by Jamison in Rio, he considered himself at liberty to take whatever steps he saw fit. And since the Senhorina Paula Canalejas had been kidnapped by agents of The Master, he intended to take steps which might possibly bring about her safety, but would almost certainly cause his death.

The report should at least be of assistance if the Trade set to work to combat The Master. Bell had no

information whatever about that still mysterious and still more horrible person himself. But what he knew about The Master's agents he sent to a lady in Porto Rico who has an astonishingly large number of far ranging nephews. And then Bell got himself adequately shaved, bought a hearty breakfast, and, after one or two heartening drinks, was driven grandly to the residence of the Señor Francia, deputy of The Master for the republic of Paraguay.

The servants who admitted him gazed blankly when he gave his name. A door was hastily closed behind him. He was ushered into an elaborate reception room and, after an agitated pause, no less than six separate frock-coated persons appeared and pointed large revolvers at him while a seventh searched him exhaustively. Bell submitted amusedly.

"And now," he said dryly, "I suppose the Señor Francia will receive me?"

There was more agitation. The six men remained; with their weapons pointed at him. The seventh departed, and Bell re-dressed himself in a leisurely

fashion.

Ten minutes later a slender, dark skinned man with impeccably waxed moustaches entered, regarded Bell with an entirely impersonal interest, took one of the revolvers from one of the six frock-coated gentlemen, and seated himself comfortably. He waved his hand and they filed uneasily from the room. So far, not one word had been spoken.

Bell retrieved his cigarette case and lighted up with every appearance of ease.

"I have come," he said casually, "to request that I be sent to The Master. I believe that he is anxious to meet me."

The dark eyes scrutinized him coldly. Then Francia smiled.

"*Pero si*," he said negligently, "he is very anxious to see you. I suppose you know what fate awaits you?"

His smile was amiable and apparently quite friendly,

but Bell shrugged.

"I suppose," he said dryly, "he wants to converse with me. I have been his most successful opponent to date, I think."

Francia smiled again. It was curious how his smile, which at first seemed so genuine and so friendly, became unspeakably unpleasant on its repetition.

"Yes." Francia seemed to debate some matter of no great importance. "You have been very annoying, Señor Bell. The Senhor Ribiera asked that you be sent to him. It was his intention to execute you, privately. He described a rather amusing method to me. And I must confess that you have annoyed me, likewise. Since the Cuyaba plantation was destroyed my subjects have been much upset. They have been frightened, and even stubborn. Only last week"—he smiled pleasantly, and the effect was horrible—"only last week I desired the society of a lady who is my subject. And her husband considered that, since the *fazenda* was destroyed, The Master would be powerless to extend his grace before long, in any

event. So he shot his wife and himself. It annoyed me enough to make me feel that it would be a pleasure to kill you."

He raised the revolver meditatively.

"Well?" said Bell coldly.

Francia lowered the weapon and laughed.

"Oh, I shall not do it. I think The Master would be displeased. You seem to have the type of courage he most desires in his deputies. And it may yet be that I shall greet you as my fellow deputy or perhaps my fellow viceroy. So I shall send you to him. I would say that you have about an even chance of dying very unpleasantly or of being a deputy. Therefore I offer you such courtesies as I may."

Bell puffed a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"I'm about out of cigarettes," he said mildly.

"They shall be supplied. And—er—if you would desire

feminine society, I will have some of my pretty subjects...."

"No," said Bell bluntly. "I would like to speak to the Senhorina Canalejas, though."

Francia chuckled.

"She left for Buenos Aires last night. The Senhor Ribiera sent a most impatient message for her to be sent on at once. I regretted it, but he had The Master's authority. I thought her charming, myself."

The skin about Bell's knuckles was white. His hands had clenched savagely.

"In that event," he said coldly, "the only other courtesy I would ask is that of following her as soon as possible."

Francia rose languidly. The revolver dangled by his side, but his grip upon it was firm. He smiled at Bell with the same effect of a horrible, ghastly geniality.

"Within the hour, Señor," he said urbanely. "With the guard I shall place over you it is no harm, I am sure, to observe that The Master is at his retreat in Punta Arenas. You will go there to-morrow, as I go to-night."

He moved toward the door, and smiled again, and added pleasantly:

"The Senhorina was delivered to the Senhor Ribiera this morning."

Matters moved swiftly after that. A servant brought cigarettes and a tray of liquors—which Bell did not touch. There was the sound of movement, the scurrying, furtive haste which seems always to imply a desperate sort of fear. Bell waited in a terrible calmness, while rage hammered at his temples.

Then the clattering of horses' hoofs outside. A carriage was being brought. Soldiers came in and a man beckoned curtly. Bell stuffed his pockets with smokes and followed languidly. He was realizing that there was little pretense of secrecy about the power of The Master's deputy here. Police and soldiers....

But Paraguay, of all the nations of the southern continent, has learned a certain calm realism about governmental matters.

The man who has power is obeyed. The man who has not power is not obeyed. Titles are of little importance, though it is the custom for the man with the actual power eventually to assume the official rank of authority. Since the President in Asunción was no more than a figurehead who called anxiously upon the Señor Francia every morning for instructions concerning the management of the nation, Francia indifferently ignored him whenever he chose and gave orders directly. There would be very little surprise and no disorder whatever when The Master proclaimed Paraguay a viceroyalty of his intended empire.

The carriage went smartly through the cobbled streets with a cavalry escort all about it. An officer sat opposite Bell with his hand on his revolver.

"I am receiving at least the honors of royalty," Bell commented coldly to him, in Spanish.

"Señor," said the officer harshly, "this is the state in which the deputies of The Master were escorted."

He watched Bell heavily, but with the desperate intentness of a man who knows no excuses will be received if his prisoner escapes.

Out of the town to a flying field, where a multi-engined plane was warming up. It was one of the ships that had been at The Master's *fazenda* of Cuyaba, one of the ships that had fled from the burning plantation. Bell was ushered into it with a ceremonious suspicion. Almost immediately he was handcuffed to his seat. Two men took their place behind him. The big ship rolled forward, lifted, steadied, and after a single circling set out to the southeast for Buenos Aires.

The whole performance had been run off with the smoothly oiled precision of an iron discipline exercised upon men in the grip of deadly fear.

"One man, at least," reflected Bell grimly, "has some qualities that fit him for his job."

And then, for hour after hour, the big ship went steadily southeast. It flew over Paraguayan territory for two hours, soaring high over the Lago Ypoa and on over the swampy country that extends to the Argentine border. It ignored that border and all customs formalities. It went on, through long hours of flight, while mountains rose before it. It rose over those mountains and passed over the first railroad line—the first real sign of civilization since leaving Asunción—at Mercedes, and reached the Uruguay river where the Mirinjay joins it. It went roaring on down above the valley of the Rio Uruguay for long and tedious hours more. At about noon, lunch was produced. The two men who guarded Bell ate. Then, with drawn revolvers, they unlocked his handcuffs and offered him food.

He ate, of exactly those foods he had seen them eat. He submitted indifferently to the re-application of his fetters. He had reached a state which was curiously emotionless. If Paula had been turned over to Ribiera that morning, Paula was dead. And just as there is a state of grief which stuns the mind past the

realization of its loss, so there is a condition of hatred which leads to an enormous calmness and an unnatural absence of any tremor. Bell had reached that state. The instinct of self-preservation had gone lax. Where a man normally thinks first, if unconsciously, of the protection of his body from injury or pain, Bell had come to think first, and with the same terrible clarity, of the accomplishment of revenge.

He would accept The Master's terms, if The Master offered them. He would become The Master's subject, accepting the poison of madness without a qualm. He would act and speak and think as a subject of The Master, until his opportunity came. And then....

His absolute calmness would have deceived most men. It may have deceived his guards. Time passed. The Rio de la Plata spread out widely below the roaring multi-engined plane and the vast expanse of buildings which is Buenos Aires appeared far ahead in the gathering dusk. Little twinkling lights blinked into being upon the water and the earth far away. Then one of the two guards touched Bell on the shoulder.

"Señor," he said sharply above the motors' muffled roar, "we shall land. A car will draw up beside the plane. There will be no customs inspection. That has been arranged for. You can have no hope of escape. I ask you if you will go quietly into the car?"

"Why not?" asked Bell evenly. "I went to Señor Francia of my own accord."

The guard leaned back. The city of Buenos Aires spread out below them. The tumbled, congested old business quarter glittered in all its offices, and the broad Avenida de Mayo cut its way as a straight slash of glittering light through the section of the city to eastward. By contrast, from above, the far-flung suburbs seemed dark and somber.

The big plane roared above the city, settling slowly; banked steeply and circled upon its farther side, and dipped down toward what seemed an absurdly small area, which sprang into a pinkish glow on their descent. That area spread out as the descent continued, though, and was a wide and level field when the ship flattened out and checked and

lumbered to a stop.

A glistening black car came swiftly, humming into place alongside almost before the clumsy aircraft ceased to roll. Its door opened. Two men got out and waited. The hangars were quite two hundred yards away, and Bell saw the glitter of weapons held inconspicuously but quite ready.

He stepped out of the cabin of the plane with a revolver muzzle pressing into his spine. Other revolver muzzles pressed sharply into his sides as he reached earth.

Smiling faintly, he took four steps, clambered up into the glistening black car, and settled down comfortably into the seat. The two men who had waited by the car followed him. The door closed, and Bell was in a padded silence that was acutely uncomfortable for a moment. A dome light glowed brightly, however, and he lighted nearly the last of the cigarettes from Asunción with every appearance of composure as the car started off with a lurch.

The windows were blank. Thick, upholstered padding covered the spaces where openings should have been, and there was only the muffled vibration of the motor and the occasional curiously distinct noise of a flexing spring.

"Just as a matter of curiosity," said Bell mildly, "what is the excuse given on the flying field for this performance? Or is the entire staff subject to The Master?"

Two revolvers were bearing steadily upon him and the two men watched him with the unwavering attention of men whose lives depend upon their vigilance.

"You, Señor," said one of them without expression or a smile, "are the corpse of a prominent politician who died yesterday at his country home."

And then for half an hour or more the car drove swiftly, and stopped, and drove swiftly forward again as if in traffic. Then there were many turns, and then a slow and cautious traverse of a relatively few feet. It stopped, and then the engine vibration ceased.

"I advise you, Señor," said the same man who had spoken before, and in the same emotionless voice, "not to have hope of escape in the moment of alighting. We are in an enclosed court and there are two gates locked behind us."

Bell shrugged as there was the clatter of a lock operating. The door swung wide.

He stepped down into a courtyard surrounded by nearly bare walls. It had once been the *patio* of a private home of some charm. Now, however, it was bleak and empty. A few discouraged flowers grew weedily in one corner. The glow of light in the sky overhead assured Bell that he was in the very heart of Buenos Aires, but only the most subdued of rumbles spoke of the activity and the traffic of the city going on without.

"This way," said the man with the expressionless voice.

The other man followed. The chauffeur of the car stood aside as if some formality required him neither

to start the motor or return to his seat until Bell was clear of the courtyard.

Through a heavy timber door. Along a passageway with the odor of neglect. Up stairs which once had been impressive and ornamental. Into a room without windows.

"You will have an interview with the Señorita Canalejas in five minutes," said the emotionless voice.

The door closed, while Bell found every separate muscle in his body draw taut. And while his brain at first was dazed with incredulous relief, then it went dark with a new and ghastly terror.

"They know *yagué*," he heard himself saying coldly, "which makes any person obey any command. They may know other and more hellish ones yet."

He fought for self control, which meant the ability to conceal absolutely any form of shock that might await him. That one was in store he was certain. He paced grimly the length of the room and back again....

Something on the carpet caught his eye. A bit of string. He stared at it incredulously. The end was tied into a curious and an individual knot, which looked like it might be the pastime of a sailor, and which looked like it ought to be fairly easy to tie. But it was one of those knots which wandering men sometimes tie absent mindedly in the presence of stirring events. It was the recognition-knot of the Trade, one of those signs by which men may know each other in strange and peculiar situations. And there were many other knots tied along the trailing length of the string. It seemed as if some nervous and distraught prisoner in this room might have toyed abstractedly with a bit of cord.

Only, Bell drew it through his fingers. Double knot, single knot, double knot.... They spelled out letters in the entirely simple Morse code of the telegrapher, if one noticed.

"RBRA GN ON PLA HRE ST TGT J."

Your old-time telegrapher uses many abbreviations. Your short-wave fan uses more. Mostly they are made

by a simple omission of vowels in normal English words. And when the recognition sign at the beginning was considered, the apparently cryptic letters leaped into meaning.

"RiBeRA GoNe ON PauLA HeRe SiT TiGhT Jamison."

When the door opened again and a terribly pale Paula was ushered in, Bell gave no sign of surprise. He simply took her in his arms and kissed her, holding her very, very close.

Chapter 14

Paula remained in the room with Bell for perhaps twenty minutes, and Bell had the feeling of eyes upon them and of ears listening to their every word. In their first embrace, in fact, he murmured a warning in her ear and she gasped a little whispered word of comprehension. But it was at least a relief to be sure that she was alive and yet unharmed. Francia had been in error when he told Bell of Paula's delivery to the Brazilian to be enslaved or killed as Ribiera found most amusing. Or perhaps, of course, Francia had

merely wanted to cause Bell all possible discomfort.

It was clear, however, blessedly clear and evident, that Paula's pallor was due to nothing more than terror—a terror which was now redoubled because Bell was in The Master's toils with her. Forgetting his warning, she whispered to him desperately that he must try to escape, somehow, before The Master's poison was administered to him. Outside, he might do something to release her. Here, a prisoner, he was helpless.

Bell soothed her, not daring either to confess the plan he had formed of a feigned submission in order to wreak revenge, or to offer encouragement because of the message knotted in the piece of string by Jamison. And because of that caution she came to look at him with a queer doubt, and presently with a terrible quiet grief.

"Charles—you—you have been poisoned like the rest?"

The feeling of watching eyes and listening ears was

strong. Bell had a part to play, and the necessity for playing that part was the greater because now he was forced to hope. He hesitated, torn between the need to play his rôle for the invisible eavesdroppers and the desire to spare Paula.

Her hand closed convulsively upon his.

"V-very well, Charles," she said quietly, though her lips quivered. "If—if you are going to serve The Master, I—I will serve him too, if he will let me stay always near you. But if he—will not, then I can always—die...."

Bell groaned. And the door opened silently, and there were men standing without. An emotionless voice said:

"Señorita, the Señor Ortiz will interview the Señor Bell."

"I'm coming," said Paula quietly.

She went, walking steadily. Two men detached

themselves from the group about the door and followed her. The others waited for Bell. And Bell clenched his hands and squared his shoulders and marched grimly with them.

Again long passages, descending to what must have been a good deal below the surface of the earth. And then a massive door was opened, and light shone through, and Bell found himself standing on a rug of the thickest possible pile in a room of quite barbaric luxury, and facing a desk from which a young man was rising to greet him. This young man was no older than Bell himself, and he greeted Bell in a manner in which mockery was entirely absent, but in which defiance was peculiarly strong. A bulky, round shouldered figure wrote laboriously at a smaller desk to one side.

"Señor Bell," said the young man bitterly, "I do not ask you to shake hands with me. I am Julio Ortiz, the son of the man you befriended upon the steamer *Almirante Gomez*. I am also, by the command of The Master, your jailer. Will you be seated?"

Bell's eyes flickered. The older Ortiz had died by his own hand in the first stages of the murder madness The Master's poison produced. He had died gladly and, in Bell's view, very gallantly. And yet his son.... But of course The Master's deputies made a point of enslaving whole families when it was at all possible. It gave a stronger hold upon each member.

"I beg of you," said young Ortiz bitterly, "to accept my invitation. I wish to offer you a much qualified friendship, which I expect you to refuse."

Bell sat down and crossed his knees. He lit a cigarette thoughtfully, thinking swiftly.

"I remember, and admired, your father," he said slowly. "I think that any man who died as bravely as he did is to be envied."

The younger Ortiz had reseated himself as Bell sat down, and now he fingered nervously, wretchedly, the objects on his desk. A penholder broke between his fingers and he flung it irritably into the wastebasket.

"You understand," he said harshly, "the obligations upon me. I am the subject of The Master. You will realize that if you desire to escape, I cannot permit it. But you did my father a very great kindness. Much of it I was able to discover from persons on the boat. More, from the wireless operator who is also the subject of The Master. You were not acting, Señor, as a secret service operative in your attempt to help my father. You bore yourself as a very honorable gentleman. I wish to thank you."

"I imagine," said Bell dryly, "that anyone would have done what I did."

He seemed to be quite at ease, but he was very tense indeed. The bulky, round shouldered figure at the other desk was writing busily with a very scratchy pen. It was an abominable pen. Its sputtering was loud enough to be noticeable under any circumstances, but Bell was unusually alert, just now, and suddenly he added still more drily:

"Helping a man in trouble is quite natural. One always gets it back. It's a sort of dealing with the

future in which there is a profit on every trade."

He put the slightest emphasis on the last word and waited, looking at young Ortiz, but listening with all his soul to the scratching of the pen. And that scratching sound ceased abruptly. The pen seemed to write smoothly all of an instant. Bell drew a deep breath of satisfaction. In the Trade, when in doubt, one should use the word "Trade" in one's first remark to the other man. Then the other man will ask your trade, and you reply impossibility. It is then up to the other man to speak frankly, first. But circumstances alter even recognition-signs.

Ortiz had not noticed any by-play, of course. It would have been rather extraordinary if he had. A pen that scratches so that the sound is Morse code for "Bell, play up. J." is just unlikely enough to avoid all notice.

Ortiz drummed upon the desk. "Now, Señor, what can I do that will serve you? I cannot release you. You know that. I am not the deputy here. There has been a set-back to The Master's plans and all the deputies are called to his retreat to receive instructions and to

discuss. I have merely been ordered to carry out the deputy's routine labors until he returns. However, I will be obeyed in any matter. I can, and will, do anything that will make you more comfortable or will amuse you, from a change in your accommodations to providing you with companions. You observe," he added with exquisite bitterness, "that the limit of my capacity to prove my friendship is to offer my services as a pander."

Bell gazed at the tip of his cigarette, letting his eyes wander about the room for an instant, and permitting them to rest for the fraction of a second upon the round shouldered, writing form by the side wall.

"I am sufficiently amused," he said mildly. "I asked to be sent to The Master. He intends to make me an offer, I understand. Or he did. He may have changed his mind. But I am curious. Your father told me a certain thing that seemed to indicate he did not enjoy the service of The Master. Your tone is quite loyal, but unhappy. Why do you serve him? Aside, of course, from the fact of having been poisoned by his deputy."

Internally, Bell was damning Jamison feverishly. If he was to play up to Ortiz, why didn't Jamison give him some sign of how he was to do it? Some tip....

"Herr Wiedkind," said Ortiz wearily, "perhaps you can explain."

The round shouldered figure swung about and bowed profoundly to Bell.

"Der Señor Ortiz," he said gutturally, and in a sepulchral profundity, "he does not understand himself. I haff nefer said it before. But he serfs Der Master because he despairs, andt he will cease to serf Der Master when he hopes. And I—I serf Der Master because I hope, andt I will cease to serf him when I despair."

Ortiz looked curiously and almost suspiciously at the Germanic figure which regarded him soberly through thick spectacles.

"It is not customary, Herr Wiedkind," he said slowly, "to speak of ceasing to serve The Master."

"Idt is not customary to speak of many necessary things," said the round shouldered figure dryly. "Of our religions, for example. Of der women we lofe. Of our gonsciences. Of various necessary biological functions. But in der presence of der young man who is der enemy of Der Master we can speak freely, you and I who serf him. We know that maybe der deputies serf because they enjoy it. But der subjects? Dey serf because dey fear. Andt fear is intolerable. A man who is afraid is in an unstable gondition. Sooner or later he is going to stop fearing because he gets used to it—when Der Master will haff no more hold on him—or else he is going to stop fearing because he will kill himself."

To an outsider the spectacle of the three men in their talk would have been very odd indeed. Two men who served The Master, and one who had been his only annoying opponent, talking of the service of The Master quite amicably and without marked disagreement.

Ortiz stirred and drummed nervously on the desk. The round shouldered figure put the tips of its fingers

together.

"How did you know," demanded Ortiz suddenly, "that I serve because I despair?"

Bell watched keenly. He began to see where the talk was trending, and waited alertly for the moment for him to speak. This was a battlefield, this too luxurious room in which young Ortiz seemed an alien. Rhetoric was the weapon which now would serve the best.

"Let us talk frankly," said the placid German voice. "You andt I, Señor Ortiz, haff worked together. You are not a defil like most of the deputies, and I do not regret hafing been sent here to help you. And I am not a scoundtrel like most of those who help the deputies, so you haff liked me a little. Let us talk frankly. I was trapped. I am a capable segretary. I speak seferal languages. I haff no particular ambitions or any loyalties. I am useful. So I was trapped. But you, Señor Ortiz, you are different."

Ortiz suddenly smiled bitterly.

"It is a saying in Brazil, if I recall the words, '*A cauda do demonio e de rendas*.' 'The devil's tail is made of lace.' That is the story."

Bell said quietly:

"No."

Ortiz stared at him. He was very pale. And suddenly he laughed without any amusement whatever.

"True," said Ortiz. He smiled in the same bitterness.

"I had forgotten. I am a slave, and the Herr Wiedkind is a slave, and you, Señor Bell, are the enemy of our master. But I had forgotten that we are gentlemen. In the service of The Master one does forget that there are gentlemen."

He laughed again and lighted a cigarette with hands that shook a little.

"I loved a girl," he said in a cynical amusement. "It is peculiar that one should love any woman, *señores*—or do you, Señor Bell, find it natural? I loved this girl. It

pleased my father. She was of a family fully equal to my own: their wealth, their position, their traditions were quite equal, and it was a most suitable match. Most remarkable of all, I loved her as one commonly loves only when no such considerations exist. It is amusing to me now, to think how deeply, and how truly, and how terribly I loved her...."

Young Ortiz's pallor deepened as he smiled at them. His eyes, so dark as to be almost black, looked at them from a smiling mask of whiteness.

"There was no flaw anywhere. A romance of the most romantic, my father very happy, her family most satisfied and pleased, and I—I walked upon air. And then my father suddenly departed for the United States, quite without warning. He left a memorandum for me, saying that it was a matter of government, a secret matter. He would explain upon his return. I did not worry. I haunted the house of my fiancée. The habits of her family are of the most liberal. I saw her daily, almost hourly, and my infatuation grew. And suddenly I grew irritable and saw red spots before my eyes....

"Her father took me to task about my nervousness. He led me kindly to a man of high position, who poured out for me a little potion.... And within an hour all my terrible unease had vanished. And then they told me of The Master, of the poison I had been given in the house of my fiancée herself. They informed me that if I served The Master I would be provided with the antidote which would keep me sane. I raged.... And then the father of my fiancée told me that he and all his family served The Master. That the girl I loved, herself, owed him allegiance. And while I would possibly have defied them and death itself, the thought of that girl not daring to wed me because of the poison in her veins.... I saw, then, that she was in terror. I imagined the two of us comforting each other beneath the shadow of the most horrible of fates...."

Ortiz was silent for what seemed to be a long time, smiling mirthlessly at nothing. When his lips parted, it was to laugh, a horribly discordant laughter.

"I agreed," he said in ghastly amusement. "For the sake of my loved one, I agreed to serve The Master that I might comfort her. And plans for our wedding,

which had been often and inexplicably delayed, were set in train at once. And the deputy of The Master entertained me often. I plied him with drink, striving to learn all that I could, hoping against hope that there would be some way of befooling him and securing the antidote without the poison.... And at last, when very drunken, he laughed at me for my intention of marriage. He advised me tipsily to serve The Master zealously and receive promotion in his service. Then, he told me amusedly, I would not care for marriage. My fiancée would be at my disposal without such formalities. In fact—while I stood rigid with horror—he sent a command for her to attend him immediately. He commanded me to go to an apartment in his dwelling. And soon—within minutes, it seemed—the girl I loved came there to me...."

Bell did not move. This was no moment to interrupt. Ortiz's fixed and cynical smile wavered and vanished. His voice was harsh.

"She was at my disposal, as an act of drunken friendship by the deputy of The Master. She confessed to me, weeping, that she had been at the disposal of

the deputy himself. Of any other person he cared to divert or amuse.... Oh! *Dios!*"

Ortiz stopped short and said, in forced calmness:

"That also was the night that my father died."

Silence fell. Bell sat very still. The Teutonic figure spoke quietly after the clock had ticked for what seemed an interminable period.

"You didnt know, then, that your father's death was arranged?"

Ortiz turned stiffly to look at him.

"Here," said the placid voice, quaintly sympathetic.

"Look at these."

A hand extended a thick envelope. Ortiz took it, staring with wide, distended eyes. The round shouldered figure stood up and seemed to shake itself. The stoop of its shoulders straightened out. One of the seemingly pudgy hands reached up and

removed the thick spectacles. A bushy gray eyebrow peeled off. A straggly beard was removed. The other eyebrow.... Jamison nodded briefly to Bell, and turned to watch Ortiz.

And Ortiz was reading the contents of the envelope. His hands began to shake violently. He rested them on the desk-top so that he could continue to read. When he looked up his eyes were flaming.

"The real Herr Wiedkind," said Jamison dryly, "came up from Punta Arenas with special instructions from The Master. You have talents, Señor Ortiz, which The Master wished to use. Also you have considerable wealth and the prestige of an honorable family. But you were afflicted with ideas of honor and decency, which are disadvantageous in deputies of The Master. The real Herr Wiedkind had remarkable gifts in eradicating those ideas."

Jamison sat down and crossed his knees carefully.

"I looked you up because I knew The Master had killed your father," he added mildly, "and I thought

you'd either be hunting The Master or he'd be hunting you. My name's Jamison. I killed the real Wiedkind and took his identification papers. He was a singularly unpleasant beast. His idea of pleasure made him seem a fatherly sort of person, very much like my make-up. He was constantly petting children, and appeared very benign. I am very, very glad that I killed him."

Ortiz tore at his collar, suddenly. He seemed to be choking.

"This—this says.... It is The Master's handwriting! I know it! And it says—"

"It says," Jamison observed calmly, "that since your father killed the previous deputy in an attempt to save you from The Master's poison, that you are to be prepared for the work your father had been assigned. Herr Wiedkind is given special orders about your—ah—moral education. In passing, I might say that your father was sent to the United States because it was known he'd killed the previous deputy. He told Bell he'd done that killing. And he was allowed to grow

horribly nervous on his return. He was permitted to see the red spots, because he was officially—even as far as you were concerned—to commit suicide.

"It was intended that his nervousness was to be noticed. And a plane tried to deliver a message to him. Your father thought the parcel contained the antidote to the poison that was driving him mad. Actually, it was very conventional prussic acid. Your father would have drunk it and dropped dead, a suicide, after a conspicuous period of nervousness and worry."

Bell felt his cigarette burning his fingers. He had sat rigid until the thing burned short. He crushed out the coal, looking at Ortiz.

And Ortiz seemed to gasp for breath. But with an almost superhuman effort he calmed himself outwardly.

"I—think," he said with some difficulty, "that I should thank you. I do. But I do not think that you told me all of this without some motive. I abandon the service of

The Master. But what is it that you wish me to do? You know, of course, that I can order both of you killed...."

Bell put down the stub of his cigarette very carefully.

"The only thing you can do," he said quietly, "is to die."

"True," said Ortiz with a ghastly smile. "But I would like my death to perform some service. The Master has no enemies save you two, and those of us who die on becoming his enemies. I would like, in dying, to do him some harm."

"I will promise," said Jamison grimly, "to see that The Master dies himself if you will have Bell and myself put in a plane with fuel to Punta Arenas and a reasonable supply of weapons. I include the Señorita Canalejas as a matter of course."

Ortiz looked from one to the other. And suddenly he smiled once more. It was queer, that smile. It was not quite mirthless.

"You were right, just now," he observed calmly, "when as the Herr Wiedkind you said that I would quit the service of The Master when I ceased to despair. I begin to have hopes. You two men have done the impossible. You have fought The Master, you have learned many of his secrets, and you have corrupted a man to treason when treason means suicide. Perhaps, Señores, you will continue to achieve the impossible, and assassinate The Master."

He stood up, and though deathly pale continued to smile.

"I suggest, Señor, that you resume your complexion. And you, Señor Bell, you will be returned to your confinement. I will make the necessarily elaborate arrangements for my death."

Bell rose. He liked this young man. He said quietly:

"You said just now you wouldn't ask me to shake hands. May I ask you?..." He added almost apologetically as Ortiz's fingers closed upon his: "You see, when your father died I thought that I would be

very glad if I felt that I would die as well. But I think"—he smiled wryly—"I think I'll have two examples to think of when my time comes."

In the morning a bulky, round shouldered figure entered the room in which Bell was confined.

"You will follow me," said a harsh voice.

Bell shrugged. He was marched down long passageways and many steps. He came out into the courtyard, where the glistening black car with the blank windows waited. At an imperious gesture, he got in and sat down with every appearance of composure, as of a man resignedly submitting to force he cannot resist. The thick spectacles of the Herr Wiedkind regarded him with a gogglelike effect. There was a long pause. Then the sound of footsteps. Paula appeared, deathly pale. She was ushered into the vehicle—and only Bell's swift gesture of a finger to his lips checked her cry of relief.

Voices outside. The guttural Spanish of the Herr Wiedkind. Other, emotionless voices replying. The

Herr Wiedkind climbed heavily into the car and sat down, producing a huge revolver which bore steadily upon Bell. The door closed, and he made a swift gesture of caution.

"Idt may be," said the Germanic voice harshly, "that you and the young ladty haff much to say to each other. But idt can wait. And I warn you, *mein Herr*, that at the first movement I shall fire."

Bell relaxed. There was the purring of the motor. The car moved off. Obviously there was some microphonic attachment inside the tonneau which carried every word within the locked vehicle to the ears of the two men upon the chauffeur's seat. An excellent idea for protection against treachery. Bell smiled, and moved so that his lips were a bare half-inch from Paula's ears.

"Try to weep, loudly," he said in the faintest of whispers. "This man is a friend."

But Paula could only stare at the bulky figure sitting opposite until he suddenly removed the spectacles,

and smiled dryly, and then reached in his pockets and handed Bell two automatic pistols, and extended a tiny but very wicked weapon to Paula. He motioned to her to conceal it.

Jamison—moving to make the minimum of noise—handed Bell a sheet of stiff cardboard. It passed into Bell's fingers without a rustle. He showed it silently to Paula.

We were overheard last night by someone. We don't know who or how much he heard. Dictaphone in the room we talked in. Can't find out who it was or what action he's taken. We may be riding into a trap now. Ortiz has disappeared. He may be dead. We can only wait and see.

The car was moving as if in city traffic, a swift dash forward and a sudden stop, and then another swift dash. But the walls within were padded so that no sound came from without save the faint vibration of the motor and now and then the distinct flexing of a spring. Then the car turned a corner. It went more rapidly. It turned another corner. And another....

In the light of the bright dome light, Bell saw beads of sweat coming out on Jamison's face. He did not dare to speak, but he formed words with his lips.

"He's turning wrong! This isn't the way to the field!"

Bell's jaws clenched. He took out his two automatics and looked at them carefully. And then, much too short a time from the departure for the flying field to have been reached, the car checked. It went over rough cobblestones, and Bell himself knew well that there had been no cobbled roadway between the flying field and his prison. And then the car went up a sort of ramp, a fairly steep incline which by the feel of the motor was taken in low, and on for a short distance more. Then the car stopped and the motor was cut off.

Keys rattled in the lock outside. The door opened. The blunt barrel of an automatic pistol peered in.

he door of the car swung wide, and Ortiz's pale grim face peered in behind the blue steel barrel of his automatic. He smiled queerly at Jamison, with a grunt

of relief, tapped Bell's wrist in sign to put away his weapon.

Bell has fought through tremendous obstacles to find and kill The Master, whose diabolical poison makes murder-mad snakes of the hands; and, as he faces the monster at last—his own hands start to writhe!

"Ah, very well," said Ortiz, with the same queer smile upon his face. "One moment."

He disappeared. On the instant there was the thunderous crashing of a weapon. Bell started up, but Jamison thrust him back. Then Ortiz appeared again with smoke still trickling from the barrel of his pistol.

"I have just done something that I have long wished to do," he observed coolly. "I have killed the chauffeur and his companion. You may alight, now. I believe we will have half an hour or more. It will do excellently."

He offered his hand to Paula as she stepped out. She seemed to shudder a little as she took it.

"I do not blame you for shuddering, Senorita," he said politely, "but men who are about to die may indulge in petty spites. And the chauffeur was a favorite with the deputy for whom I am substituting. Like all favorites of despots, he had power to abuse, and abused it. I could tell you tales, but refrain."

The car had come to a stop in what seemed to be a huge warehouse, and by the sound of water round about, it was either near or entirely built out over the harbor. A large section near the outer end was walled off. Boxes, bales, parcels and packages of every sort were heaped all about. Bell saw crated air engines lying in a row against one wall. There were a dozen or more of them. Machinery, huge cases of foodstuffs....

"The Buenos Aires depot," said Ortiz almost gaily. "This was the point of receipt for all the manufactured goods which went to the *fazenda* of Cuyaba, Senor Bell. Since you destroyed that place, it has not been so much used. However, it will serve excellently as a tomb. There are cases of hand grenades yonder. I advise you to carry a certain number with you. The machine guns for the air-craft, with their ammunition,

are here...."

He was hurrying them toward the great walled-off space as he talked, his automatic serving as a pointer when he indicated the various objects.

"Now, here," he added as he unlocked the door, "is your vessel. The Master bought only amphibian planes of late. Those for Cuyaba were assembled in this little dock and took off from the water. Your destruction up there, Senor Bell, left one quite complete but undelivered. I think another, crated, is still in the warehouse. I have been very busy, but if you can fuel and load it before we are attacked...."

They were in a roofed and walled but floorless shed, built into the warehouse itself. Water surged about below them, and on it floated a five passenger plane, fully assembled and apparently ready to fly, but brand new and so far unused.

"I'll look it over," said Bell, briefly. He swung down the catwalk painted on the wings. He began a swift and hasty survey. Soot on the exhaust stacks proved that

the motors had been tried, at least. Everything seemed trim and new and glistening in the cabin. The fuel tanks showed the barest trace of fuel. The oil tanks were full to their filling-plugs.

He swung back up.

"Taking a chance, of course," he said curtly. "If the motors were all right when they were tried, they probably are all right now. They may have been tuned up, and may not. I tried the controls, and they seem to work. For a new ship, of course, a man would like to go over it carefully, but if we've got to hurry...."

"I think," said Ortiz, and laughed, "that haste would be desirable. Herr Wiedkind—No! *Amigo mio*, it was that damned Antonio Calles who listened to us last night. I found pencil marks beside the listening instrument. He must have sat there and eavesdropped upon me many weary hours, and scribbled as men do to pass the time. He had a pretty taste in monograms.... I gave all the orders that were needful for you to take off from the flying field. I even went there myself and gave additional orders. And Calles

was there. Also others of The Master's subjects. My treason would provoke a terrible revenge from The Master, so they thought to prove their loyalty by permitting me to disclose my plan and foil it at its beginning.

"I would have made the journey with you to The Master, but as a prisoner with the tale of my treason written out. So I returned and changed the orders to the chauffeur, when all the Master's loyal subjects were waiting at the flying field. But soon it will occur to them what I have done. They will come here. Therefore, hasten!"

"We want food," said Bell evenly, "and arms, but mostly we want fuel. We'll get busy."

He shed his coat and picked up a hand-truck. He rammed it under a drum of gasoline and ran it to the walkway nearest to the floating plane. Coiled against the wall there was a long hose with a funnel at its upper end. In seconds he had the hose end in one of the wing fuel-tanks. In seconds more he had propped the funnel into place and was watching the gasoline

gurgling down the hose.

"Paula," he said curtly, "watch this. When it's empty roll the drum away so I can put another in its place."

She moved quickly beside it, throwing him a little smile. She set absorbedly about her task.

Jamison arrived with another drum of gas before the first was emptied, and Bell was there with a third while the second still gurgled. They heaped the full drums in place, and Jamison suddenly abandoned his truck to swear wrathfully and tear off his spectacles and fling them against the wall. The bushy eyebrows and beard peeled off. His coat went down. He began to rush loads of foodstuffs, arms, and other objects to a point from which they could be loaded on the plane. Ortiz pointed out the things he pantingly demanded.

In minutes, it seemed, he was demanding: "How much can we take? Any more than that?"

"No more," said Bell. "All the weight we can spare goes for fuel. See if you can find another hose and

funnel and get to work on the other tank. I'm going to rustle oil."

He came staggering back with heavy drums of it. A thought struck him.

"How do we get out? What works the harbor door?"

Ortiz pointed, smiling.

"A button, Senor, and a motor does the rest." He looked at his watch. "I had better see if my fellow subjects have come."

He vanished, smiling his same queer smile. Bell worked frantically. He saw Ortiz coming back, pausing to light a cigarette, and taking up a hatchet, with which he attacked a packing case.

"They are outside, Senor," he called. "They have found the signs of the car entering, and now are discussing."

He plucked something carefully from the packing box

and went leisurely back toward the door. Bell began to load the food and stores into the cabin, with sweat streaming down his face.

There was the sound of a terrific explosion, and Bell jumped savagely to solid ground.

"Keep loading! I'll hold them back!" he snapped to Jamison.

But when he went pounding to the back of the warehouse he found Ortiz laughing.

"A hand grenade, Senor," he said in wholly unnatural levity. "Among the subjects of The Master. I believe that I am going mad, to take such pleasure in destruction. But since I am to die so shortly, why not go mad, if it gives me pleasure?"

He peered out a tiny hole and aimed his automatic carefully. It spurted out all the seven shots that were left.

"The man who poisoned me," he said pleasantly. "I

think he is dead. Go back and make ready to leave, Senor Bell, because they will probably try to storm this place soon, and then the police will come, and then.... It is amusing that I am the one man to whom those enslaved among the city authorities would look for The Master's orders."

Bell stared out. He saw a small horde of people, frantically agitated, milling in the cramped and unattractive little street of Buenos Aires' waterfront. Sheer desperation seemed to impel them, desperation and a frantic fear. They surged forward—and Ortiz flung a hand grenade. Its explosion was terrific, but he had perhaps purposely flung it short. Bell suddenly saw police uniforms, fighting a way through to the front of the crowd and the source of all this disturbance.

"Go back," said Ortiz seriously. "I shall die, Senor Bell. There is nothing else for me to do. But I wish to die with Latin melodrama." He managed a smile. "I will give you ten minutes more. I can hold off the police themselves for so long. But you must hasten, because there are police launches."

He held out his hand. Bell took it.

"Good luck," said Ortiz.

"You can come—" began Bell, wrenched by the gaiety on Ortiz's face.

"Absurd," said Ortiz, smiling. "I should be murder mad within three days. This is a preferable death, I assure you. Ten minutes, no more!"

And Bell went racing back and found Jamison rolling away the last of the fuel drums and Paula looking anxiously for him.

"Tanks full," said Jamison curtly. "Everything set. What next?"

"Engines," said Bell.

He swung down and jerked a prop over. Again, and again.... The motor caught. He went plunging to the other. Minutes.... They caught. He throttled them down to the proper warming up roaring, while the air

in the enclosed space grew foul.

Once more to the warehouse. Ortiz shouted and waved his hand. He was filling his pockets with hand grenades. Bell made a gesture of farewell and Ortiz seemed to smile as he went back to hold the entrance for a little longer.

"We're going," said Bell grimly. "Get your guns ready, Jamison, for when the door goes up."

He pressed on the button Ortiz had pointed out. There were more explosions and the rattle of firearms from the front of the warehouse. There was a sudden rumble of machinery and the blank front of the little covered dock rose suddenly. The sunlit waters of Buenos Aires harbor spread out before them. To Bell, who had not looked on sunlight that day, the effect was dazzling. He blinked, and then saw a fast little launch approaching. There were uniformed figures crowded about its bows.

"All set!" he snapped. "I'm going to give her the gun."

"Go to it," said Jamison. "We're—"

The motors bellowed and drowned out the rest. The plane shuddered and began to move. The sound of explosions from the back of the warehouse was loud and continuous, now. Out into the bright sunlight the plane moved, at first heavily, then swiftly....

Bell saw arms waving wildly in the launch with the uniformed men. Sunlight glittered suddenly on rifle barrels. Puffs of vapor shot out. Something spat through the wall beside Bell. But the roaring of the motors kept up, and the pounding of the waves against the curved bow of the boat-body grew more and more violent.... Sweat came out on Bell's face. The ship was not lifting....

But it did lift. Slowly, very slowly, carrying every pound with which it could have risen from the water. It swept past the police launch at ninety miles an hour, but no more than five feet above the waves. A big, clumsy tramp flying the Norwegian flag splashed up river with its propeller half out of water. Bell dared to rise a little so he could bank and dodge it. He could

not rise above it.

He had one glimpse of blonde, astonished beards staring over the stern of the tramp as he swept by it, his wing tips level with its rail and barely twenty feet away. And then he went on and on, out to sea.

He began to spiral for height fully four miles offshore, and looked back at the sprawling city. Down by the waterfront a thick, curling mass of smoke was rising from one spot abutting on the water. It swayed aside and Bell saw the rectangular opening out of which the plane had come.

"Ortiz's in there," he said, sick at heart. "Dying as he planned."

But there was a sudden upheaval of timbers and roof. A colossal burst of smoke. A long time later the concussion of a vast explosion. There was nothing left where the warehouse had been.

Bell looked, and swore softly to himself, and felt a fresh surge of the hatred he bore to The Master and

all his works. And then filmy clouds loomed up but a little above the rising plane, and Bell shot into them and straightened out for the south.

For many long hours the plane floated on to southward, high above a gray ocean which seemed deceptively placid beneath a canopy of thin clouds. The motors roared steadily in the main, though once Bell instructed Jamison briefly in the maintenance of a proper course and height, and swung out into the terrific blast of air that swept past the wings. He clung to struts and handholds and made his way out on the catwalk to make some fine adjustment in one motor, with six thousand feet of empty space below the swaying wing.

"Carburetter wrong," he explained when he had closed the cabin window behind him again and the motors' roar was once more dulled. "It was likely to make a lot of carbon in the cylinders. O.K., now."

Paula's hand touched his shyly. He smiled abstractedly at her and went back to the controls.

And then the plane kept on steadily. Time and space have become purely relative in these days, in startling verification of Mr. Einstein, and the distance between Buenos Aires and Magellan Strait is great or small, a perilous journey or a mere day's travel, according to the mind and the transportation facilities of the voyager. Before four o'clock in the afternoon the coast was low and sandy to the westward, and it continued sterile and bare for long hours while the plane hung high against the sky with a following wind driving it on vastly more swiftly than its own engines could have contrived.

It was little before sunset when the character of the shore changed yet again, and the sun was low behind a bank of angry clouds when the stubby forefinger of rock that Magellan optimistically named the Cape of the Eleven Thousand Virgins reached upward from the seemingly placid water. Bell swept lower, then, much lower, looking for a landing place. He found it eight or nine miles farther on, on a wide sandy beach some three miles from a lighthouse. The little plane splashed down into tumbling sea and, half supported

by the waves and half by the lift remaining to its wings, ran for yards up upon the hard packed sand.

The landing had been made at late twilight, and Bell moved stiffly when he rose from the pilot's seat.

"I'm going over to that lighthouse," he said curtly.

"There won't be enough men there to be dangerous and they probably haven't frequent communication with the town. I'll learn something, anyway. You two stay with the plane."

Jamison lifted his eyebrows and was about to speak, but looked at Bell's expression and stopped.

Leadership is everywhere a matter of emotion and brains together, and though Jamison had his share of brains, he had not Bell's corroding, withering passion of hatred against The Master and all who served him gladly. All the way down the coast Bell had been remembering things he had seen of The Master's doing. His power was solely that of fear, and the deputies of his selection had necessarily been men who would spread that terror with an unholy zest. The nature of his hold upon his subjects was such that no

honorable man would ever serve him willingly, and for deputies he had need of men even of enthusiasm. His deputies, then, were men who found in the assigned authority of The Master full scope for the satisfaction of their own passions. And Bell had seen what those passions brought about, and there was a dull flame of hatred burning in his eyes that would never quite leave them until those men were powerless and The Master dead.

"You'll look after the ship and Paula," said Bell impatiently. "All right?"

Jamison nodded. Paula looked appealingly at Bell, but he had become a man with an obsession. Perhaps the death of Ortiz had cemented it, but certainly he was unable to think of anything, now, but the necessity of smashing the ghastly hold of The Master upon all the folk he had entrapped. Subconsciously, perhaps, Bell saw in the triumph of The Master a blow to all civilization. Less vaguely, he foresaw an attempt at the extension of The Master's rule to his own nation. But when Bell thought of The Master, mainly he remembered certain disconnected incidents. The girl

at Ribiera's luxurious *fazenda* outside of Rio, who had been ordered to persuade him to be her lover, on penalty of a horrible madness for her infant son if she failed. Of a pale and stricken *fazendiero* on the Rio Laurenço who thought him a deputy and humbly implored the grace of The Master for a moody twelve year old girl. Of a young man who kept his father, murder mad, in a barred room in his house and waited despairingly for that madness to be meted out upon himself and on his wife and children. Of a white man who had been kept in a cage in Cuyaba, with other men....

Bell trudged on through the deepening night with his soul a burning flame of hatred. He clambered amid boulders, guided by the tall lighthouse of Cape Possession with the little white dwelling he had seen at its base before nightfall. He fell, and rose, and forced his way on and upward, and at last was knocking heavily at a trim and neatly painted door.

He was so absorbed in his rage that his talk with the lighthouse keeper seemed vague in his memory, afterward. The keeper was a wizened little Welshman

from the Chibut who spoke English with an extraordinary mixture of a Spanish intonation and a Cimbrian accent. Bell listened heavily and spoke more heavily still. At the end he went back to the plane with a spindle-shanked boy with a lantern accompanying him.

"All settled," he said grimly, when Jamison came out into the darkness with a ready revolver to investigate the approaching light. "We get a boat from the lighthouse keeper to go to Punta Arenas in. He's a devout member of some peculiar sect, and he's seen enough of the hell Punta Arenas amounts to, to believe what I told him of its cause. His wife will look after Paula, and this boy will hitch a team to the plane and haul it out of sight early in the morning. With the help of God, we'll kill Ribiera and The Master before sunset to-morrow."

Chapter 16

But they did not kill The Master before nightfall. It was not quite practicable. Bell and Jamison started out well before dawn with a favorable wind and tide,

in the small launch the wizened Welshman placed at their disposal. His air was one of dour piety, but he accepted Bell's offer of money with an obvious relief, and criticized his Paraguayan currency with an acid frankness until Jamison produced Argentine pesos sufficient to pay for the boat three times over.

"I think," said Jamison dryly, "that Pau—that Miss Canalejas is safe enough until we come back. The keeper is a godly man and knows we have money. She'll be in no danger, except of her soul. They may try to save that."

Bell did not answer. He could think of nothing but the mission he had set himself. He tinkered with the engine to make it speed up, and set the sails with infinite care to take every possible advantage of the stiff breeze that blew. During the day, those sails proved almost as much of a nuisance as a help. The fiendish, sullen williwaws that blow furiously and without warning about the Strait required watching, and more than once it was necessary to reef everything and depend on the motor alone.

Bell watched the horizon ahead with smouldering eyes. Jamison watched him almost worriedly.

"Look here, Bell," he said at last, "you'll get nowhere feeling like you do. I know you've done The Master more damage than I have, but you'll just run your head into a trap unless you use your brains. For instance, you didn't ask about communications. There's a direct telegraph wire from Cape Virgins to Buenos Aires, and there's telephonic communication between the Cape and Punta Arenas. Do you imagine that the plane wasn't seen when it came in the Cape? And do you imagine The Master doesn't know we're here?"

Bell turned, then, and frowned blackly.

"I hadn't thought of it," he said grimly, "but I put some hand grenades in the locker, there."

"You damned fool!" said Jamison angrily. "Stop being bloodthirsty and use your head! You haven't even asked what I've done! I've done something, anyhow. That bundle I chucked in the bow has a couple of

sheepmen's outfits in it. Lots of sheep raised around here. We'll put 'em on before we land. And like a good general, I arranged a method of retreat before we left B. A. There'll be a naval vessel here in two or three days. She's carrying a party of Government scientists. She'll anchor in Punta Arenas harbor and announce a case of some infectious disease on board. No shore leave, you see, and nobody from shore permitted on board her. And she has one or two damned good analytical chemists with a damned good laboratory on board her, too. It's a long gamble, but if we can get hold of some of The Master's poison.... Do you see?"

"Yes," said Bell heavily. "I see. But you haven't been through what I've been through. What I've done, fighting that devil, has caused men to be deserted after being enslaved. There's one place, Cuyaba...."

His face twitched. That place was in his dreams, now. That place and others where human beings had watched their bodies go mad, and had been carried about screaming with horror at the crimes those bodies committed....

"I'm going to kill The Master," he rasped. "That's all."

He settled down to his grim watch for the city. All during the cloudy, overcast day he strained his eyes ahead. Jamison could make nothing of him. In the end he had to leave Bell to his moody waiting.

The morning passed, and midday, and a long afternoon. Three times Bell came restlessly back to the engine and tried to coax more speed out of it. But when darkness fell the town was still not in sight. They kept on, then, steering by the stars with the motor putt-putt-putting sturdily away in the stern. The water splashed and washed all about them. The little boat rose, and fell, and rose and fell again.

"That's the town," said Bell grimly.

It was eleven at night, or later. Lights began to appear, very far away, dancing miragelike on the edge of the water. They grew nearer with almost infinite slowness. Two wide bands of many lights, with a darker space in which a few much brighter lights showed clearly. Presently a single red light appeared,

the Punta Arenas harbor light, twenty-five feet up on an iron pole. They passed it.

"Bell," said Jamison curtly, "it's time you showed some sense, now. We're going to find out some things before we get reckless. This town isn't a big one, but it always was a hell on earth. No extradition from here. It's full of wanted men. It's dying, now, from the old days when all ships passed the Straits before the Panama Canal opened up, but it ought to be still a hell on earth. And we're going to put on these sheepmen outfits, and put up at some low caste sailors' and sheepmen's hotel on shore, and find out what is what. In the morning, if you like—"

"In the morning," said Bell coldly, "I'm going to settle with The Master."

They found a small and filthy hotel, in a still filthier street where the houses were alternately black and silent and empty, and filled with the squalid hilarity most seaport towns can somehow manage to support. The street lamps were white and cold. The dirt and squalor showed the more plainly by their light. There

were sailors from the few ships in harbor, and women so haggard and bedraggled that shrill laughter and lavish endearments remained their only allure. And Bell and Jamison plodded to the reeking place in which a half-drunk sheepman pointed, and there Bell sat grimly in the vermin infested room while Jamison, swearing wryly, went out.

He came back later, much later. His breath was strong of bad whiskey and he looked like a man who feels that a bath would be very desirable. He looked like a man who feels unclean.

"Give me a cigarette," he said shortly. "I found out most of what we want to know."

Bell gave him a cigarette and waited.

"Good thing you stayed behind," said Jamison. "I want to vomit. Why people go in hell holes for fun.... But I was very drunk and very amorous. Picked up a woman and fed her liquor. Young, too. Damnation! She got crying drunk and told me everything she knew. I gave her money and left. Punta Arenas is The

Master's, body and soul."

"One could have guessed it," said Bell grimly.

"Nothing like it is," said Jamison. "Every living creature, man, woman, and child, has been fed that devilish poison of his. The keepers of the dives go fawning to the local officials for the antidote. The *jefe politico* is driven in his carriage to be cured when red spots form before his eyes. The damned place is full of suicides, and women, and—oh, my God! It's horrible!"

A humming, buzzing noise set up off in the night somewhere. It kept up for a long time, throttled down. Suddenly it seemed to grow louder, changed in pitch, and dwindled as if into the far, far distance.

"That's one of The Master's planes now, no doubt," said Jamison savagely, "going off on some errand for him. He uses this place practically as an experiment station. The human beings here are his guinea pigs. The deputies get a standardized form of the stuff, but he's got it worked out in different doses so he can

make a man go mad in hours, if he chooses, instead of after a delay. I don't know how. And The Master—"

He checked himself sharply. There were shuffling footsteps in the hall outside. A timid tap on the door. Jamison opened it, while Bell dropped one hand inconspicuously to a weapon inside his shapeless clothing.

The toothless and filthy old man who kept the hotel beamed in at them.

"*Senores*," he cackled. "*Vdes son de Porvenir, no es verdad?*"

Jamison hiccupped, as one who has been out and been drunken ought to do.

"*No, viejo*," he rumbled tipsily, "*somos de la estancia del Señor Rubio. Vaya.*"

The old man seemed to mourn that they did not come from the sheep ranches about Porvenir Bay. But he produced a bottle with a shaking hand, still beaming.

"*Tengo muchos amigos en Porvenir,*" he chirped amiably. "*Y questa botella—*"

"*Démela,*" rumbled Jamison. He reached out his hand.

"*No mas que poquito!*" said the old man, beaming but anxious as Jamison tilted it to his lips. "*Es visky de gentes....*"

He beamed upon Bell, and Bell swallowed a spoonful and seemed to swallow vastly more. He lay back lazily while Jamison in the part of a tipsy shepherd bullied the old man amiably and eventually chased him out.

"You're amused?" asked Jamison sardonically, when there were no more sounds outside. "Because I said you didn't want to meet the young senorita who loved you when she saw you downstairs? Well, Bell, if you used your brain you didn't swallow any of that stuff."

Bell started up. Jamison caught him by the shoulder.

"I'm not sure," he said sharply. "Of course not. But it's

damned funny for a Spanish hotel keeper to give something for nothing, even when he seemed just to want to gossip about his friends. Here. Drink this water. It looks vile enough to take the place of mustard...."

Next morning the hotel keeper beamed upon them both as they went out of the place. A slatternly, dark haired girl who leaned on his shoulder smiled invitingly at Bell. And Bell, in his character of a loutish sheepman from one of the ranches that dot the shores of the Strait, grinned awkwardly back. But he went on with Jamison.

"We separate," said Jamison under his breath. "We want to find where The Master lives, mostly, and then we want to find the laboratory where his stuff is mixed. We don't want to do any killing until that's settled. After all, the Trade has something to say!"

Bell coddled indifferently and began to wander idly about the streets, turning here and there as if moved by nothing more than the vaguest curiosity. But gradually he was working through the sections in

which the larger buildings stood. Concrete structures, astonishingly modern, dotted the business section. But none of them had the air that would surround a place where a man with power of life or death would be. In a town the size of Punta Arenas there would be unmistakable evidences about The Master's residence, even if it were only that those who passed it did so hurriedly and with a twinge of fear.

There were prosperous men in plenty on the streets, mingled with deserting sailors, stockmen and farmers from the villages along the Strait, and even a few grimy men who looked like miners. But there is a lignite mine not far from the city, and a narrow gauge railroad running to it. Of the prosperous-seeming men, however, Bell picked out one here and there toward whom all passersby adopted a manner of cringing respect. Bell lounged against a pole and studied them thoughtfully. Men with an air of amused and careless scorn which only men with unlimited power may adopt. He saw one grossly fat man with hard and cruel eyes. The uniformed policemen drove all traffic abjectly out of the way of his carriage, and

stood with lifted hat until he had passed. The fat man gave no faintest sign of acknowledgment.

"I wonder," said Bell slowly, and very grimly, "if that's The Master?"

And then a passerby dodged quickly past his shoulder, brushing against him, and waited humbly in the street. Bell turned. A party of men were taking up nearly all the sidewalk. There were half a dozen of them in all. And nearly in the middle was the bulky, immaculate, pigmented Ribiera.

Bell stiffened. But to move, beyond clearing the way, would be to attract attention. He backed clumsily off the curbing as if making way....

And Ribiera looked at his face.

Bell's hand drifted near his hidden weapon. But Ribiera looked neither surprised nor alarmed. He halted and chuckled.

"Ah, the Senhor Bell!"

Bell said nothing, looking as stupid as possible, merely because there was nothing else to do.

"Ah, do not deny my acquaintance!" said Ribiera. He laughed. "I advise you to go and look at the view, over the harbor. Good day, Senhor Bell."

Laughing, he went off along the street. And Bell felt a cold horror creeping over him as he realized what Ribiera might mean. Ribiera had entirely too much against him to greet him only, in a town where even the dogs dared not bark without The Master's express command. He had guards with him, men who would have shot Bell down at a nod from Ribiera.

Bell burst into a mad run for the waterfront. When the bay spread out before his eyes he saw what Ribiera meant, and something seemed to snap in his brain.

The plane in which he and Jamison and Paula had escaped in was floating out in the harbor. It was unmistakable. A larger, bulkier seaplane floated beside it. The buzzing in the air the night before....

The arrival of the plane had been telephoned from Cape Virgins. Through a glass, perhaps, even its alighting had been watched. And a big seaplane had gone out to bring it back. Footprints in the sand would lead toward the lighthouse. There would be plenty of men to storm that, if necessary, to take the three fugitives. But they would have found only Paula. It was quite possible that the plane had only been sent for after Bell and Jamison had been seen to land in Punta Arenas. And Paula in The Master's hands would explain Ribiera's amusement perfectly.

Bell found Jamison looking unhurriedly for him. And Jamison glanced at his utterly white face and said softly:

"We want to get where we can't be seen, to talk. There's the devil to pay."

"No use hiding," said Bell. His lips seemed stiff.

"Paula—"

"Hide anyway," snapped Jamison. He fairly thrust Bell into an alleyway between two houses and thrust two

rounded objects beneath his loose fitting coat. "Two grenades. I have two more. The boat we came in is taken—"

"So is the plane," said Bell emotionlessly.

"And there is a sign, in English, posted where we tied it up. The sign says, '*The Senores Bell and Jamison may recover their boat on application to The Master, and may also receive news of a late traveling companion from him.*'"

"We're known," Bell told him—and amazingly found it possible to smile faintly—"Ribiera met me on the street and spoke to me and laughed and went on."

Jamison stared. Bell's manner was almost entirely normal again. Then Jamison shrugged.

"The sense of what you're saying," he observed wryly, "is that we're licked. Let us, then, go to see The Master. I confess I feel some curiosity to know just what he's like."

Bell was smiling. Being in an entirely abnormal state, he had a curious certitude of the proper course to adopt. He went up to a policeman and said politely, in Spanish:

"I am desired to report to The Master, himself. Will you direct me?"

The policeman abased himself instantly and trotted with them as a guide. And Bell walked naturally, now, with his head up and his shoulders back, and smoked leisurely as he went, and the policeman's abasement became abject. All who walked with that air of amused superiority in Punta Arenas were high in the service of The Master. Obviously, the two men in these dejected clothes must also be high in the service of The Master, and had adopted their disguise for purposes into which a mere policeman and a slave of The Master should not dare enquire.

Jamison was rather grim and still. Jamison thought he was walking to his death. But Bell smiled peculiarly and talked almost gaily and—as Jamison thought—almost irrationally.

They came to a house set in a fairly spacious lawn behind a rather high wall. There were greenhouses behind it, and there were flowers growing as well as any flowers can be expected to grow in such high altitudes. It was an extraordinarily cheerful dwelling to be found in Punta Arenas, but the shuddering fear with which the little policeman removed his hat as he entered the gateway was instructive.

They were confronted by four other policemen, on guard inside the gate.

"*Estos Señores*—" began the abject one.

"Take us to The Master," commanded Bell in a species of amused and superior scorn.

"It is required, Senor," said the leader of the four on guard, very respectfully, "it is required that none enter without being searched for weapons."

Bell laughed.

"Does The Master manage things so?" he asked

scornfully. "Now, where I am deputy no man would dare to think of a weapon to be used against me! If it is The Master's rule, though...."

The policeman cringed. Bell scornfully thrust an automatic out.

"Take it," he snapped. "And go and tell The Master that the Senores Bell and Jamison await his pleasure, and that they have given up their weapons."

The policeman scuttled toward the house. Bell smiled at his cigarette.

"Do you know, Bell," said Jamison dryly, in English, "I'd hate to play poker with you."

"I'm not bluffing," said Bell. "Not altogether. I've a four card flush, with the draw to come."

Almost instantly the policeman returned, more abject still. He had stammered out Bell's message, just as it was given him. And the slaves of The Master did not usually disobey orders, especially orders designed to

prevent any danger of a doomed man or woman trying to assassinate The Master before madness was complete. Bell and Jamison were received by liveried servants in utter silence and conducted through a long passageway, too long to have been contained entirely in the house as seen from the front. Indeed, they came out into a great open greenhouse, in which the smell of flowers was heavy. There were flowers everywhere, and a benign, small old man with a snowy beard and hair, sat at a desk as if chatting of amiable trivialities with the frock-coated men who stood about him. The white haired old man lifted a blossom delicately to his nostrils and inhaled its perfume with a sensitive delight. He looked up and smiled benignly upon the two.

It was then that Jamison got a shock surpassing all the rest. Bell's hands were writhing at the ends of his wrists, writhing as if they were utterly beyond his control and as if they were longing to rend and tear....

And Bell suddenly looked down at them, and his expression was that of a man who sees cobras at the ends of his arms.

Chapter 17

There was a long pause. Bell was very calm. He seemed to tear his eyes from the writhing hands that were peculiarly sensate, as if under the control of an intelligence alien to his own.

"I believe," said Bell steadily, "that The Master wishes to speak to me."

With an apparent tremendous effort of will, he thrust his hands into his pockets. Jamison cursed softly. Bell had taken the direction of things entirely out of his hands. It only remained to play up.

"To be sure," said a mild, benevolent voice. The man with the snowy beard regarded Bell exactly in the fashion of an elderly philanthropist. "I am The Master, Senor Bell. You have interested me greatly. I have grown to have a great admiration for you. Will you be seated? Your companion also pleases me. I would like"—and the mild brown eyes beamed at him—"I would like to have your friendship, Senor Bell."

"Pull out a chair for me, Jamison," said Bell in a strained voice. "And—I'd like to have a cigarette."

Jamison, cursing under his breath, put a chair behind Bell and stuck a cigarette between his lips. He held a match, though his hands shook.

"You might sit down, too," said Bell steadily. "From the manner of The Master, I imagine that the conversation will take some time."

He inhaled deeply of his cigarette, and faced the little man again. And The Master looked so benevolent that he seemed absolutely cherubic, and there was absolutely no sign of anything but the utmost saintliness about him. His eyes were clear and mild. His complexion was fresh and translucent. The wrinkles that showed upon his face were those of an amiable and a serene soul filled with benevolence and charity. He looked like one of those irritatingly optimistic old gentlemen who habitually carry small coins and stray bits of candy in their pockets for such small children as they may converse with under the smiling eyes of nurses.

"Ah, Senor Bell," he said gently. "You do cause me to admire you. May I see your hands again?"

Bell held them out. He seemed to have conquered their writhing to some extent. But he could not hold them quite still. Sweat stood out on his forehead. He thrust them abruptly out of sight again.

"Sad," said The Master gently. "Very sad." He sighed faintly and laid down the rose he had been toying with. His fingers caressed the soft petals delicately. "Fortunately," he said benevolently, "it is not yet too late for me to relieve the strain under which you labor, Senor. May I send for a certain medicine which will dispose of those symptoms in a very short time?"

"We'll talk first," said Bell harshly. "I want to hear what you have to say."

The Master nodded, his fingers touching the rose petals as if in a sensitive pleasure in their texture.

"Always courageous," he said benignly. "I admire it while I combat it. But the Senor Jamison...."

Jamison had been looking fascinatedly at his own hands, opening and closing the fingers with a savage abruptness. They obeyed him, though they trembled.

"I didn't drink the damned stuff that hotel keeper brought us last night," he growled. "Bell did. And I—"

"Wait a minute, Jamison," said Bell evenly. "Let's talk to The Master for a while. I swore, sir," he said grimly, "that I'd kill you. I've seen what your devilish poison does, in the hands of the men you've chosen to distribute it. I've seen"—he swallowed and said harshly—"I've seen enough to make me desire nothing so much as to see you roast in hell! But you wanted to talk to me. Go ahead!"

The Master beamed at him, and then glanced about at the frock-coated men who had been attending him. Bell glanced at them. Ribiera was there, chuckling.

"I told you, *tio mio*," he said familiarly, "that he would not be polite. You can do nothing with him. Better have him shot."

Francia, of Paraguay, nodded amusedly to Bell as their eyes met. But The Master shook his really rather beautiful head. An old man can be good to look at, and with a saintly aureole of snow-white hair and the patriarchal white beard, The Master was the picture of benign and beautiful old age.

"Ah, you do not understand," he protested mildly.

"The more the Senor Bell shows his courage, *hijo mio*, the more we must persuade him." He turned to Bell.

"I realise," he said gently, "that there are hardships connected with the administration of my power, Senor. It is inevitable. But the Latin races of the continent which is now nearly mine require strong handling. They require a strong man to lead them.

They are comfortable only under despotism. The task I have chosen for you is different, entirely. *Los*

Americanos del Norte will not respond to the treatment which is necessary for those *del Sud*. Their governments, their traditions, are entirely unlike. If you become my deputy and viceroy for all your nation, you shall rule as you will. A benevolent, yet strong, rule is needed for your people. It may even be—I will

permit it—that the democratic institutions of your nation may continue if you so desire. I am offering you, Senor, the position of the absolute ruler of your nation. You may interfere with the present government not at all, if you choose, provided only that my own commands are obeyed when relayed through you. I choose you because you have courage, and resource, and because you have the *Yanqui* cleverness which will understand your nation and cope with it."

Bell inhaled deeply.

"In other words," he said bitterly, "you're saying indirectly that you offer me a chance to be the sort of ruler Americans will submit to without too much fuss, because you think one of Ribiera's stamp would drive them to rebellion."

The fine dark eyes twinkled.

"You have much virtue, Senor. My nephew—though he is to be my successor—has a weakness for a pretty face. Would you prefer that I give him the task of

subduing your nation?"

"You might try it," said Bell. His eyes gleamed. "He'd be dead within a week."

The Master laughed softly.

"I like you, *Senor*. I do like you indeed. I have not been so defied since another *Americano del Norte* defied me in this same room. But he had not your resource. He had been enslaved with much less difficulty than yourself. I do not remember what happened to him...."

"He was taken, Master," said a fat man with hard eyes, obsequiously, "he was taken in Bolivia." It was the man whom Bell had seen earlier that morning in a carriage. "You gave him to me. He had insulted me when I ordered him sent to you. I had him killed, but he was very obstinate."

"Ah, yes," said The Master meditatively. "You told me the details." He seemed to recall small facts in benevolent retrospection. "But you, *Senor Bell*, I have

need of you. In fact, I shall insist upon your friendship. And therefore—"

He beamed upon Bell.

"I give you back the Senorita Canalejas."

He shook his head reproachfully at the utterly grim look in Bell's eyes.

"I shall give you one single portion of the antidote to the medicine which makes your hands behave so badly. You may take it when you please. The Senor Jamison I shall keep and enslave. I do not think he will be as obstinate as you are, but he has excellent qualities. If you prove obdurate, I may yet persuade him to undertake certain tasks for me. But you and the Senorita Canalejas are free. Your boat has been reprovisioned and provided with fuel. You may go from here where you will."

Ribiera snarled.

"*Tio mio*," he protested angrily, "you promised me—"

"Your will in many things," said The Master gently, "but not in all. Remember that you have much to learn, *hijo mio*. I have taught you to prepare my little medicine, it is true. That is so you can take my place if age infirmity shall carry me away." The Master folded his hands with an air of pious resignation. "But you must learn policy. The Senorita Canalejas belongs to the Senor Bell."

Jamison was staring, now, but Bell's eyes had narrowed to mere slits.

"You see," said The Master gently, to him, "I desire your friendship. You may go where you will. You may take the Senorita Canalejas with you. You will have enough of the antidote to my little medicine to keep you sane for perhaps a week. In one week you may go far, with her. You may do many things. But you cannot find a place of safety for her. I still have a little power, Senor. If you take her with you, your hands will writhe again. Your body will become uncontrollable. Your eyes, staring and horror-struck, will observe your own hands rending her. While your brain is yet sane you will see this body of yours which now desires her so

ardently, tearing at and crushing that delicate figure, gouging out her eyes, battering her tender flesh, destroying her.... Have you ever seen what a man who has taken my little medicine does to a human being at his mercy?"

The figures about The Master were peculiarly tense. The fat man with the hard eyes laughed suddenly. It was a horrible laugh. Francia of Paraguay took out his handkerchief and delicately wiped his lips. He was smiling. Ribiera looked at Bell's face and chuckled. His whole gross figure shook with his amusement.

"And of course," said The Master benignly, "if you prefer to commit suicide, if you prefer to leave her here—well, my nephew knows little expedients to reduce her will to compliance. You recall *Yagué*, among others."

Bell's face was a white mask of horror and fury. He tried to speak, and failed. He raised his hand to his throat—and it tore at the flesh, insanely.

"Let—let me see her," croaked Bell, as if strangling.

Jamison stiffened. Bell seemed to be trying to get his hands into his pockets. They were apparently uncontrollable. He thrust them under his coat as there was a stirring at the door.

And Paula was brought in, as if she had been waiting. She was entirely colorless, but she smiled at Bell. She came quickly to his side.

"I heard," she said in a clear and even little voice. "We will go together, Charles. If there is a week in which we can be together, it will be so much of happiness. And when you are—The Master's victim, we will let the little boat sink, and sink with it. I do not wish to live without you, Charles, and you do not wish to live as his slave."

Bell gave utterance to a sudden laugh that was like a bark. His hands came out from under his coat.

Dangling from each one was a small, pear-shaped globule of metal. A staff projected upward from each one, and he held those staffs in his writhing hands. About each wrist was a tiny loop of cord that went down to a pin at the base of the staffs.

"Close to me, Paula," he said coldly. She clung to his arm. He moved forward, with half-a-dozen revolver muzzles pointed at his breast.

"If one of you damned fools fires," he said harshly, "I'll let go. When I let go—these are Mills grenades, and they go off in three seconds after they leave the hand. Stand still!"

There was a terrible, frozen silence. Then a movement from behind Bell. Jamison was rising with a grunt.

"Some day, Bell," he observed coolly, "I'll be on to all of your curves. This is the best one yet. But you're likely to let go at any second, aren't you?"

"Like hell!" raged Bell. "I drank some of your poison," he snarled at The Master. "Yes! I was fool enough to do it! But I took what measures any man will take who finds he's swallowed poison. I got it out of my stomach at once. And if you or one of these deputies tries to move...."

Ribiera had blanched to a pasty gray. The Master was frozen. But Bell saw Ribiera's eyes move in swift calculation. There was a solid wall behind The Master. It seemed as if the greenhouse were a sort of passageway between two larger structures. And there was a door almost immediately behind Ribiera. Ribiera glanced right—left—

He flung himself through that door. He knew the secret of The Master's power. He was The Master's appointed successor. If The Master and all his deputies died, Ribiera....

But Bell snapped into action like a bent spring released. His arm shot forward. A grenade went hurtling through the door through which Ribiera had fled. There was an instantaneous, terrific explosion. The solid wall shook and shivered and, with a vast deliberation, collapsed. The greenhouse was full of crushed plaster dust. Panes of glass shivered....

But Bell was upon The Master. He had struck the little man down and stood over him, his remaining automatic replacing the grenade he had thrown.

"Ribiera's dead," he snapped, "and if I'm shot The Master dies too and you all go mad! Stand back!"

The deputies stood frozen.

"I think," said Jamison composedly, "I take a hand now. I'll pick him up, Bell.... Right. I've got him. With a grenade hanging down his back. If he jerks away from me, or I from him, it will blow his spine to bits."

"Hold him so," said Bell coldly.

He went coolly to where he could look over the heap of the collapsed wall. He saw a bundle of torn clothing that had been a man. It was flung against a cracked and tottering chimney.

"Right," he said evenly. "Ribiera's dead, all right."

He turned to the deputies, whose revolvers were still in their hands.

"The Master's carriage, please," he said politely. "To the door. You may accompany us if you please, but in

other carriages. I am working for the release of all the Master's slaves, and you among them if you choose. But you can see very easily that there is no hope of the release of The Master without the meeting of my terms."

The Master spoke, softly and mildly and without fear.

"It is my order that the Senor Bell is to be obeyed. I shall return. You need have no fear of my death. My carriage."

A man went stiffly, half-paralyzed with terror, to where chattering scared servants were grouped in the awful fear that came upon the slaves of The Master at any threat to his rule.

But Bell and Paula and Jamison went slowly and cautiously—though they held the whip hand—to the entrance door of the house, and out to the entrance gate. A carriage was already before the door when they reached it, and others were drawing up in a line behind it.

"Get in," said Bell briefly. "Down to the waterfront."

He turned to the group of frock-coated, stricken men who had followed.

"Some of you men," he said coldly, "had better go on ahead and warn the police and the public generally about the certainty of The Master's death if any attempt is made to rescue him."

Francia, of Paraguay, summoned a swagger and raised his hand to the second carriage. It drew in to the curb.

"I will attend to it, Senor Bell," he said politely. "Ah, when I think that I once raised my revolver to shoot you and refrained!"

He drove off swiftly.

Bell's eyes were glowing. He got into the carriage, and such a procession drove through the streets of Punta Arenas as has rarely moved through the streets of any city in the world. The long line of carriages

moved at a funereal pace amid a surging, terrified mob. The Master beamed placidly as he looked out over white, starkly agonized faces. Some of the people groaned audibly. A few cursed The Master in their despair. More cursed Bell, not daring to strike or fire on him. But he would have been torn to bits if he had stepped from the carriage for an instant.

"Bell," said Jamison dryly, "considering that I'm prepared to be blown apart on three seconds notice, it is peculiar that this mob frightens me."

The Master's eyes twinkled benignly. He seemed totally insensible to fear.

"You need not be afraid," he said gently. "They will not touch you unless I order them."

Jamison stared down at the little man whose collar he held firmly, with a Mills grenade dangling down at the base of his neck.

"I wouldn't order them to attack, if I were you," he said coldly. "I haven't Bell's brains, but I have just as

much dislike for you as he has."

They came to the harbor. Bell spoke again.

"The carriage is to drive out to the end of one of the docks, and no one else is to go out on that dock."

The Master relayed the order in his mild voice, but as the coachman obeyed him he clucked his tongue commiseratingly.

"Senor Bell," he protested gently. "You do not expect to escape! Not after killing me! Why that is absurd!"

Bell said nothing. He alighted from the carriage, his face set grimly, and stared ashore at the long, long row of terrified faces staring out at him. The whole waterfront seemed to be lined with staring faces. Wails came from that mass of enslaved human beings.

"Hold him here, Jamison," he said drearily. "I'm going out to look at that big plane. There's a rowboat tied to the dock, here."

He swung down the side into the dock and rowed off into the harbor, while the horses attached to The Master's carriage pawed impatiently at the wooden flooring of the dock. Bell reached the two planes anchored on the still harbor water. The smaller one had brought them down from Buenos Aires. The larger one had gone after the beached amphibian and brought it and Paula on to the city. Bell, from the shore, was seen to be investigating the larger one. He came rowing back.

His head appeared above the dock edge.

"All right," he said tiredly. "The Master has a rule requiring all his ships ready for instant flight. Very useful. The big plane is fueled and full of oil. We'll go out to it and take off."

Jamison lifted The Master to his feet and with a surge of muscles swept him down to the flooring of the dock.

"Paula first," said Bell, "and then The Master, and then you, Jamison."

"One moment," said The Master reproachfully. "It would be cruel not to let me reassure my subjects. I will give an order."

Bell and Jamison listened suspiciously. But he spoke gently to the coachman.

"You will tell the deputies," said The Master in Spanish, "that a month's supply of medicine for all my subjects will be found in my laboratory. And you may tell them that I shall return before the end of that time."

The coachman's eyes filled with a passionate relief.

"Now," said The Master placidly, "I am ready for our little jaunt."

Paula descended the ladder and seated herself in the bow of the boat. Bell covered The Master grimly with his automatic as he descended, with surprising agility. Jamison came down last, and resumed his former grip on The Master's collar. Bell rowed out to the big plane.

Jamison kept close watch while Bell started the four huge motors and throttled them down to warming up speed, and while he hauled up the anchor with which the huge seaplane was anchored.

The dock was covered with a swarm of panic stricken folk.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing a crowd of horrified people looking at something offscreen. Image description

end.]

Everywhere, all the inhabitants of the city who were slaves to The Master had come in awful terror to watch. And all the inhabitants of the city were slaves to The Master. Some of them fell to their knees and held out imploring arms to Bell, begging him for mercy and the return of The Master. Some cursed wildly.

But, with his jaws set grimly, Bell gave the motors the gun.

The big plane moved heavily, then more swiftly through the water. It lifted slowly, and rose, and rose, and dwindled to a speck high in the air.

And all through the streets and ways of Punta Arenas, fear stalked almost as a tangible thing. Panic hovered over the housetops, always ready to descend. Terror was in the air that every man breathed, and every human being looked at every other human being with staring, haunted eyes. Punta Arenas was waiting for its murder madness to begin.

Chapter 18

There were four motors to pull the big plane through the air, and their roaring was a vast thundering noise which the earth re-echoed. But inside the cabin that tumult was reduced to a not intolerable humming sound.

"What'll I do with this devil, Bell?" asked Jamison.

"Now that we're aloft, I confess this grenade makes me nervous. I'm holding it so tightly my fingers are getting cramped."

"Tie him up," said Bell, without looking. "He'll talk presently."

Movements. The plane flew on, swaying slightly in the way of big sea-planes everywhere. A williwaw began in the hills ahead and swept out and set the ship to reeling crazily in its erratic currents. The Strait vanished and there were tumbled hills below them. Minutes passed.

"Got him fixed up," said Jamison coolly, "I'll guarantee

he won't break loose. Got any plans, Bell?"

"No time," said Bell. "I haven't had time to make any. The first thing is to get where his folk will never find us. Then we'll see what we can do with him."

Paula looked at the now bound figure of The Master. And the little old man beamed at her.

"He—he's smiling!" said Paula, in a voice that was full of a peculiar horrified shock.

Bell shrugged. Punta Arenas was all of twenty-five miles behind, and the earth over which they flew began to take on the shape of an island. Water appeared beyond it, and innumerable small islands. Bell began to rack his brain for the infinitesimal scraps of knowledge he had about this section of the world. It was pitifully scanty. Punta Arenas was the southernmost point of the continental mass. All about it was an archipelago and a maze of waterways, thinly inhabited everywhere and largely without any inhabitants at all. The only solid ground between Cape Horn and the Antarctic ice pack was Diego

Ramirez and the South Shetlands....

Nothing to go on. But any sufficiently isolated and desolate spot would do. Almost anywhere along the southern edge of the continental islands should serve.

The plane roared on monotonously, while Bell began to wrestle with another and more serious problem. In three days—two, now—an American naval vessel would turn up, with scientists and chemists on board. It was to be doubted whether anything like an overt act would be risked by that vessel. If all the governments of South America were under The Master's thumb, then cabled orders from his deputies would race three navies to the spot. And the government of the United States does not like to start war, anywhere. Certainly it would not willingly enter into a conflict with the whole southern continent for the solution of a problem that so far affected that continent alone. The Master's kidnapping had solved nothing, so far.

Jamison tapped his shoulder.

"No pursuit, so far," he observed coolly. "I've looked."
Bell nodded.

"They don't dare. Not yet, anyhow. They're depending on The Master. How is he?"

"Smiling peacefully to himself, damn him!" snarled Jamison. "Do you know what we're up against?"

"Ourselves," said Bell coldly. "But I'm nearly licked. He's got to talk!"

Jamison moved away again. The earth below looked as if it had been torn to shreds in some titanic convulsion of ages past. The sea was everywhere, and so was land! There were little threads of silver interlacing and crossing and wavering erratically in every conceivable direction. And there were specks of islands—rocks only yards in extent—and islands of every imaginable size and shape, with their surfaces in every possible state of upheaval and distortion. A broader mass of land appeared ahead and to the left.

"Tierra del Fuego again," muttered Bell. "If we cross

it...."

For fifteen minutes the plane thundered across desolate, rocky hills. Then the maze of islets again. Bell scanned them keenly, and saw a tiny steamer traveling smokily, for no conceivable reason, among the scattered bits of stone. The sea appeared, stretching out toward infinity.

Bell rose, to survey a wider space. He swung to the left, so that he was heading nearly southeast, and went on down toward that desolation of desolations, the stormy cape which faces the eternal ice of the antarctic. He was five thousand feet up, then, and scanning sea and earth and sky....

And suddenly he swung sharply to the right and headed out toward the open sea. He felt a small figure pressing against his shoulder. Presently fingers closed tightly upon his sleeve. He glanced down at Paula and managed to smile.

"There are some rocks out there," he told her quietly. "Islands, I think, and Diego Ramirez, at a guess."

They were specks, no more, but they were vastly more distinct from the plane than from Mount Beaufoy. That is on Henderson Island in New Year Sound, and its seventeen-hundred-foot peak was almost below Bell when he sighted the islands. But the islands have been seen full fifty miles from there.

It took the plane nearly forty minutes to cover the space, but long before that the islands had become distinct. Two tiny groups of scattered rocks, the whole group hardly five miles in length and by far the greater number no more than boulders surrounded by sheets of foam from breakers. Two of them merited the name of islands. The nearer was high and bare and precipitous. No trace of vegetation showed upon it. The farther was smaller, and at its northern corner a little cove showed, nearly land-locked.

Bell descended steeply. The big plane plunged wildly in the air eddies about the taller island at five hundred feet, but steadied and went winging on down lower, and lower.... The waves between the two islands were not high, but the seaplane alighted with a mighty, a tremendous splashing, and Bell navigated

it grimly though clumsily into the mouth of the cove. There a small beach showed. He went very slowly toward it. Presently he swung abruptly about. A wing tip float grounded close to the shore.

The motors cut off and left a thunderous silence. Bell climbed atop the cabin and let go the anchor.

"We're here," he said shortly. "Bring The Master and we'll go ashore."

The catwalk painted on the lower wing guided them. Bell jumped to the rocks first, and stumbled, and then rose to lift Paula down and take The Master's small, frail body from Jamison's arms.

"You looked for a gun?" asked Bell

"He'd nothing to fight with," said Jamison heavily. He had been facing the same problem Bell had worked on desperately, and had found no answer. But he shuddered a little as he looked about the island.

There was nothing in sight but rock. No moss. No

lichens. Not even stringy grass or the tufty scrub bushes that seemed able to grow anywhere.

Bell untied The Master, carefully but without solicitude. The little man sat up, and brushed himself off carefully, and arranged himself in a comfortable position.

"I am an old man," said The Master in mild reproach. "You might at least have given me a cushion to sit upon."

Bell sat down and lighted a cigarette with fingers that did not tremble in the least.

"Suppose," he said hardly, "you talk. First, of what your poison is made. Second, of what the antidote is made. Third, how we may be sure you tell the truth."

The Master looked at him with bright, shrewd, and apparently kindly old eyes.

"*Hijo mio*," he said mildly, "I am an old man. But I am obstinate. I will tell you nothing."

Bell's eyes glowed coldly.

"Does it occur to you," he asked grimly, "that it's too important a matter for us to have any scruples about? That we can—and will—make you talk?"

"You may kill me," said The Master benignly, "but that is all."

"And," said Bell, still more grimly, "we have only to get back in the plane yonder, and go away...."

The Master beamed at him. Presently he began to laugh softly.

"*Hijo mio*," he said gently, "let us stop this little byplay. You will take me back in my airplane, and you will land me at Punta Arenas. And then you will fly away. I concede you freedom, but that is all. You cannot leave me here."

"Paula," said Bell coldly, "get in the plane again. Jamison—"

Paula rose doubtfully. Jamison stood up. The Master continued to chuckle amiably.

"You see," he said cherubically, "you happen to be a gentleman, Senor Bell. Every man has some weakness. That is yours. And you will not leave me here to die, because you have killed my nephew, who was the only other man who knew how to prepare my little medicine. And you know, Senor, that all my subjects will wish to die. Those who do, in fact," he added mildly, "will be fortunate. The effect of my little medicine does not make for happiness without its antidote."

Bell's hands clenched.

"You know," said The Master comfortably, "that there are many thousands of people whose hands will writhe, very soon. The city of Punta Arenas will be turned into a snarling place of maniacs within a very little while—if I do not return. Would you like, Senor, to think in after days of that pleasant city filled with men and women tearing each other like beasts? Of little children, even, crouching, and crushing and

rending the tender flesh of other little children? Of
lissing little ones gone—"

"Stop!" snarled Bell, in a frenzy. "Damn your soul!
You're right! I can't! You win—so far!"

"Always," said The Master benevolently. "I win
always. And you forget, Senor. You have seen the
worst side of my rule. The revolutions, the rebellions
that have made men free, were they pretty things to
watch? Always, *amigo*, the worst comes. But when my
rule is secure, then you shall see."

He waved a soft, beautifully formed hand. From every
possible aspect the situation was a contradiction of all
reason. The bare, black, salt encrusted rocks with no
trace of vegetation showing. The gray water rumbling
and surging among the uneven rocks at the base of
the shore, while gulls screamed hoarsely overhead.
The white haired little man with his benevolent face,
smiling confidently at the two grim men.

"The time will come," said The Master gently, and in
the tone of utter confidence with which one states an

inescapable fact, "the time will come when all the earth will know my rule. The taking of my little medicine will be as commonplace a thing as the smoking of tobacco, which I abhor, Senores. You are mistaken about there being an antidote and a poison. It is one medicine only. One little compound. A vegetable substance, Senor Bell, combined with a product of modern chemistry. It is a synthetic drug. Modern chemistry is a magnificent science, and my little medicine is its triumph. Even my deputies have not heard me speak so, Senores."

Bell snarled wordlessly, but if one had noticed his eyes they would have been seen to be curiously cool and alert and waiting. The Master leaned forward, and for once spoke seriously, almost reverently.

"There shall be a forward step, Senores, in the race of men. Do you know the difference between the brain of a man and that of an anthropoid ape? It consists only of a filmy layer of cortex, a film of gray nerve cells which the ape has not. And that little layer creates the difference between ape and man. And I have discovered more. My little medicine acts upon that

film. Administered in the tiny quantities I have given to my slaves, it has no perceptible effect. It is merely a compound of a vegetable substance and a synthetic organic base. It is not excreted from the body. Like lead, it remains always in solution in the blood. But in or out of the blood it changes, always, to the substance which causes murder madness. Fresh or changed, my little medicine acts upon the brain."

He smiled brightly upon them.

"But though in tiny quantities it has but little effect, in larger quantities—when fresh it makes the functioning of the gray cells of the human brain as far superior to the unmedicated gray cells, as those human gray cells are to the white cells of the ape! That is what I have to offer to the human race! Intelligence for every man, which shall be as the genius of the past!"

He laughed softly.

"Think, Senores! Compare the estate of men with the estate of apes! Compare the civilization which will

arise upon the earth when men's brains are as far above their present level as the present level is above the anthropoid! The upward steps of the human race under my rule will parallel, will surpass the advance from the brutish caveman to intellectual genius. But I have seen, Senores, the one danger in my offering."

There was silence. Jamison shook his head despairingly. The Master could not see him. He formed the word with his lips.

"Crazy!"

But Bell said coldly:

"Go on."

"I must rule," said The Master soberly. "It is essential. If my little secret were known, intelligences would be magnified, but under many flags and with many aims. Scientists, with genius beside which Newton's pales, would seek out deadly weapons for war. The world would destroy itself of its own genius. But under my rule—"

"Men go mad," said Bell coldly.

The Master smiled reproachfully.

"Ah, you are trying to make me angry, so that I will betray something! You are clever, Senor Bell. With my little medicine, in such quantities as I would administer it to you...."

"You describe it," said Bell harshly and dogmatically, "as a brain stimulant. But it drives men mad."

"To be sure," said The Master mildly. "It does. It is not excreted from the body save very, very slowly. But it changes in the blood stream. As—let us say—sugar changes into alcohol in digestion. The end-product of my little medicine is a poison which attacks the brain. But the slightest bit of unchanged medicine is an antidote. It is"—he smiled amiably—"it is as if sugar in the body changed to alcohol, and alcohol was a poison, but sugar—unchanged—was an antidote. That is it exactly. You see that I have taken my little medicine for years, and it has not harmed me."

"Which," said Bell—and somehow his manner made utter silence fall so that each word fell separately into a vast stillness—"which, thank God, is the one thing that wins finally, for me!"

He stood up and laughed. Quite a genuine laugh.

"Paula," he said comfortably, "get on the plane. In the cabin. Jamison and I are going to strip The Master."

Paula stared. The Master looked at him blankly. Jamison frowned bewilderedly, but stood up grimly to obey.

"But Senor," said The Master in gentle dignity, "merely to humiliate me—"

"Not for that," said Bell. He laughed again. "But all the time I've been hearing about the stuff, I've noticed that nobody thought of it as a drug. It was a poison. People were poisoned. They did not become addicts. But you—you are the only addict to your drug."

He turned to Jamison, his eyes gleaming.

"Jamison," he said softly, "did you ever know of a drug addict who could bear to think of ever being without a supply of his drug—*right on his person*?"

Jamison literally jumped.

"By God! No!"

The Master was quick. He was swarming up the plane-wing tip before Jamison reached him, and he kicked frenziedly when Jamison plucked him off. But then it was wholly, entirely, utterly horrible that the little white haired man, whose face and manner had seemed so cherubic and so bland, should shriek in so complete a blind panic as they forced his fingers open and took a fountain pen away from him.

"This is it," said Bell in a deep satisfaction. "This is his point of weakness."

The Master was ghastly to look at, now. Jamison held him gently enough, considering everything, but The Master looked at that fountain pen as one might look at Paradise.

"I—I swear," he gasped. "I—swear I will give you the formula!"

"You might lie," said Jamison grimly.

"I swear it!" panted The Master in agony. "It—If the formula is known it—can be duplicated! It—the excretion can be hastened! It can all be forced from the body! Simply! So simply! If only you know! I will tell you how it is done! The medicine is the cacodylate of—"

Bell was leaning forward, now, like a runner breasting the tape at the end of a long and exhausting race.

"I'll trade," he said softly. "Half the contents of the pen for the formula. The other half we'll need for analysis. Half the stuff in the pen for the formula for freeing your slaves!"

The Master sobbed.

"A—a pencil!" he gasped. "I swear—"

Jamison gave him a pencil and a notebook. He wrote, his hands shaking. Jamison read inscrutably.

"It doesn't mean anything to me," he said soberly, "but you can read it. It's legible."

Bell smiled faintly. With steady finger he took his own fountain pen from his pocket. He emptied it of ink, and put a scrupulous half of a milky liquid from The Master's pen into it. He passed it over.

"Your medicine," said Bell quietly, "may taste somewhat of ink, but it will not be poisonous. Now, what do we do with you? I give you your choice. If we take you with us, you will be held very secretly as a prisoner until the truth of the information you have given us can be proven. And if your slaves have all been freed, then I suppose you will be tried...."

The Master was drawn and haggard. He looked very, very old and beaten.

"I—I would prefer," he said dully, "that you did not tell where I am, and that you go away and leave me here.

I—I may have some subjects who will search for me, and—they may discover me here.... But I am beaten, Senor. You know that you have won."

Bell swung up on the wing of the plane. He explored about in the cabin. He came back.

"There are emergency supplies," he said coldly. "We will leave them with you, with such things as may be useful to allow you to hope as long as possible. I do not think you will ever be found here."

"I—prefer it, Senor," said The Master dully. "I—I will catch fish...."

Jamison helped put the packages ashore. The Master shivered. Bell stripped off his coat and put it on top of the heap of packages. The Master did not stir. Bell laid a revolver on top of his coat. He went out to the plane and started the motors. The Master watched apathetically as the big seaplane pulled clumsily out of the little cove. The rumble of the engines became a mighty roar. It started forward with a rush, skimmed the water for two hundred yards or so, and suddenly

lifted clear to go floating away through the air toward the north.

Paula was the only one who looked back.

"He's crying," she said uncomfortably.

"It isn't fear," said Bell quietly. "It's grief at the loss of his ambition. It may not seem so to you two, but I believe he meant all that stuff he told me. He was probably really aiming, in his own way, for an improved world for men to live in."

The plane roared on. Presently Bell said shortly:

"That stuff he has won't last indefinitely. I'm glad I left him that revolver."

Jamison stirred suddenly. He dug down in his pocket and fished out a cigar.

"Since I feel that I may live long enough to finish smoking this," he observed dryly, "I think I'll light it. I haven't felt that I had twenty minutes of life ahead of

me for a long time, now. A sense of economy made me smoke cigarettes. It wouldn't be so much waste if you left half a cigarette behind you when you were killed."

The tight little cabin began to reek of the tobacco. Paula pressed close to Bell.

"But—Charles," she asked hopefully, "is—is it really all right, now?"

"I think so," said Bell, frowning. "Our job's over, anyhow. We go up the Chilean coast and find that navy boat. We turn our stuff over to them. They'll take over the task of seeing that every doctor, everywhere in South America, knows how to get The Master's poison out of the system of anybody who's affected. Some of them won't be reached, but most of them will. I looked at his formula. Standard drugs, all of them. There won't be any trouble getting the news spread. The Master's slaves will nearly go crazy with joy. And," he added grimly, "I'm going to see to it that the Rio police take back what they said about us. I think we'll have enough pull to demand that much!"

He was silent for a moment or so, thinking.

"I do think, Jamison," he said presently, "we did a pretty good job."

Jamison grunted.

"If—if it's really over," said Paula hopefully, "Charles —"

"What?"

"You—will be able to think about me sometimes," asked Paula wistfully, "instead of about The Master always?"

Bell stared down at her.

"Good Lord!" he groaned. "I have been a brute, Paula! But I've been loving you—" He stopped, and then said with the elaborate politeness and something of the customary idiotic air of a man making such an announcement. "I say, Jamison, did you know Paula and I were to be married?"

Jamison snorted. Then he said placidly:

"No. Of course not. I never dreamed of such a thing. When did this remarkably original idea occur to you?"

He puffed a huge cloud of smoke from his cigar. It was an unusually vile cigar. Bell scowled at him helplessly for a moment and then said wrathfully:

"Oh, go to hell!"

And he bent over and kissed Paula.

#27 The Jovian Jest, By Lilith Lorraine:

There came to our pigmy planet a radiant wanderer with a message—and a jest—from the Vasty universe.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Consternation reigned in Elsnore village when the Nameless Thing was discovered in Farmer Burns' corn-patch. When the rumor began to gain credence that it was some sort of meteor from inter-stellar space, reporters, scientists and college professors flocked to the scene, desirous of prying off particles for analysis. But they soon discovered that the Thing was no ordinary meteor, for it glowed at night with a peculiar luminescence. They also observed that it was practically weightless, since it had embedded itself in the soft sand scarcely more than a few inches.

By the time the first group of newspapermen and scientists had reached the farm, another phenomenon was plainly observable. The Thing was growing!

Farmer Burns, with an eye to profit, had already built a picket fence around his starry visitor and was charging admission. He also flatly refused to permit the chipping off of specimens or even the touching of the object. His attitude was severely criticized, but he stubbornly clung to the theory that possession is nine points in law.

It was Professor Ralston of Princewell who, on the third day after the fall of the meteor, remarked upon its growth. His colleagues crowded around him as he pointed out this peculiarity, and soon they discovered another factor—pulsation!

Larger than a small balloon, and gradually, almost imperceptibly expanding, with its viscid transparency shot through with opalescent lights, the Thing lay there in the deepening twilight and palpably shivered. As darkness descended, a sort of hellish radiance began to ooze from it. I say hellish, because there is

no other word to describe that spectral, sulphurous emanation.

As the hangers-on around the pickets shudderingly shrank away from the weird light that was streaming out to them and tinting their faces with a ghastly, greenish pallor, Farmer Burns' small boy, moved by some imp of perversity, did a characteristically childish thing. He picked up a good-sized stone and flung it straight at the nameless mass!

Instead of veering off and falling to the ground as from an impact with metal, the stone sank right through the surface of the Thing as into a pool of protoplasmic slime. When it reached the central core of the object, a more abundant life suddenly leaped and pulsed from center to circumference. Visible waves of sentient color circled round the solid stone. Stabbing swords of light leaped forth from them, piercing the stone, crumbling it, absorbing it. When it was gone, only a red spot, like a bloodshot eye, throbbed eerily where it had been.

Before the now thoroughly mystified crowd had time

to remark upon this inexplicable disintegration, a more horrible manifestation occurred. The Thing, as though thoroughly awakened and vitalized by its unusual fare, was putting forth a tentacle. Right from the top of the shivering globe it pushed, sluggishly weaving and prescient of doom. Wavering, it hung for a moment, turning, twisting, groping. Finally it shot straight outward swift as a rattler's strike!

Before the closely packed crowd could give room for escape, it had circled the neck of the nearest bystander, Bill Jones, a cattleman, and jerked him, writhing and screaming, into the reddish core. Stupefied with soul-chilling terror, with their mass-consciousness practically annihilated before a deed with which their minds could make no association, the crowd could only gasp in sobbing unison and await the outcome.

The absorption of the stone had taught them what to expect, and for a moment it seemed that their worst anticipations were to be realised. The sluggish currents circled through the Thing, swirling the victim's body to the center. The giant tentacle drew

back into the globe and became itself a current. The concentric circles merged—tightened—became one gleaming cord that encircled the helpless prey. From the inner circumference of this cord shot forth, not the swords of light that had powdered the stone to atoms, but myriads of radiant tentacles that gripped and cupped the body in a thousand places.

Suddenly the tentacles withdrew themselves, all save the ones that grasped the head. These seemed to tighten their pressure—to swell and pulse with a grayish substance that was flowing from the cups into the cord and from the cord into the body of the mass. Yes, it was a grayish something, a smokelike Essence that was being drawn from the cranial cavity. Bill Jones was no longer screaming and gibbering, but was stiff with the rigidity of stone. Notwithstanding, there was no visible mark upon his body; his flesh seemed unharmed.

Swiftly came the awful climax. The waving tentacles withdrew themselves, the body of Bill Jones lost its rigidity, a heaving motion from the center of the Thing propelled its cargo to the surface—and Bill Jones

stepped out!

Yes, he stepped out and stood for a moment staring straight ahead, staring at nothing, glassily. Every person in the shivering, paralysed group knew instinctively that something unthinkable had happened to him. Something had transpired, something hitherto possible only in the abysmal spaces of the Other Side of Things. Finally he turned and faced the nameless object, raising his arm stiffly, automatically, as in a military salute. Then he turned and walked jerkily, mindlessly, round and round the globe like a wooden soldier marching. Meanwhile the Thing lay quiescent—gorged!

Professor Ralston was the first to find his voice. In fact, Professor Ralston was always finding his voice in the most unexpected places. But this time it had caught a chill. It was trembling.

"Gentlemen," he began, looking down academically upon the motley crowd as though doubting the aptitude of his salutation. "Fellow-citizens," he corrected, "the phenomenon we have just witnessed

is, to the lay mind, inexplicable. To me—and to my honorable colleagues (added as an afterthought) it is quite clear. Quite clear, indeed. We have before us a specimen, a perfect specimen, I might say, of a—of a —"

He stammered in the presence of the unnamable. His hesitancy caused the rapt attention of the throng that was waiting breathlessly for an explanation, to flicker back to the inexplicable. In the fraction of a second that their gaze had been diverted from the Thing to the professor, the object had shot forth another tentacle, gripping him round the neck and choking off his sentence with a horrid rasp that sounded like a death rattle.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration, showing the glowing sphere reaching out a tentacle to grab the suited professor, while the crowd watches on in horror. Image description end.]

Needless to say, the revolting process that had turned Bill Jones from a human being into a mindless automaton was repeated with Professor Ralston. It happened as before, too rapidly for intervention, too suddenly for the minds of the onlookers to shake off

the paralysis of an unprecedented nightmare. But when the victim was thrown to the surface, when he stepped out, drained of the grayish smokelike essence, a tentacle still gripped his neck and another rested directly on top of his head. This latter tentacle, instead of absorbing *from* him, visibly poured into him what resembled a threadlike stream of violet light.

Facing the cowering audience with eyes staring glassily, still in the grip of the unknowable, Professor Ralston did an unbelievable thing. He resumed his lecture at the exact point of interruption! But he spoke with the tonelessness of a machine, a machine that pulsed to the will of a dictator, inhuman and inexorable!

"What you see before you," the Voice continued—the Voice that no longer echoed the thoughts of the professor—"is what you would call an amoeba, a giant amoeba. It is I—this amoeba, who am addressing you—children of an alien universe. It is I, who through this captured instrument of expression, whose queer language you can understand, am explaining my presence on your planet. I pour my thoughts into this

specialised brain-box which I have previously drained of its meager thought-content." (Here the "honorable colleagues" nudged each other gleefully.) "I have so drained it for the purpose of analysis and that the flow of my own ideas may pass from my mind to yours unimpeded by any distortion that might otherwise be caused by their conflict with the thoughts of this individual.

"First I absorbed the brain-content of this being whom you call Bill Jones, but I found his mental instrument unavailable. It was technically untrained in the use of your words that would best convey my meaning. He possesses more of what you would call 'innate intelligence,' but he has not perfected the mechanical brain through whose operation this innate intelligence can be transmitted to others and, applied for practical advantage.

"Now this creature that I am using is, as you might say, full of sound without meaning. His brain is a lumber-room in which he has hoarded a conglomeration of clever and appropriate word-forms with which to disguise the paucity of his ideas, with

which to express nothing! Yet the very abundance of the material in his storeroom furnishes a discriminating mind with excellent tools for the transportation of its ideas into other minds.

"Know, then, that I am not here by accident. I am a Space Wanderer, an explorer from a super-universe whose evolution has proceeded without variation along the line of your amoeba. Your evolution, as I perceive from an analysis of the brain-content of your professor, *began* its unfoldment in somewhat the same manner as our own. But in your smaller system, less perfectly adjusted than our own to the cosmic mechanism, a series of cataclysms occurred. In fact, your planetary system was itself the result of a catastrophe, or of what might have been a catastrophe, had the two great suns collided whose near approach caused the wrenching off of your planets. From this colossal accident, rare, indeed, in the annals of the stars, an endless chain of accidents was born, a chain of which this specimen, this professor, and the species that he represents, is one of the weakest links.

"Your infinite variety of species is directly due to the variety of adaptations necessitated by this train of accidents. In the super-universe from which I come, such derangements of the celestial machinery simply do not happen. For this reason, our evolution has unfolded harmoniously along one line of development, whereas yours has branched out into diversified and grotesque expressions of the Life-Principle. Your so-called highest manifestation of this principle, namely, your own species, is characterized by a great number of specialized organs. Through this very specialization of functions, however, you have forfeited your individual immortality, and it has come about that only your life-stream is immortal. The primal cell is inherently immortal, but death follows in the wake of specialization.

"We, the beings of this amoeba universe, are individually immortal. We have no highly specialized organs to break down under the stress of environment. When we want an organ, we create it. When it has served its purpose, we withdraw it into ourselves. We reach out our tentacles and draw to

ourselves whatsoever we desire. Should a tentacle be destroyed, we can put forth another.

"Our universe is beautiful beyond the dreams of your most inspired poets. Whereas your landscapes, though lovely, are stationary, unchangeable except through herculean efforts, ours are Protean, eternally changing. With our own substance, we build our minarets of light, piercing the aura of infinity. At the bidding of our wills we create, preserve, destroy—only to build again more gloriously.

"We draw our sustenance from the primates, as do your plants, and we constantly replace the electronic base of these primates with our own emanations, in much the same manner as your nitrogenous plants revitalize your soil.

"While we create and withdraw organs at will, we have nothing to correspond to your five senses. We derive knowledge through one sense only, or, shall I say, a super-sense? We see and hear and touch and taste and smell and feel and know, not through any one organ, but through our whole structure. The

homogeneous force of our omni-substance subjects the plural world to the processing of a powerful unity.

"We can dissolve our bodies at will, retaining only the permanent atom of our being, the seed of life dropped on the soil of our planet by Infinite Intelligence. We can propel this indestructible seed on light rays through the depths of space. We can visit the farthest universe with the velocity of light, since light is our conveyance. In reaching your little world, I have consumed a million years, for my world is a million light-years distant: yet to my race a million years is as one of your days.

"On arrival at any given destination, we can build our bodies from the elements of the foreign planet. We attain our knowledge of conditions on any given planet by absorbing the thought-content of the brains of a few representative members of its dominant race. Every well-balanced mind contains the experience of the race, the essence of the wisdom that the race-soul has gained during its residence in matter. We make this knowledge a part of our own thought-content, and thus the Universe lies like an open book before

us.

"At the end of a given experiment in thought absorption, we return the borrowed mind-stuff to the brain of its possessor. We reward our subject for his momentary discomfiture by pouring into his body our splendid vitality. This lengthens his life expectancy immeasurably, by literally burning from his system the germs of actual or incipient ills that contaminate the blood-stream.

"This, I believe, will conclude my explanation, an explanation to which you, as a race in whom intelligence is beginning to dawn, are entitled. But you have a long road to travel yet. Your thought-channels are pitifully blocked and criss-crossed with nonsensical and inhibitory complexes that stand in the way of true progress. But you will work this out, for the Divine Spark that pulses through us of the Larger Universe, pulses also through you. That spark, once lighted, can never be extinguished, can never be swallowed up again in the primeval slime.

"There is nothing more that I can learn from you—

nothing that I can teach you at this stage of your evolution. I have but one message to give you, one thought to leave with you—forge on! You are on the path, the stars are over you, their light is flashing into your souls the slogan of the Federated Suns beyond the frontiers of your little warring worlds. Forge on!"

The Voice died out like the chiming of a great bell receding into immeasurable distance. The supercilious tones of the professor had yielded to the sweetness and the light of the Greater Mind whose instrument he had momentarily become. It was charged at the last with a golden resonance that seemed to echo down vast spaceless corridors beyond the furthestmost outposts of time.

As the Voice faded out into a sacramental silence, the strangely assorted throng, moved by a common impulse, lowered their heads as though in prayer. The great globe pulsed and shimmered throughout its sentient depths like a sea of liquid jewels. Then the tentacle that grasped the professor drew him back toward the scintillating nucleus. Simultaneously another arm reached out and grasped Bill Jones, who,

during the strange lecture, had ceased his wooden soldier marching and had stood stiffly at attention.

The bodies of both men within the nucleus were encircled once more by the single current. From it again put forth the tentacles, cupping their heads, but the smokelike essence flowed back to them this time, and with it flowed a tiny threadlike stream of violet light. Then came the heaving motion when the shimmering currents caught the two men and tossed them forth unharmed but visibly dowered with the radiance of more abundant life. Their faces were positively glowing and their eyes were illuminated by a light that was surely not of earth.

Then, before the very eyes of the marveling people, the great globe began to dwindle. The jeweled lights intensified, concentrated, merged, until at last remained only a single spot no larger than a pin-head, but whose radiance was, notwithstanding, searing, excruciating. Then the spot leaped up—up into the heavens, whirling, dipping and circling as in a gesture of farewell, and finally soaring into invisibility with the blinding speed of light.

The whole wildly improbable occurrence might have been dismissed as a queer case of mass delusion, for such cases are not unknown to history, had it not been followed by a convincing aftermath.

The culmination of a series of startling coincidences, both ridiculous and tragic, at last brought men face to face with an incontestable fact: namely, that Bill Jones had emerged from his fiery baptism endowed with the thought-expressing facilities of Professor Ralston, while the professor was forced to struggle along with the meager educational appliances of Bill Jones!

In this ironic manner the Space-Wanderer had left unquestionable proof of his visit by rendering a tribute to "innate intelligence" and playing a Jovian Jest upon an educated fool—a neat transposition.

A Columbus from a vaster, kindlier universe had paused for a moment to learn the story of our pigmy system. He had brought us a message from the outermost citadels of life and had flashed out again on his aeonic voyage from everlasting unto everlasting.

#28 The Atom-smasher, By Victor Rousseau Emanuel:

Four destinies rocket through the strange time-space of the fourth dimension in Tode's marvelous atom-smasher.

Aproximate word count: 26,100

Bigotry: Antiblack racism, misogyny

Warnings: Extreme antiblackness, specifically against Aboriginal Australians. Victor Emanuel really fucking hates Black people. It's disgusting.

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Chapter 1: The "Vanishing Place"

"Look at that plane! That fellow's crazy! Took off with the wind behind him! He'll nose dive before he clears the clubhouse! He'll crash into those trees along the edge of the golf course!"

The group on the field at Westbury, Long Island, held

their breaths as they watched James Dent take off in the wildest, most erratic flight that they had ever seen. Under lowering storm clouds, with the wind roaring half a hurricane behind him, Dent spiraled upward as if unconscious of the laws of Earthly gravity.

"I told you so! You ought to have stopped him, even if it is his private plane! A feller's got no business trying to break his neck! Look there! He's cleared those trees after all!"

James Dent had cleared them, and the clubhouse too, and was already disappearing across the Hempstead Plains, looking like a leaf whirling up in a winter storm. At a height of five hundred feet he sped eastward.

"Didn't tell you where he was going?"

"Nope, acted like a crazy man. Something on his mind sure. Wherever he's bound for, he'll never get there!"

ut James Dent was already out of sight, and the little

group dispersed. And Dent, winging his way due east, over the oak barrens of central Long Island, was conscious neither of the storm that howled about him nor of the excitement that his rash take-off had occasioned.

The rain lashed him in the open cockpit, the ground fog swirled about him, and, though it was still afternoon, there brooded a somber twilight over the wastes. But in his mind Dent was already anticipating his descent at the "Vanishing Place," as the natives called it near Peconic Bay.

The "Vanishing Place" was so called because of the terrible and inexplicable catastrophe that had occurred there five years previously. In the two-century-old farmhouse, Miles Parrish, the world's greatest authority on physical chemistry, had been conducting investigations into the structure of the atom.

James Dent and Lucius Tode had been associated with old Parrish in this work, which, carried to a successful issue, would revolutionize the social organization of

the world. The energy locked up in the atom is so stupendous that, as Eddington indicated, a thimbleful of coal, disintegrated, would carry the *Mauretania* from England to America and back again. To unlock this energy would be to set man free from bondage, to restore the pristine leisure and happiness of Eden.

And because the three men were playing with deadly forces, of incalculable power, this deserted spot had been selected for the carrying on of the investigations. The old farmhouse had been converted into a laboratory. For days together the three had bent over their tubes and laboratory apparatus, hardly eating or sleeping. And the day had come when success had seemed almost within their grasp.

Dent had received six months' leave of absence from his duties at Columbia University in order to prosecute the experiments. As the weeks went by, and the blind track that the three were following opened into a clear road, a sort of madness settled upon every one of them.

The Planck-Bohr quantum theory that the energy of a

body cannot vary continuously, but only by a certain finite amount, or exact multiples of this amount, had been the key that unlocked the door. But always it had been Lucius Tode who led the way. Tode was a graduate of the University of Virginia, and accounted one of the most brilliant minds of his generation. At thirty, he stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries.

Dark, handsome, fearless, with a will power that nothing seemed able to subdue, he had taken the leadership away from old Miles Parrish, who eagerly and without thought of his own reputation followed in his assistant's footsteps.

There were the three men—and there was the girl, Lucille Parrish, the child of Miles's old age.

Seventeen, when the catastrophe occurred, she had come out to the deserted spot sometimes of a Sunday from her boarding school at Garden City.

And Tode had found time to make love to her when he rushed her back to her school in his high-powered foreign car!

Jim Dent had known nothing of that until after the catastrophe. Lucille had been afraid of him, afraid to open her mouth upon the subject even to her father. And she had been fascinated too, as a young girl may well be, when a fascinating man of thirty uses his arts to win her.

It was only by chance that Jim had failed to be involved in the hideous catastrophe that had stamped the old farmhouse with the name of "Vanishing Place" whenever the natives spoke of it.

"Two Killed in Laboratory Explosion!" was the heading in the next morning's paper which gave Jim his first intimation of the accident. He had been to Columbia overnight to look up a new publication that contained an article on the hydrogen spectrum.

It was only a long paragraph, and the names of Parrish and Tode meant nothing to the man who had written it. But Jim had taken train to Hempstead, taxied to the flying fields, and essayed his first plane ride to Peconic Bay, in the charge of a pilot.

A group of natives, three newspaper men and a Suffolk County policeman were near the spot where the farmhouse had been—near the spot, not on it.

For where the farmhouse had been was a great pool of stagnant water, black as ink, covering an expanse of perhaps three-quarters of an acre.

"No, sir, there was no explosion," said the officer. "At least, none of these fellows heard anything. Just a—you tell the Professor, Mr. Lumm."

"It was about half-past eight last night, Mr. Dent," said Andrew Lumm, who kept the village store a mile away. "Ground seemed to rock. Earthquake, I says to myself, holdin' on to the door. But it wasn't no earthquake. Too gentle for that. Nothin' broke, not even a plate. Then I says to Mrs. Lumm, 'They're gone, poor fellers, and I allus knowed it would be that way. It's lucky young Mr. Dent went out last night on the 7.15.'"

"We hurried here, but there wasn't no sign of the place, jest a hole on the ground with a sort of sticky

mud in it. Water's been fillin' in since then, but I guess it's reached its level now. They jest blowed themselves to bits, Mr. Dent."

"Tell him about the vi'let light, Andy," put in one of the bystanders.

"Yeah, like a pillar of vi'let fire that were, Mr. Dent. We seed it through the trees, but by the time we got here it was 'most gone. Gosh, that throwed a scare into some of us!"

"It was Mr. Tode's soul a-burnin'," squeaked Granpop Dawes. "I allus said that feller'd come to no good end."

The group shook their heads and remained silent. It was clear that, if they did not share Granpop Dawes's opinion, at least they considered it not without the bounds of plausibility. Lucius Tode had created a bad impression among the natives.

Jim Dent stooped and picked up something lying imbedded in the mud at the edge of the black pool,

and slipped it into his pocket. He had been present at the inquest and had gone back to Columbia. That had been five years before.

Professor McDowd, the palaeontologist, had identified the object Jim had found as the milk molar of *merychippus insignis*, the miocene representative of the modern horse. And that had made Jim Dent think furiously.

The catastrophe must have been a gigantic one to have flung up that fossil tooth from strata far beneath the level of the earth's surface. More, there were even traces of archaean deposits around the borders of the pool, whose depth, in the center, was ascertained to be 164 feet.

Black, silent, uninhabited, unstirred save by a passing breeze, the pool had remained those five years past. The spot was shunned as haunted or accursed by the superstitious country folks. Dense underbrush had grown up around it.

Periodically, Jim had gone out to visit it. That was how

he had come to invest in a private plane. It was only an hour to the flying-fields, and less than an hour from there to Peconic Bay. What he expected to achieve he did not know. In the back of his mind was the belief that some day he would light upon some clue that would tell something of the unusual catastrophe.

And then that afternoon he had been shaken to the depths when a message came to him in Lucille's voice over the telephone:

"I've heard from dad!"

Winging his way eastward through the storm, Jim Dent was mentally reconstructing all that had led up to the present moment.

Lucille had finished her high school course and gone into business life. Jim had found a position for her as secretary to a small group of physicists, who were conducting private investigations, a position for which her training well fitted her. She had done well. He had kept in touch with her.

Six months before, their relations had altered. They had realized that they were in love with each other. In the months that followed they had discovered all sorts of things about each other that neither had suspected, which might be summed up by saying that they had become all in all to each other.

It was so amazing, this transformation of ordinary friendship into radiant love, that they were still bewildered over it. They were to be married at the end of the year.

It was then that Lucille had first told Jim about Lucius's wooing, and her fear of the man. Apart from that, both had refrained, by tacit agreement, from making reference to the past.

And then, that afternoon, there sounded Lucille's voice over the telephone, "I've heard from dad!"

"From—your father? You're mistaken, dear!"

"No, Jim, I'm not mistaken. He called me on the 'phone two hours ago. I couldn't mistake his voice,

and, besides, he called me "Lucy," like he used to do. He told me to come at once to the Vanishing Place, but not to tell a soul unless I wished to do him a great evil. Then he rang off."

"Where are you now?" asked Jim.

"I'm 'phoning from Amityville. I took the train immediately, but I was so frightened, and—and at last I decide I must tell you. I didn't think dad would have minded my telling you. So I got out. There's another train in a few minutes, and I shall go on to Hampton Bays and walk the two miles to the Vanishing Place. I—I'll meet you there."

"Lucille, wait! Can't you meet me somewhere else, and we'll go on together. I'll get my plane and—"

"Oh, I just can't wait, Jim! I'm in such terror that I won't find dad when I get there. And he told me to tell nobody. I—I'll meet you at the Vanishing Place, Jim."

And so great had been her agitation that with that arrangement Jim had had to rest content. He had

taken a taxi out to the flying fields at once.

In half an hour he would know what had happened. And he was obsessed by the terror that he would not find Lucille or anything except the lonely pool.

That was why he opened the throttle and drove on wildly through the scurrying wraiths of mist, pierced by the tops of trees that at times rose dangerously near the spreading wings.

That gap in the trees was Lake Ronkokoma. Not far now! Jim would know soon. But as he flew, vague fears that had beset his mind since he had received Lucille's message began to crystallize into the single fear of Tode. If Parrish was really alive—why not Tode too?

Beneath the polish and the surface comradeship, Jim had always been conscious of some *diablerie* about the man, of some inner life of which he knew nothing. Something unscrupulous and relentless, something infinitely cruel—as when he had tested the Atom Smasher on a stray cur that had run into the

laboratory, not for experimentation, but in mere ruthless savagery, converting the living beast instantly into a shapeless mass of flesh and bone.

And Tode had known more about the Atom Smasher—as they affectionately called the mechanism for releasing atomic energy—than old Parrish and he together. Suppose Lucille's story were true! Suppose old Parrish were actually alive, suppose Tode were responsible for some designed scheme which would, in the end place Lucille in his power!

Wild thoughts and fears—but Jim would soon know. And with throttle stretched to the limit he went roaring over the scrub oak toward Peconic Bay.

It was beginning to grow dark, almost too dark for landing. But now Jim could feel the tang of the salt wind upon his face. He slowed down. The fog was as thick as ever, but the scrub oak had given place to more open country. In a minute or two he ought to sight some landmark. Yes, he had overshot his mark, for suddenly, through a gap in the mists, he saw the line of breakers forming a white ridge upon the sand.

A mile southward! Jim knew where he was now, for he knew every curve of that shore. He banked and turned. And then he saw something that for an instant chilled his blood.

Not far away, and not far beneath him, a ghostly violet haze was spreading through the fog, and the fog itself was coiling back from it until it formed a dense white wall.

For a moment Jim's hand was paralysed upon the stick. The next, his decision was made. He closed his throttle and went down in a slow descent right toward the heart of that column of lavender smoke that seemed to be springing straight up out of the ground. "A pillar of violet fire!" It could not have been described better.

The plane dived through the dense wall of fog, which for a moment shut out the violet fire completely. Then Jim was through, and almost immediately beneath him lay the black and glassy surface of the pool. Out of the very heart of it rose the fire, burning like some infernal flame that consumed nothing, and between it

and the fog was a space of almost translucent air, extending to the borders of the pool.

Jim began to circle the pool to find a landing-place. But as he looked down, the surface of the pool began to change its aspect.

In place of the unruffled calm, it began to work with some devil's yeast all around the central pillar of flame, until its depths seemed to be churned up in frothy masses and the movement extended almost to the circumference. Then the whole surface of the water began to tilt and sway with a slow, shimmering, undulatory movement, as if it was a giant roulette wheel in rotation.

And something was materializing out of the heart of the violet flame itself.

It was a face—a human face, with bestial features, distorted and enormously magnified through the substance in which it was. Such a face as might look back upon an observer out of one of those distorting mirrors at Coney Island, or some other place of

popular amusement, but twisted and enlarged beyond conception, so that it covered half the area of a city block.

Curiously blurred, too, as if each atom of that face was in isolated motion on its own account. And beneath the face appeared the vague outlines of a hand, apparently manipulating some sort of infernal mechanism.

And that face, enlarged as it was out of all proportion, filled Jim's heart with greater horror than any face he had ever known.

For it was the visage of Lucius Tode, and on those huge and distorted features was something that looked like a diabolical smile.

Everything vanished. Jim was back in the surrounding wall of fog. Instinctively he banked again. He strove to drive the horror from his brain. He must circle, circle incessantly, in the hope of finding Lucille. She must have already arrived. But if she had not fallen into Tode's power, she would hear the roaring of the

plane and manage to signal him.

He circled back into the clear space between the white and the violet, and now he saw that the effect upon the pool was still more pronounced. The waters were rising up in a rim all around, and yet not overflowing. They were standing up like a bowl of clay upon the potter's wheel, and down in the depths Jim could see the head and shoulders of Tode, much less magnified, more natural in appearance, and less blurred. And Tode was looking up at him and pointing that infernal mechanism at him—something that looked like the tube of a telescope.

Suddenly the plane shivered and stood still. The motor died abruptly. The stick went dead. And yet the plane did not fall. As if upheld by the same repulsive force that drove back the white fog, it simply hung suspended three hundred feet above the heart of the violet flame.

Then—there was no longer any plane. The stick had melted in Jim's hand, the wings dissolved like wreaths of mist. The entire body had disintegrated into

nothingness. Jim sat suspended in the void, and felt himself very slowly descending into the violet column.

Down into the vortex of that bubbling pool, which rimmed him on all sides ... down into the central aperture out of which emerged the leering face of Tode! And as he dropped Jim heard, thin, faint, and very far away, the despairing cry of Lucille....

Chapter 2: *Old Friends—and Foes*

Jim must have lapsed into unconsciousness, for when he opened his eyes there was a gap in his consciousness of the passage of time, though none in his memory. He opened his eyes, and instantly he remembered everything.

Only a brief interval could have elapsed, for it was not quite dark. The fog and the violet flame had cleared away. Overhead a few stars twinkled. Jim was lying on his side, half-buried in the black, slimy mud of the dried up pool.

There was nothing but the smooth, shelving mud

basin, with the scrub oak surrounding it. Tode and the machine had vanished.

Jim pulled himself with an effort out of the sucking mud, and, heavily clogged with it, began to make his way toward the margin.

Stumbling, struggling through the viscid ooze, he shouted Lucille's name despairingly. But no answer came, and his cries only made the utter silence all about him seem more fearsome.

Exhausted by his efforts, he gained the edge of the pool at last, and stopped, trying to orientate himself. As he did so, he saw a human face peering at him out of a clump of scrub oak.

It was the face of an aged man, with a long white beard and rags of clothes that were festooned about him. Jim took a step toward it, shouting a challenge. Next moment it had hurled itself out of its shelter toward him, and two skeletonlike arms were twined about his shoulders, while the fingers worked upward toward his throat.

The face was that of a madman, crazed by fear. And Jim recognized it. It was the face of Professor Parrish.

Parrish, the trim, immaculate, clean-shaven, urbane old man, whose lectures, imbued with wit and scholarship, had always been the delight of his classes—Parrish reduced to this gibbering maniac! And yet Parrish himself, returned to the site of their experiments after five years!

So fierce was the old man's onset, so desperate his clutch, that for a half-minute or more Jim was reduced to fighting for his life. The clawing fingers, armed with long nails, furrowed Jim's throat, there was a terrific strength in the body, wasted though it was almost to a skeleton.

But it was only for a half-minute that old Parrish's endurance lasted. Suddenly the old man went limp and tottered forward, dropped upon the ground. Jim bent over him.

"Parrish, you know me! I'm Jim Dent!" he cried. "I came here to save you."

Parrish was muttering something. Jim caught the words "Tode," and "God help Lucille!"

"Parrish, I'm Jim Dent!" Jim cried again, and the old man, shuddering, opened his eyes and recognized him.

"Jim!" he muttered. "Jim Dent! Then where is she? I got away from that devil, found farmhouse empty, got telephone book, found her and 'phoned her. Told her to come. Save—Lucille!"

He fell back, his eyes closed. Jim crouched over the unconscious old man. He was in a state of utter perplexity. He could not quite gather what Parrish had been trying to tell him, and it was with difficulty that he could focus his mind upon the situation, so great had been the shock of finding his former chief in that condition.

What had become of his plane, and where was Lucille? Jim was positive that he had heard her cry for help out of the vortex in the water.

But there was no water, only the circle of black mud extended in the starlight.

Again and again Jim shouted Lucille's name, and his cries went echoing away through the scrub without result.

Jim looked down at the unconscious old man beside him. He must get Parrish away, get him to Andy Lumm's. He bent over him again and raised him in his arms.

Suddenly he heard two familiar sounds behind him, two dull thumps that sounded less like explosions than echoes, long drawn out, and receding into infinity. There was no other sound quite like them that he had ever heard.

They were the snap of the electrical discharge as the Atom Smasher began to operate, and why the snap had sounded like a heavy body falling a long distance away, was not known.

Tode had said one day, with what Jim had taken for

sarcasm, that they represented the wave series of a single sound extended in time to make four-dimensional action, but Jim had never considered the explanation seriously.

That sound, bringing back all Jim's memories of their experiments, brought him to his feet sharply. He swung around. The surface of the pool was a bubbling, seething mass of mud and water. And over its surface that faint violet haze was beginning to spread.

In the center where the light was thickest, something like a gyroscope appeared to be revolving. Out of the gyroscope something was beginning to project—that infernal tube of Lucius Tode. And Jim knew that in the heart of the flame that enormous, distorted face of Lucius Tode would again be visible.

The human nervous system can only endure a certain amount of impact. The sight of that ghastly flame, already condensing into a violet pillar, was more than Jim could stand. He dragged old Parrish to his feet and started off with him into the thickest part of the

undergrowth.

A fearful scream behind him stopped him at the very edge of the scrub. He looked back, still supporting the half-conscious old man in his arms. The violet flame was shooting up in a straight pillar, the whole central portion of the pool was dry, and the waters were heaped up all around it.

From the slightly elevated spot where Jim stood, he could see Tode holding Lucille in his arms in the very heart of the fire, which threw a pale, fluorescent light over their faces. Tode was wearing a spotted skin, like that of a leopard, and Lucille was in the blue frock that she had worn when Jim and she had dinner together two evenings before.

Jim dropped old Parrish, shouted in answer, and dashed back like a madman down the slope into the solid wall of water.

He fought his way desperately through that wall, which seemed of the consistency of soft rubber or treacle, as if some subtle change had taken place in

its molecular isomers. It adhered to him without wetting him, and he plunged through it, hearing Lucille cry out again, and yet again.

And now he was through, and once more struggling over the viscid surface of the pond. Behind him he heard old Parrish blundering, and screeching at the top of his voice, but he paid no attention to him.

He could see Lucille more clearly, and the large, hazy outlines of Tode's features were beginning to assume the proper proportions. There was a diabolical leer upon Tode's face, unchanged during the five years since Jim had seen him last, except that it had become more evil, more powerful. The enormous and distorted face that Jim had seen had been simply due to the presence of some refracting medium.

The pillar of violet light was thinning, spreading out over the pool, but Jim could now see the scene more clearly than before, even as he rushed onward.

The machine was inside what looked like a flat boat, but more circular than a boat, and apparently was

made of some metal resembling aluminum. Either from the metal hull or from the mechanism inside it there was emitted a pungent odor resembling chlorine.

The mechanism itself bore some resemblance to the old Atom Smasher of five years before, but it appeared to be immensely more complicated. Wheels of various sizes were set at every conceivable angle around the central tube, from which the violet light was emanating, and all were rotating and gyrating so fast that they looked like discs of light. The boat itself was trembling, and this movement appeared to be communicated to the boiling mud in the central part of the pool.

As Jim tried to leap down through the sucking mud to snatch Lucille from Tode, the latter stopped, straightened himself, and pointed a short tube at Jim's heart.

Jim felt as if an enormous, invisible force had struck him in the chest. It was apparently the same repulsive force that had driven back the waters. The shock was

not a violent one. It did not throw him off his feet. It merely pushed him slowly and irresistibly backward.

And the whole picture was beginning to fade. Etched sharply in the violet light one moment, it now looked like a drawing that had been covered with tissue paper.

The outlines were dissolving into a haze—or, rather, each line seemed reproduced an infinite number of times, as the edge of a vibrating saw shows an infinitude of edges. The violet fire was becoming still more diffused. It hovered over the waters, a pale, flickering glow. And simultaneously the walls of water began to break and come surging forward.

Jim saw Lucille stretching out her arms toward him, and tried to struggle forward, but in vain. She cried out his name, and he put all his strength into that desperate futile struggle to reach her. But he was being borne backward by the invisible power in the tube. The rushing torrent was surging about his knees; grew waist deep: in another moment Jim was swimming for his life against the furious flood.

Suddenly, however, the tremendous pressure on his chest was relaxed. Tode had turned the tube away from him. He was leaning forward out of the boat and grasped old Parrish, who had been flung violently against it by the dissolving waters.

The same flood carried Jim to the boat's side. Here, however, the flood was only knee deep, owing to the repulsion still being exercised by the violet light, which was glimmering feebly. Jim found his feet and leaped into the craft. He grasped Lucille in his arms.

He turned to confront Tode, who had just dragged old Parrish over the side. The three men confronted one another.

"Turn that tube on me, and I'll jump into your damn machinery and bust it!" Jim shouted.

An ironical expression came on Tode's face. It was clear that he still considered himself master of the situation. "At the immediate moment, Dent, the lives of all of us depend upon your keeping absolutely still," he answered. "Take my advice and sit down!"

Jim saw Lucille's face, ghastly in the faint violet light that played about it. The girl had fainted. She was lying unconscious, her feet against the circular metal plate that protected the machinery, her head upon the rail that ran around the boat's upper edge. Tode, without waiting for Jim's answer, stepped over the plate and took his seat at a sort of instrument board with control levers and thumb screws that apparently controlled the needles on four dials. He touched a button, and instantly the violet light disappeared.

With its vanishing, the waves came surging forward, and lapped violently against the hull, as if about to overwhelm the vessel, which, however, seemed immovable. It simply rose higher in the water.

Jim understood the cause of this. Those gyroscopes would retain the hull in the same position against anything but a mechanical force strong enough to ruin it. He watched Tode as he sat at the instrument board, which was illuminated by two tiny lights of what looked like mercury-vapor. His face, handsome and cruel as ever, was tense as he manipulated the thumb screws. Beside him lay Parrish, faintly

whimpering. The old man had evidently abandoned all hope of effecting his escape, or of rescuing his daughter.

It was unbearable to have to sit there, knowing that the three of them were absolutely at Tode's mercy, and yet there was nothing else to do.

Tode looked up with a saturnine smile. "It's a delicate operation to blur the present without shooting out a hundred years or so in time," he said, "but my micrometer's pretty accurate, Dent. Don't move, I caution you!" He smiled again. "Yes, Dent, time is something like the fourth dimension of space, as we believed in the old days, and I've proved it."

Jim saw Tode touch the screw that controlled the fourth dial, and instantly it was borne in on him that each of the dials controlled one spatial dimension. This fourth, then, was the time dimension!

Could it be true that Tode had solved the practical problem of traveling in time, theoretically implied since the discoveries of Einstein?

He had known in the old days that the Atom Smasher might be adapted to this purpose, but neither Parrish nor he had dreamed of turning aside from their endeavor to utilize it for the purpose of releasing atomic energy.

Thump! Thump! The familiar old sound, rushing back into memory after all those years, the release of the electrical discharge, echoing through infinity! The scrub around the pool blurred and was gone. A vast gray panorama extended itself on either side of them.

They were travelling—in space—and time too. Jim no longer doubted. And, chilled with horror, he sat there, his arm about Lucille's unconscious form.

Chapter 3: *Into the Infinite*

How long he sat there he did not know. Minutes or hours seemed all the same to him. Nothing but that gray monochrome, of neither light nor darkness, that endless panorama of miles and years, blended

together into this chaos!

But suddenly there came a shout from Tode. The blur ceased, the lights flickered. Again there sounded the two thumps of the electrical discharge. The vibrating mechanism grew steady. Above them, out of the grayness, a moon disclosed itself, then the pin-points of stars. All about them was an immense, sandy waste.

"Know where we are, Dent?" came Tode's chuckle.

Jim was not sufficiently master of himself to attempt to answer.

"We are on what will be the Russian steppes some fifty thousand years ahead of us in time," grinned Tode. "This is an interlude between two ice ages. Observe how pleasantly warm the climate is, for Russia. Unfortunately the receding glaciers carried off the top-soil, which accounts for the barrenness of the district, but in another century this country will be overgrown with ferns, and inhabited by the mastodon and wild horse, and a few enterprising

palaeolithic hunters, who will come in to track them down and destroy them with their stone axes."

"I think you're the same sort of damn liar you always were, Tode," answered Jim—but without conviction. There was something terrific about that desolation. Nothing within a thousand miles of Long Island corresponded to it.

"You'll be convinced pretty quickly, when you see my specimen," answered Tode. "I let him off here on the way to the pool. He's not exactly presentable, and when I got the idea of picking up Lucille and taking her back with me, I thought it best not to let her see him. He didn't want to be let off. Was afraid I wouldn't pick him up again, and I'll admit it was a matter of pretty careful reckoning. But this is the place, almost to the yard.

"Yes, I've done some close reckoning, Dent, but the cleverest part of the business was letting old Parrish think he'd got away from me. I knew he'd telephone Lucille. You know, I always had the brains of the outfit, Dent," he continued, with a smirk of self-

satisfaction.

He looked out of the boat. "And here, if I'm not mistaken, comes my specimen," he added.

Something was running across the steppes toward them. It came nearer, took human form. It was human! A man—but such a man as Jim had never seen before outside the covers of a book. And he recognised the race immediately.

It was a Neanderthal man, one of the race that co-existed with the highly developed Cro-Magnons some thirty thousand years ago. Man and not ape, though the face was bestial, and there were huge ridges above the eyebrows.

And if Jim had needed conviction, the sight of this gibbering creature, now climbing into the boat and fawning upon Tode, convinced him. For the Neanderthal man vanished from the scene long before the beginning of recorded history.

For a few moments a deathly faintness overcame

him ... his eyes closed, he felt unconsciousness rushing in upon him like a black cloud.

"It's all right, Dent—don't look so scared!" came Tode's mocking voice.

Jim opened his eyes, shook off that cloud of darkness with an immense effort. The boat was throbbing violently as the wheels gyrated, the violet light had become a pillar as thick as a man, and shot straight up to a height of fifty feet, before it rolled away. Lucille was lying where she had been, her eyes still staring up unseeing at the stars. Old Parrish was whining and whimpering as he crouched in his place.

And at Tode's feet crouched the Neanderthal man, repulsive, bestial, even though hardly formidable, and filling the last vacant spot inside the boat. He was gibbering and mouthing as he fawned upon Tode and pressed his hand to his hairy face. He continued to crouch and looked up at his master with doglike eyes.

Repulsive, and yet man, not ape. Distinctly human, perhaps a little lower than the Australian aborigine,

the Neanderthal showed by his reverence that the human faculty of worship existed in him.

"Meet Cain, one of my Drilgoes," said Tode, with a grin. "A faithful servant. I left him here to wait for me on the return journey. Cain's just my pet name for him because he subsists on the fruits of the earth, don't you, Cain?"

The Drilgo grunted, and pressed Tode's hand to his repulsive lips, which were fringed with a reddish beard. Suddenly Tode began to laugh uproariously. "Feel anything wrong with your head, Dent?" he asked.

Dent put up his hand and pulled away a quantity of charred hair. His forehead began to itch, and, rubbing his finger across it, he realized that his eyebrows were gone. Tode laughed still louder.

"You've kept your teeth by about two seconds' grace, Dent, but I shouldn't be surprised if you needed dental attention shortly," he said. "What a pity dentists won't be invented for another forty or fifty

thousand years."

"You're a devil!" cried Jim.

"You see, the human body is very resistant to the Ray," Tode went on. "It almost seems as if there is an organizing principle within it. Even the animal tissues are resistant, though not to the same extent as the human ones. It takes about twenty seconds for the organized human form to be disintegrated. But hair and beaks and claws, being superficial matter, vanish almost as soon as the Ray is turned on them. Ten seconds more, and you'd have been obliterated, Dent, just as your plane was.

"Yes, rub your head. Your hair will probably grow again—if I decide to let you live. It rather depends upon what impression you make upon Lucille as a bald-headed hero. After all, I didn't invite you to accompany us. It's your own lookout."

Jim could find nothing to say to that. He was discovering more and more that they were all helpless in Tode's hands.

"Sit back!" snarled Tode suddenly. He gave the Drilgo a push that sent him sprawling into the bottom of the boat. "Dent, your life depends upon your absolute acquiescence to my proposals. I didn't like you particularly in the old days, any more than you liked me. I thought you were a fool. On the other hand, I've no active reason to hate you, at present. It may be that I can use you.

"Meanwhile we've got a longish journey before us, ten thousand years more, multiplied by the fourth power of two thousand miles. Seems simple? Well, I had to invent the mathematical process for it. Reckon in the gravitational attraction of the planets, and you'll begin to get an idea of the complexity of it. So, in vulgar parlance, we're not likely to arrive till morning."

He glanced at Lucille, who was still lying unconscious with Jim's arm about her. Then his eyes rose to meet Jim's, and a sneering smile played about his lips. That smile was the acknowledgment of their rivalry for the girl's affections. And it was more—it was a challenge.

Tode welcomed that rivalry because, Jim could see, he meant to keep him alive under conditions of servitude, to demonstrate to Lucille his superiority.

Tode turned his thumbscrews, and the two thuds resounded. The violet column sank down, the boat vibrated, the level stretch of land became a blur again. The moon and stars vanished. Once more the four were off on that terrific journey.

At first they seemed to be traversing space that was shot through by alternate light and darkness, so that at times Jim could see the other occupants of the boat clearly, while at other times there was only Tode visible at the instrument board, with the dark outlines of the Drilgo, Cain, sprawled at his feet. But soon these streaks seemed to come closer and closer together, until the duration of each was only a fraction of a second. And closer, until light and darkness blended into a universal gray. These, Jim knew, were the alternations of night and day.

They were traveling—incredible as it was—in time as well as space, though whether backward or forward

Jim could not know. From the presence of the Neanderthal man, however, Jim was convinced that Tode was taking them back more thousands of years, into the beginnings of humanity.

A fearful journey! A madder journey than Jim could have conceived of, had he not been a participant in it. He was losing all sense of reality. He was hardly convinced that he would not awaken in New York, to discover that the whole episode had been a dream.

Was this Lucille, the girl he loved ... with whom he had dined in New York only a day or two before ... this unconscious form, stretched out on the deck of the weird ship that was rushing through eternity? Or, rather, it was they who were rushing through space and time upon a stationary ship! What was reality, and what was dream, then?

Tode called "Come over here, Dent! I want to talk to you!"

Jim picked his way over the metal floor of the round boat, came up to Tode, and sat down beside him

above the sprawling form of the Drilgo, Cain.

"You were a fool to come here, Dent." Tode turned with a malicious smile from his seat at the instrument board. "You didn't have to come. I take it that you are in love with Lucille, you poor imbecile, and still cherish dreams of winning her. We'll take up that matter in due course.

"Do you think I've been idle during these five years of my exile? I've been too busy even to come back for the woman I was in love with. And do you know what I've been doing during all this hellish period? Charting courses, Dent! Mapping out all the planetary movements back for uncounted ages—roughly, crudely, of course, but the best I was able to. These are difficult seas to navigate, though they may not seem so. You fool," he added savagely, "why didn't you come in with me in the old days? I told you that the Atom Smasher could be used to travel through time, and you mocked at me as a dreamer.

"I chose my hour. When everything was ready, I set forth on the most desperate journey ever attempted

by man. Talk of Columbus!—he had nothing on me. I tell you, Dent, I've been back to the Archaean Age, back to the time when nothing but crawling worms moved on the face of the earth. And I've been forward to the time when an errant planet will disrupt the earth into a shower of lava—and I nearly wrecked the boat. Dent.

"I've won, Dent! I've won! I've solved the problem that gives man immortality! All the epochs that have existed since God first formed the world are mine to play with! I have seen myself as a puling infant, and as a greybeard. I have made myself immortal, because, with this machine, I can set back the clock of time. I have found a land where I am worshipped as a god."

Tode's eyes glittered with maniacal fires. He went on in a voice of indescribable triumph:

"I'm a god there, Dent. Do you want to know where that land is? It is Atlantis, sunk beneath the waves nine thousand years before recorded history opened. It is Atlantis, from which the Cro-Magnons fled in

their ships, to land on the coasts of Spain and France, and become the ancestors of modern man.

"In old Atlantis, still not wholly submerged, I have made myself a god. I have mastered the savage Drilgoes whom the Atlanteans oppressed. All the spoils of their ruined cities are at my disposal. And I came back to get Lucille, whom I had never ceased to love. Together Lucille and I will rule like god and goddess.

"Join me, Dent. I'm a god in Atlantis—a god, I tell you. The lesser races fear me as a supernatural being. Only the city remains uncaptured, but it is mine whenever I choose to take it. A god—a god—a god!"

Jim saw now what he had not realized before, that Tode was insane. It would, indeed, have been a miracle if he had been able to retain his sanity under such circumstances as he had described. His voice rose into a wild scream. Yes, Tode was mad—just such a madman as any of the old Roman emperors, drunk with power, each in his turn the sole ruler of the world.

"The Earth is mine!" Tode screamed. "Before the modern world was dreamed of, before the nations were created, Atlantis was the sole power that held dominion over the scattered tribes of mankind. And she is in my hand whenever I strike.

"Wealth incalculable, treasures such as man has never since seen, marvels of scientific discovery, flying machines that would make ours look foolish, paintings grander than have since been executed—all these things exist in the proud city that will shortly be at my command. And I have my Drilgoes, the inferior race, to serve me. They worship me because they know I am a god. Join me, Dent, and taste the joys of being one of the supreme rulers of the world."

In spite of his undoubted madness, there was such power in Tode's voice that Jim could not help believe what he had said.

"Well," snarled Tode. "You hesitate to give me your answer, Dent?"

"Lucille and I are engaged to be married," answered

Jim, and the words were drawn from his lips almost against his will. "We love each other. I am not going to lie to you and then betray you, Tode."

The expression on Tode's face was demoniacal. He snatched up the deadly tube that contained the violet fire and turned it upon Jim. Again Jim felt that repulsive force pushing him back. He gasped for breath, and tensed his whole body in supreme resistance, while he tried to grapple with Tode in vain.

But suddenly Tode dropped the tube, and a roar of laughter broke from his lips.

"You fool!" he shouted. "I tell you I am a god, the one god, supreme above all. Do you think to match your puny will against my own? I tell you Lucille is mine. And for ever, Dent. Whenever we two have reached old age, all that will be necessary for us to do will be to turn this screw a hair's breadth back into the past, and we are both young again. By holding this vessel steady in four-dimensional space, I can achieve immortality."

"Yes, Tode," answered Jim, "but, you see, that's the one thing that you haven't been able to work out yet."

The words seemed to come automatically from Jim's lips. It was only after he had spoken them that he realized they were true. For a moment Tode glared at him; then suddenly, with a shriek of insane rage, he leaped from the instrument board and swung the ray tube with all his might.

Jim felt the blow descend with stunning force upon his head. He reeled, flung out his arms, and toppled forward, unconscious....

Chapter 4: *Escape*

An intolerably bright light that seemed to sear his eyeballs was the first thing of which Jim was conscious. Then he became aware of his aching head, of a sense of utter lassitude, as if he had been bruised all over in some machine that had caught him up and held him in its grip for endless aeons.

At last, despite the pain in his eyes, he managed to

get his eyelids open. He tried to struggle to his feet, only to discover that he was firmly bound with what appeared to be tough creepers, pliant as ropes.

After the lapse of a few minutes, during which he struggled with the receding waves of unconsciousness, he came to a realization of his surroundings. That light that had so distressed him—though the effects were now beginning to pass off—was a pillar of smoke and flame, shooting out of the crater of a volcano about a mile away, across a valley.

He was lying in the entrance to a cave, pegged out on his back, and bound by the tough creepers to the stakes driven into the ground. Up to the mouth of the cave grew huge tree-ferns, cattails, cycads, and such growths as existed in earlier ages in the warm, moist regions of the world.

Beneath the level of the cave a heavy white fog completely shrouded the valley, extending up to within a short distance of the volcano opposite. But on the upper slopes of the volcano the sunlight played, making its crater a sheen of glassy lava,

intolerably bright.

Beyond the volcano Jim could see what looked like an expanse of ocean.

He groaned, and at the sound a creature came shambling forward, carrying what looked like a huge melon in either hand. Jim recognized the Drilgo, Cain.

Chattering and mumbling, Cain placed one of the fruits to Jim's mouth. It was a sort of bread-fruit, but he was too nauseated to eat, and rejected it with disgust. Cain offered him the second fruit.

It was a hollow gourd, the interior filled with a clear fluid. Jim drank greedily as the Drilgo put it to his lips. The contents were like water, but slightly acid. Jim felt refreshed. He looked about him.

The Drilgo uttered a chattering call, and immediately a host of the savages swarmed into the cave. Men—undoubtedly men, in spite of the brow ridges and the receding foreheads, carrying long spears, consisting of chipped and pointed heads of stone, with holes

bored in them, through which long bands of creepers passed, fastening them firmly to the shaft.

Chattering and gesticulating, the Drilgoes surrounded Jim as he lay helpless on the ground. Their savage faces, their rolling eyes, the threatening gestures that they made with their spears, convinced Jim that his end was a foregone conclusion.

But suddenly a distant rumbling sound was heard, increasing rapidly in volume. The floor of the cave vibrated; masses of rock dropped from the walls. The light of the volcano across the valley was suddenly obscured in an immense cloud of black smoke. The twilight within the cave was succeeded by almost impenetrable darkness.

Shrieking in terror, the Drilgoes bolted, while Jim lay straining at his ropes, expecting each moment to be crushed by the masses of rock that were falling all about him.

Suddenly a soft whisper came to Jim through the darkness: "Jim! Are you safe! Where are you? I can't

see you! Speak to me!"

It was Lucille's voice, and Jim called back, husky and tremulous in the sheer joy that had succeeded his anticipation of instant death.

Then he felt the girl kneeling at his side, and heard her hacking at his bonds. A whole minute passed before the stone knife was able to sever the last of the stout withes, however.

Then Jim was swaying on his feet, and Lucille's arms were about him, and for a few moments their fears were forgotten in the renewal of their love.

"I heard what that devil said to you last night," the girl said. "He means to kill you with awful tortures. He is away now, on some task or other, but he'll be back at any moment. We must get away at once—we three. Dad's in another cave not far away, and his guards bolted after the earthquake."

The earth was still rumbling, and the cavern still vibrating, but it was clear that there was no time to

lose. As soon as the quake subsided the Drilgoes would return. Guided by Lucille, Jim groped his way through the cavern. The girl called softly at intervals, and presently Jim heard old Parrish's answering call. Then the old man's form appeared in silhouette against the dark.

"I've got Jim," Lucille whispered. "Are you ready, dad?"

"Yes, yes, I'm ready," chattered the old man. "Now's our chance. I know a place where we can hide in the thick forests, where the Ray of the Atlanteans cannot penetrate the mists. Let's go! Let's go!"

Gripping hands, the three started back toward the point where a faint patch of darkness showed out the entrance to the cavern. They were nearing it when another and more violent shock flung them upon their faces.

Huge masses of rock came hurtling down from the roof and sides of the cavern, and again the three seemed to escape by a miracle.

Suddenly a huge shaft of fire shot from the crater opposite, evolving into an inverted cone that made the whole land dazzlingly bright. It pierced the mists in the valley underneath, and by that light Jim could see a great wave of lava streaming down the mountain sides, like soup spilled out of a bowl.

A gush of black smoke followed, and the light went out.

"Now!" gasped Parrish, and, clinging to one another, the three darted out of the cavern's entrance. Another terrific shock sent them stumbling and reeling and sprawling down the side of the mountain. Jim heard old Parrish wailing, and, as the shock subsided, groped his way to his side.

"You hurt?" he shouted.

"Lucille, Lucille," moaned the old man. "She's dead! A big rock crushed her. I wish I was dead too."

Jim called Lucille's name frantically, and to his immense relief heard her crying faintly out of the

darkness. He rushed to her side and held her in his arms.

"Where are you hit, darling?"

"I'm—all right," she panted. "I was stunned for a moment. I—can—go on now."

But she went limp in Jim's arms, and Jim picked her up and stood irresolute, until he heard Parrish shambling toward him over the heaving ground.

"She's not hurt, I think, only fainted," said Jim. "Which way, Parrish? You lead us."

"Down the slope," panted Parrish. "We'll be in the ferns in a minute. We can hide there for a while, till she's able to walk. God help us all! And I was once Professor of Physical Chemistry at Columbia!"

The outcry might have seemed comical under other circumstances; as it was, Jim heartily re-echoed old Parrish's sentiments in his heart.

The last shock was subsiding in faint earth tremors. The two men plunged down into the heavy fog, which quickly covered them, Jim carrying Lucille in his arms. He felt the ferny undergrowth all about him, the thick boles of tree-ferns emerged out of the mist.

"We can stop here for a while," panted Parrish.

"Crouch down! They'll never find us in this fog, and in a few minutes, when Lucille's better, we can go on."

You must tell me where we are and what our chances are," said Jim, after again ascertaining that Lucille was unharmed.

"I'll tell you, Dent, as quick as I can. It's the place where I've spent five years of hell as the slave of that devil, Tode. I never dreamed, when we were working on the old Atom Smasher, that he had adapted it to travel in the fourth dimension. He's taken us back twelve thousand years or so to the island of Atlantis. History hasn't begun yet. Atlantis is the only civilization in the world. The rest are Drilgoes, Neanderthal men, wandering in the forests, and still in their stone age.

"It's true, Dent, what old Plato learned from the Egyptian priests. Atlantis has been slowly sinking for thousands of years, and all that's left now is the one great island that we're on. Nearly all the Atlanteans, the Cro-Magnon men, have perished, except for a few who have crossed in ships to the coasts of France and Spain. They'll be the founders of modern Europe—Basques and Iberians, and Bretons and Welshmen. Our ancestors! It makes my brain reel to think of it!"

"Go on! Go on!" said Jim.

"There's a great city on the island, known as Atlantis too. As big as London or New York. With flying-machines and temples and art galleries and big ships that they're building to carry them away when the next subsidence comes. They know they're doomed, for every few days there's an eruption now.

"Tode means to make himself master of Atlantis, and transport it into another epoch by means of the Atom Smasher. But he's never managed to enter. He's made himself a god in the eyes of the Drilgoes, the savages who inhabit these forests. He's planning to lead them

against the city, and he's got an army of thousands from all parts of the interior, who worship him as divine.

"The Atlanteans are unwarlike. They've forgotten how to fight in their thousands of years of peace. But they've got a Ray ten times as strong as Tode's, that brings instant death to everything it touches. It shrivels it up. It's a different principle. I don't understand it, but it's this Ray that keeps the Drilgoes from capturing the city.

"Tode's got a laboratory inside the cave, fitted up with apparatus that he brought from Chicago, the world capital of the year 3000 A. D., after disintegrating the atoms and recombining them. But he hasn't succeeded altogether. He hasn't learned everything. The future isn't quite clear, like the past. There's a dark cloud moves across the spectral lines and blurs them. I think it's the element of free will—or God!"

"I know," Jim answered. "He can't hold that boat steady in four-dimensional space, as he pretends he can. If he could, it would mean that man was wholly

master of his destiny. He can't and he never will.

"There's an unknown quantity comes in, Parrish. It is God, and that's what's going to beat him in the end."

"I've not been as idle as Tode thinks," said Parrish, with a senile leer. "I know more about the Atom Smasher than he dreams of. He thinks me just an old fool, the remnants of whose brains are useful to him in his laboratory. That's why he's kept me alive so far. He'll find out his mistake," he chuckled. "I have something Tode doesn't dream of."

Suddenly Parrish's air of intense seriousness vanished. He chuckled and fumbled in his rags. Jim felt a small object like a lever pressed into his hand and then withdrawn.

"It's death, Dent," chuckled old Parrish. "The concentrated essence of the destructive principle. It's a lever I fitted into a concealed groove in the Atom Smasher unknown to Tode. This lever has a universal joint and connects with a hidden chamber, and when pulled will catapult the annihilated components of a

small quantity of uranium in any direction we desire. The release of the slumbering energy of this uranium will produce an explosion of proportions beyond the wildest dreams of engineers—perhaps, one great enough to throw the Earth out of its orbit!"

"Uranium!... Breaking up its components!" gasped Jim. "You mean you can actually do that?"

"Yes!" chuckled Parrish. "I'm keeping it for the day when Tode becomes a god. When he's steadied the boat in time-space and halted the march of the past, and when he's got Lucille—then, Dent, I shall so pull the lever that it will release the energy straight at Tode—and destroy the Atom-Smasher, ourselves, and even, perhaps, the whole Earth!"

And he burst into a peal of such wild laughter that Jim realized the old man's wits were gone.

Was it true, that amazing story? It was difficult to know, and yet anything seemed possible in this amazing world into which Jim had suddenly been thrown.

The vast pall of smoke cast out by the volcano was beginning to subside. Slowly a spectral light began to filter through the valley. Through the fog Jim could see glimpses of the ferny undergrowth, the giant tree-ferns and cycads that towered aloft. It was like a picture of the earth when the mastodons, the grass-eaters and the meat-eaters disputed for its supremacy.

Jim bent over Lucille. He saw her stir, he heard her murmur his name. Suddenly she sat up, fixed her eyes on his, and shuddered.

"I'm all right, Jim. Let's go," she said. "I can walk now."

She staggered to her feet. Jim put out his hand to support her, but she shook her head. Jim touched old Parrish on the arm. He started and uttered a wild screech; then seemed to come to himself and rose.

But that screech of his was re-echoed from the mountainside above. Other voices took up the echoes. Lucille clutched at Jim in a frenzy of fear.

"The Drilgoes!" she whispered. "They're on our trail!"

Seizing old Parrish by the arm, Jim started to drag him into the recesses of the fern forest. Suddenly the bestial face of a Drilgo appeared.

A yell broke from the man's throat. The hairy arm shot back. Jim saw the stone tip of the long spear poised overhead. He leaped forward, delivering a blow in the man's midriff with all the strength of his right arm.

The Drilgo grunted and doubled forward, the spear falling from his hand. The heavy head of stone embedded itself in the soft ground, so that the spear remained upright. As the man collapsed he yelled at the top of his voice.

"This way! This way!" gibbered old Parrish, suddenly alert.

But now the undergrowth all about them was alive with Drilgoes. The three dodged and doubled like hunted hares. High overhead something began to

clack with a sound like that made by a woodpecker drilling a tree, but infinitely louder.

And out of the void above came Tode's voice, shouting commands to the Drilgoes in their own language.

Suddenly a column of fire shot up from the volcano, infusing the white mists with a reddish glare.

Overhead the three could see Tode. He was flying with a pair of mechanical wings strapped to his shoulders, not more than two hundred feet above them. With a shout of triumph he swooped down. In his hand was a small cylinder, about the mouth of which a phosphorescent violet light was beginning to play.

"I've got you, Dent," he screamed in triumph, hovering above the three, while the wings drummed and vibrated till they seemed the mere play of light and shadow about Tode's shoulders. "Halt, or I'll blast your body and soul to hell! Halt, or I'll kill *her*!"

The deadly tube was pointing steadily at Lucille's body as Tode hovered ten feet overhead, perfectly still

save for the whirring wings. The three stopped dead, and Tode, with a shout of triumph, began calling the Drilgoes, who swarmed forward out of the undergrowth.

Huge brown bodies, nude save for their skins of jungle-cat or serpent, they emerged, quickly forming a ring about the three prisoners. Tode fluttered to the ground.

"Fools, did you think you could escape that way?" he asked. "As for you, Dent. I'm going to convince you of the reality of four-dimensional space as you would not be convinced in the old days. Do you know what I'm going to do with you? I'm going to strip the skin from you with the ray, and take you into the anatomical room at Columbia University and leave you there as an exhibit, Dent!"

Tode grinned like a madman. But Jim was looking past him, at something that had suddenly appeared upon the far horizon.

It was a round disc of bluish white, a disc like the

moon, but slightly smaller, a disc that flickered as if it had an eyelid that was being winked repeatedly. Simultaneously screams broke from the throats of all the Drilgoes. They stampeded.

Tode whirled about and saw. With a curse he leaped into the air and whirred away.

Out of that disc a slender, blue-white beam shot suddenly, driving a pathway through the fog, and disclosing the dark depths of the valley.

"The Eye! The Eye!" screeched Parrish. "Down on the ground! Down! Down!"

He dropped, and Jim caught Lucille and flung himself headlong with her. To and fro overhead, but only a few feet above them, moved the searchlight. Shrieks broke from the Drilgoes' throats as they scattered through the jungle.

Everywhere that ray moved, trees and undergrowth simply disappeared. A bunch of Drilgoes, caught by it, were obliterated in an instant. Great gaps were left

through the undergrowth as the ray passed.

It faded as quickly as it had come, and instantly old Parrish was on his feet, dragging at his daughter.

"Now! Now!" he babbled, heading along one of the burned tracks through the undergrowth.

Jim seized Lucille and the two raced in the wake of old Parrish. Behind them they could hear the Drilgoes shouting, but a dense, impenetrable darkness was already beginning to settle down over the valley. They lost the track and went crashing through the ferns, on and on until all was silence about them.

Suddenly Parrish went down like a log. He lay breathing heavily, completely exhausted. When Jim spoke to him a feeble muttering was the only answer. Jim and Lucille dropped to the ground exhausted beside him.

Chapter 5: *The Eye of Atlantis*

For perhaps half an hour the three lay there, hearing

nothing. It seemed to be night, for the darkness was impenetrable, save for the lurid flashes of fire from the volcano. Parrish, who was slowly recovering his strength, was mumbling incessantly. It was with difficulty that Jim recalled him to a realization of his surroundings.

"Where is the city of Atlantis?" he asked him.

"Over there," mumbled Parrish. "Behind the volcano. Why do you ask me?"

"I'm thinking of going there."

"Eh? Going there? You're mad. The Eye will see you, the Eye that can see for a hundred miles. They'll turn the Ray on you. Nothing is too small for the Eye. And they watch night and day."

"The Eye is off now."

"It's never off. The Eye is dark. It grows white only when they are about to use the Ray. Perhaps the Eye is watching us now."

"Nevertheless," said Jim, "I think we would do well to try to enter the city. We can't live here in the jungle at the mercy of these Drilgoes."

"It is impossible to enter. All strangers are killed by the Atlanteans."

"Dad," interposed Lucille, "I think we'd better do what Jim suggests. One of us must decide."

"My idea is that you take us to some place where we can get a view of the city," said Jim. "Then we can make up our minds what to do. We've got to get somewhere out of this jungle."

Parrish rose to his feet, mumbling. "If we go round the base of the volcano we can see Atlantis," he said. "It's always light there. In the daytime they drive away the fogs by some means they've got, and at night they have an artificial sun. But we'll be killed, we'll all be killed."

Mumbling and muttering, he began groping his way through the undergrowth in the direction of the

volcano, whose flashes were again becoming more frequent, affording a means of directing their route. Obscure rumblings were again beginning to shake the earth. For an hour the three picked their way steadily upward through the ferns, until the ground became more open.

They were approaching the base of the volcano, whose side now towered above them, the upper part glassy with vitreous lava.

Suddenly Parrish, who was still leading, stopped and began to tremble with fear. Stepping to his side, Jim heard the low muttering of voices not far away.

Very cautiously he moved forward through the thin fern scrub, until the glow of burning embers caught his sight. He stopped, hearing the voices more distinctly, and again moved forward.

Three Drilgoes, huge, bestial men, and evidently an outpost, were squatting around the ashes, devouring something with noisy gusto.

Softly as Jim had moved, their acute ears had caught the sound of his footsteps. They rose, still holding what they were eating in their hands, and, grasping their stone spears, moved in three separate ways toward the edge of the clearing.

The man nearest Jim uttered a guttural exclamation and, after sniffing a moment, began to lope in his direction. Suddenly he stopped short, petrified with astonishment and fear at the sight of a man who, instinct told him, was neither Atlantean nor of his own kind.

Jim leaped, tackling him about the knees, and brought him heavily to the ground. As the Drilgo fell, the spear clattered from his hand, but from his snakeskin girdle he pulled a long, curved knife of chipped obsidian, sharp as a razor.

Jim grasped the Drilgo's wrist, but in a moment he saw that he was no match for the creature in strength. He drew back his right arm and delivered a punch to the solar plexus with all his strength.

As the Drilgo's hand grew limp he snatched away the knife. There was no helping what he did for the two others were close upon him.

A thrust, a slashing blow, and the Drilgo was weltering in his life-blood. A backward leap, and Jim evaded the flung spear by a hair's breadth.

Knife in hand he leaped forward, and, dodging in beneath the long shaft of the weapon, got in a slash that almost cut the Drilgo's body in two.

The third Drilgo, seeing his two companions in their death-throes, flung away his spear and fled with loud howls into the jungle.

Jim stepped back. Lucille and her father were already almost at his heels. "It's all right," he called. "Come this way!" He led them through the ferny growth in such a manner that they should not see the two dead bodies. Nevertheless, he felt that Lucille knew.

"Let's see what they were cooking," he said.

But again he turned quickly. He could not know for sure what flesh that was, roasting and scorching on the embers, and he had no desire to know. It might have been monkey, but ... he turned away, and as he did so, Parrish picked up several round objects that were lying a little distance away.

"These are good to eat," he said. "A sort of bread-fruit. I've lived on it for five years," he added with a sort of grotesque pathos.

They munched the fruit as they proceeded up the mountain, and found it satisfying. Parrish seemed more himself again, though he still muttered at intervals. Lucille clung closely to Jim as they proceeded.

They were treading on lava now, vitreous, and smooth as glass. It was impossible to proceed further in that direction. They turned their steps around the base in the direction of the sea.

After another hour, during which their way was lit by almost continuous lurid flashes from the crater, a

patch of illumination, apparently out at sea, began to become visible. A half hour more, and they were rounding the volcano's base, and suddenly it burst upon them, a stupendous spectacle that drew an exclamation of amazement from Jim's lips.

That low, flat background was the sea, the sound of whose breakers was faintly audible. Between sea and land ran a narrow, slender causeway, perhaps a mile in length. And beyond that, set on a small island, was the most splendid city that Jim could have imagined.

Like New York—very like New York, with its mighty towers, but more symmetrical, sloping upward from the sea toward a towering rampart at the heart of it, crowned with huge domes and minarets and serpentine ramps and mighty blocks of stone that must have sheltered as many occupants as New York's highest skyscrapers.

The whole was snow-white, and gleamed softly in an artificial light dispensed from an enormous artificial planet that seemed to hover above the ramparts.

"God!" whispered Jim in awe as he gazed at the great city.

"You cannot cross that causeway," whimpered old Parrish. "It's death to try. One sweep of the Ray will blot out every living thing."

"Hush! Listen!" came from Lucille's lips. "Something's moving down there!"

The distant murmur of voices, the indescribable "feel" of the proximity of other human beings told Jim that they were in imminent danger. He glanced about him. A little overhead was an outcrop of enormous boulders, standing up like a little fortress above the smooth lava.

"Get behind there!" Jim whispered.

They turned and ran, slipping and stumbling up the smooth slope. Reaching the boulders, they ensconced themselves hastily behind them. Jim peered out through a crevice between two of the largest stones. The sound of moving things became more audible.

Then, as a flash of flame shot from the crater overhead, Jim saw a black human horde creeping like an array of ants around the base of the mountain not far beneath.

Just like an army of warrior ants it seemed to flow onward, in perfect order. And in the midst of it a faint violet light began to be visible.

Parrish seized Jim's arm, shaking with terror. "You know what that is, Dent?" he whimpered.

"It's Tode's Drilgoes, moving for a night attack upon Atlantis," answered Jim. "And that thing in the middle is the Atom Smasher."

It seemed hours before the last of the serried ranks of Drilgoes had passed. By the light of a lurid flash from the volcano Jim could see the column winding toward the causeway. Then all was shrouded in impenetrable darkness, save for the snow-soft city upon the island.

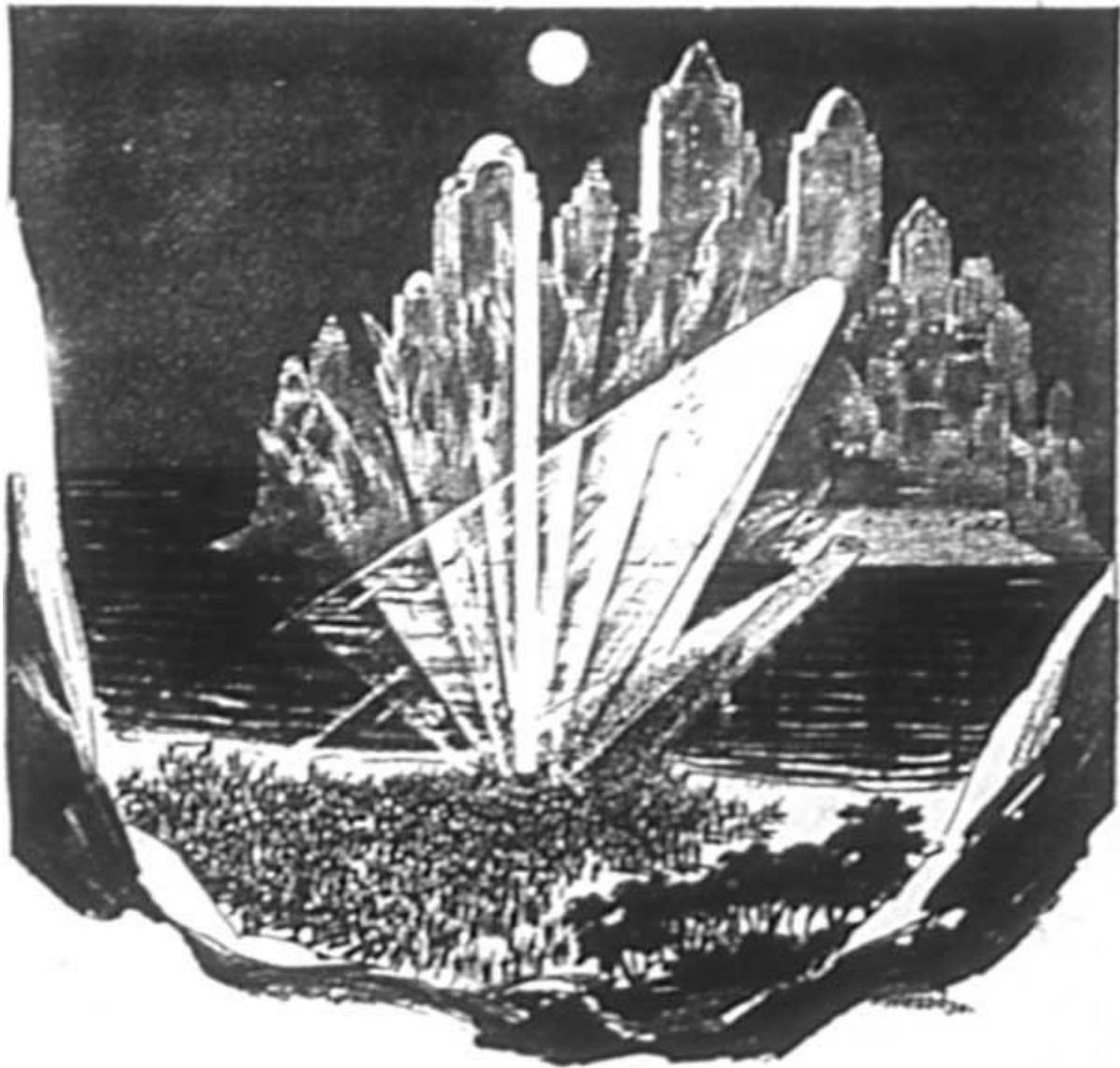
"What are we going to do?" chattered old Parrish. "I wish I was back in Tode's cave. He gave me food and

let me help with his work sometimes. I'll die here.
We'll never get away. We'll never get anywhere."

"We're safer here than anywhere else," answered Jim.
"We'll have to stay till morning, or—God, look at that!"

Out of the ramparts of the city the round, blue-white disc of the Eye had suddenly disclosed itself. And simultaneously a violet flare shot up above the moving hosts of the Drilgoes in the middle of the causeway.

Out of the center of the Eye that blinding searchlight streamed. And the pillar of violet fire rose up to counter it, clove it in two, as a man cuts off the tentacle of a cuttlefish, and left it groping helplessly above the heads of the Drilgoes.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing the city of Atlantis in the distance, bright against the dark night sky, with the wide beam of the Eye of Atlantis shooting out over a bridge of land, hitting the ray of light shooting up out of the Atom-Smasher, while a crowd of people surrounds it. Image description end.]

To and fro wavered the blue-white beam, and like a protective wall the violet column spread and extended, till the air was interlaced with the play of the two colors. Streaks of white shot through streaks of purple and black neutral clouds twirled, swirling in ghostlike forms. It was a scene inconceivably beautiful, and it was impossible to realize what must be happening out there.

Men must be dying, withering like stubble in the blue-white flames, whenever they caught them. And yet, under that play of colors, Jim could see the vast host crawling forward to the assault.

He held his breath. It was sublime and terrible, and on the result of that conflict depended—what? What difference, when all this was forgotten history, antedating the written records of the human race?



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing Dent, Lucille, and her father standing behind rocks, watching a bright light. Image description end.]

Then of a sudden the blue-white rays were seen to win. They were beating down the violet light. Like living fingers they pierced that protective wall, flinging it back, until only the tall central pillar remained. And then for the first time the sound of combat became audible.

A groan of despair, of defeat, of hopelessness. The black stream was recoiling, turning upon itself. In the vivid glare of the white light it could be seen dissolving, breaking into a thousand pieces, streaming back toward the land. And, as it broke, the blue-white light pursued, eating its way and blasting all it met. Atlantis had triumphed.

Another sound was audible. From the city it came, a whirring as of innumerable grasshoppers, increasing till it sounded once more like the tapping of innumerable woodpeckers. Suddenly the night broke into whirling balls of fire.

Lucille cried out. Jim leaped to his feet to see more clearly.

"It's men with wings," he cried. "Scores of them. They're hurling something at the Drilgoes!"

The clacking of the wing mechanism filled the air. Now the fugitives from the Drilgo host were streaming along the base of the mountain underneath, seeking the safety of the jungles, and

over them, riding them, harrying them, flew the Atlantean birdmen, hurling their fiery balls. And where the balls fell, conflagrations of cold fire seemed to start and run like mercury, and shrivel up everything they touched.

But the birdmen were not without casualties of their own. Here and there one could be seen to drop, and then the massed Drilgoes would turn savagely upon him with their stone-pointed spears. The fight was coming very close now. The savage cries of the Drilgoes filled the night.

A ball of fire broke hardly fifty yards away from where the three were crouching. A birdman fluttered down like a wounded hawk and lay a-sprawl just underneath the rampart of boulders. Jim surmounted them, ran down the slope of the mountainside, and bent over the dying man. He was hideously wounded by the thrust of a Drilgo spear—whether because the mechanism had failed, or because he had swooped too low, Jim could not determine. As Jim bent over him he looked up at him.

A youth in his teens, with the face and build of a Greek warrior, a worthy ancestor of European man. Jim looked at him and shuddered. "My grandfather four hundred generations removed," he thought.

Seeing that this was no Drilgo, with eyes widened by the anticipation of death, the Atlantean smiled, and died.

Jim detached the straps that held the wings to his shoulders and examined them. They were multi-hinged, built of innumerable layers of laminated wood, which seemed to have been subjected to some special treatment. In the base of each, just where it fitted to the curve of the shoulder-blade, a tiny light was burning.

Jim looped the straps about his arms and walked back to the rampart. Old Parrish saw him and screamed. Lucille cried out.

"I'm going to try to get the Atom Smasher," said Jim, pointing to the thin spire of violet flame that was still visible in the center of the causeway. "It's our only

chance. You must stay here. If I live, I'll return. If I don't return—"

But he knew that he must return. Nothing could kill him, because Lucille would be waiting for him behind that rampart of stones upon the bare, vitreous mountainside.

"I'm going to get the Atom Smasher," Jim repeated. "In these wings I'll be taken for Atlantean. I'll—bring it back." He spoke with faltering conviction. And yet there was nothing else to do. Everything depended upon his being able to bring back the Atom Smasher and take Lucille and her father away.

"I think you're right, Jim," answered Lucille. "We'll—wait here till you—come—back."

Her voice died away in a sob. Jim bent and kissed her. Then he began examining the mechanism of the wings. It did not appear difficult. A leather strap fastened around the body. Through this strap ran cords operated by levers upon the breast, and there was a knob in a groove that looked as if it controlled

the starting of the mechanism.

"I'll be back," said Jim.

And suddenly the Eye appeared again, and with it there sounded once more the whir of wings.

"Down!" shouted Jim.

He was too late. A score of birdmen shot out of the dark and hovered over them. Next moment they had descended to the ground. Lucille and Parrish were seized, and Jim, struggling furiously, quickly found himself equally helpless in their grasp.

The accents of the Atlanteans as they spoke to one another were soft and liquid, their faces were refined and gentle, but their strength was that of athletes. Jim saw Lucille and Parrish lifted into the air; next moment he himself was raised in the arms of one of the birdmen, who shot upward like an arrow and headed a course back toward the city, carrying Jim as if he had been as light as a child.

Chapter 6: *Human Sacrifice*

In a great open space, flanked by temples and colonnades, the flight had come to rest. There, under the soft artificial light that made the whole city as bright as day, Jim, Lucille, and her father were set down before a sort of rostrum, on which were gathered the dignitaries of the city.

Jim's hopes were rising fast, for between the Atlanteans and the savage Drilgoes there was as much difference as between a modern American and a blackfellow from the Australian bush. These men were civilized to a degree that even modern America has not attained.

Nowhere was there a speck of dirt to be seen. Vehicles moved soundlessly along the wide streets on either side of this central meeting-place, and the whole city was roofed with glass, through which could be seen the brilliant moon and stars—invisible from the mist-filled valley without.

Soft garments of white wool clothed men and women

alike, fashioned something like togas, but cut short at the knee, leaving the lower part of the leg bare and disclosing the sandaled feet. The hair was long and flowed about the shoulders. But what struck Jim most forcibly was the look of utter gentleness and benignity upon these faces.

"I guess we've fallen into pretty good hands after all," he whispered to Parrish.

But one of the dignitaries upon the platform, an elderly man with a face reminiscent of William Jennings Bryan in his inspired moments, was leaning forward out of his curved chair and addressing the old man, and, to Jim's astonishment, Parrish was answering.

But these were not the liquid accents of the Atlanteans. The words resembled the barking of a dog, and across Jim's brain there suddenly flashed the explanation. The dignitary was speaking in the tongue of the Drilgoes, which Parrish, of course, would have learned in his five years of captivity.

Suddenly Parrish turned to Jim. "He wants to know where we come from," he said. "I've told him from a far country. He thinks we're ambassadors from some of the parts of Europe that the Atlanteans who sailed away some years ago landed at. It's no use trying to explain—they don't seem to have succeeded in inventing an Atom Smasher for themselves."

Jim nodded, and the colloquy went on and on, while the Atlanteans listened with languid interest, their kind and smiling faces seeming to exude benignity. At length the session seemed to have ended.

Parrish wore a wide grin. "Everything's coming right, dear," he told Lucille. "The old chap says we are to be the guests of the city either for a night or for a week. It's something to do with the moon, and there seems to be a full moon to-night. Some quaint superstition or other. And then I guess we'll have a chance to get away in the Atom Smasher. I've learned something of the mechanism, and it won't be hard to operate it. We've fallen into good hands."

A squad of four soldiers or policemen, with shorter

robes and what looked like truncheons in their hands, made signs to the three to accompany them. Amid mutual bows, the city's guests filled into a small court-way, closed at the further end, on which a number of Atlanteans were standing.

While Jim was wondering what the next move was to be, to his astonishment the whole courtyard began to rise slowly up the walls of the tall buildings on either side.

"An elevator!" gasped Lucille. "Now I do feel that everything is coming out all right, Jim, dear."

Jim did not question the psychology of this. He pressed her hand tenderly. Already Tode and the past were becoming a bad dream.

"Did you say anything about the Atom Smasher, Parrish?" he asked.

"No, I thought it better not to," replied the old scientist. "You see, they know it only as a force that neutralizes the blue-white ray. Best not to let them

know we're sailing for home in it."

"I think that was wise," answered Jim, and just then the rising court-way came to a stop level with the top story of the great building at one side.

Smiling courteously, the guards invited the three to precede them inside an enormous hall, supported on pillars of gleaming stone resembling alabaster. In the center was a small, low table, triangular in shape, with three of the low, curved chairs. The guards invited the three to be seated.

Almost immediately smiling servitors brought in fruits on platters of porcelain, dishes of cooked vegetables, somewhat like the modern ones, but seasoned and flavored with delicious herbs. The staple dish was something like an oval banana, but infinitely more succulent. The three fell to and made a hearty meal, which was washed down with fine wines.

"We've certainly fallen into good hands," said Jim. "All we've got to do is to lie low, and look pleasant, and it won't be long before we get an opportunity to get

hold of the Atom Smasher."

The guards, seeing that they had finished their meal, smilingly invited them to accompany them through a huge bronze door at one end of the hall. It swung back, disclosing complete darkness.

Jim felt Lucille's hand upon his arm. The girl was hesitating, and for a moment Jim hesitated too, half afraid of a fall into emptiness. Then he heard the footsteps of the guards ahead, and went on.

It was eery, moving there with the sound of feet in front of them, and, apart from that, utter silence. Then Lucille uttered a little cry.

"Jim, do you feel something pushing you?" she asked.

"There is something—" Jim swung around, but some invisible force continued to propel him forward. He moved sidewise, and the force gently corrected him. The sound of footsteps had ceased.

"What is it, Jim?" cried the girl. "Help me!"

Something's got hold of me!"

Old Parrish was struggling close beside them. Jim panted as he wrestled with the force, but his efforts were absolutely futile. Slowly, as if slid on wires, he was propelled forward, until a cushion of air seemed to block his further progress.

Dark as it was, and silent, Jim had the consciousness of other human beings about him, of a vast, unseen multitude that was watching him.

Suddenly the droning of a chant began to fill the place, as if a priest were intoning hymns. As that chant rose and fell, voices all about took up the echoing refrain. Jim tried to reach Lucille, but he could move his arm only a few inches against that resilient force pressing in on all sides of him.

Then, in an instant, a blinding, stabbing light shot through his eyeballs. He heard Lucille scream, old Parrish yelp, and, with eyelids screwed tight against the intolerable glare, fought once more desperately and ineffectively to reach Lucille's side.

Slowly Jim managed to unscrew his eyes. He began to realize that he was standing in what appeared to be an enormous amphitheatre. But high up, upon a narrow tongue of flooring that ran like a bridge from one end to the other, with Lucille on his right and Parrish on his left. Nothing visible seemed to be restraining them, and yet they were as securely held as if fastened with tight chains.

Jim's brain reeled as he looked down. Imagine a bridge about half-way up an amphitheatre of a hundred stories, the ground beneath packed with human beings no larger than ants, the whole of the vast interior lined with them, tier above tier, faces and forms increasing from pismire size below to the dimensions of the human form upon a level, and, again, fading almost to pin-points at the summit of the vast building, where the soft glow of the artificial light filtered through the glass of the roof.

He clutched at the air, felt the soft pressure of the force that was restraining him, looked at Lucille, and saw her half-unconscious with fear, leaning against it, leaning against that soft, resilient, cushionlike,

invisible substance; looked at Parrish, whom the shock had thrown into a sort of semi-catalepsy—Parrish, mouthing and staring!

He looked forward to where the tongue of flooring ended. Here, upon a stage, flanked with huge carved figures, a group was gathered. At first he was unable to discern what was being enacted there, so brilliant was the light that glared overhead.

It was the Eye, a round disc perhaps ten feet in diameter, that all-seeing Eye of Atlantis that guarded the great city, but how it worked Jim was totally unable to discover. He saw, however, that it was blinking rapidly, the alternations being so swift that it was only just possible to be conscious of them. Perhaps the Eye was opening and closing ten times a second.

Jim strained his eyes to see what was taking place on the stage at the end of the tongue on which he stood. What was it? What were they doing there? And was that the captured Atom Smasher standing between what looked like grinning idols? A group of captured

Drilgoes near it?

A shrill scream from Lucille echoed through the vast amphitheatre. Her eye had seen what Jim's had not yet seen—something that had shocked her into complete unconsciousness.

A marble figure, she stood leaning against the invisible force that kept her on her feet, and in those open, staring eyes was a look of ineffable horror.

Jim could see clearly now, for the light from the Eye was slowly diminishing in brilliancy, or else his own eyes were growing more accustomed to it. Those carved figures, forming a semi-circle upon the platform were figures of gods, squat, huge forms seeming to emerge out of the blocks of rock from which they had been fashioned.

Hideous, gruesome carvings they were, resembling some futuristic sculpture of to-day, for the artist who had fashioned them had given hardly more than a hint of the finished representation. It was rather as if the masses of rock that had been transported there had

become vitalized, foreshadowing the dim yet awful beings that were some day to emerge from them.

Only the arms were clearly sculptured, and each of the half-dozen figures squatting upon its haunches in that semi-circle had four of them. Arms that protruded so as to form an interlacing network, and the fingers were long claws fashioned of some metal. Over the arms the shapeless heads beat down with a leering look, and from each mouth protruded a curved tongue.

A masterpiece of horror, that group, like the great stone figures of the Aztecs, or some of the hideous Indian gods. Seen under the glare of the Eye, they formed a background of horrible omen. In a flash it dawned upon Jim that these hideous figures might be gods of bloody sacrifice.

"That's why these people seem so gentle," he heard himself saying. "It's the—the contrast."

He pulled himself together. Again he tried to move towards Lucille, and again that invisible force

restrained him.

Yes, it was the captured Atom Smasher upon the platform, and those forms grouped in front of the dignitaries were captured Drilgoes, a dozen or so of them. And the concealed priest was droning a chant again. Every other sound was hushed, but from each square foot of the great amphitheatre a pair of eyes was watching.

A myriad of eyes turned upon the platform! What was going to happen next?

Suddenly the priest's voice died away, and simultaneously the three dignitaries, who seemed to be officiating priests, from their solemn gestures, stepped backward, passing beneath the protruding arms of the idols. There sounded the deep whir of some mechanism somewhere, and the same invisible force that had Jim and his two companions in its control suddenly began to agitate the captive Drilgoes.

It was shuffling them! It was forcing them into line,

pushing here and pulling there, in spite of the Drilgoes' terrified struggles. They writhed and twisted, groaning and clicking in abject terror as they wrestled with that unseen power, and all in vain. Slowly the foremost of the Drilgoes was propelled forward, inch by inch, until he stood immediately beneath the interlacing arms.

And what happened next filled Jim with sick horror and loathing. For of a sudden the arms began to move, the iron claws cut through the air—a shriek of terror and anguish broke from the Drilgo's mouth ... and he was no longer a man, but a clawed and pulped mass of human flesh!

"Aiah! Aiah! Aiah!" broke from the throats of the assembled multitude.

The weaving arms had stopped. From behind them an attendant was gathering up what had been the Drilgo in a basket. Then the mechanism had begun again, and again that shrill cry of the spectators was ringing in Jim's ears.

Louder still rose the shriek of old Parrish as he understood. Jim put forth all his strength in a mad effort to break free. A child would have had more chance in the grip of a giant. And each time the arms of the gods revolved, the unseen force pushed Jim, Lucille, and Parrish nearer the platform.

Now Jim understood. This horrible sacrifice was a part of the religion of the Atlanteans, and he, Lucille, and Parrish, were being reserved for the final spectacle.

And at the sight of Lucille beside him, stonily unconscious, and yet standing, and moving like a mechanical doll, in little forward jerks—at the sight of the girl, hardly six feet distant, and yet utterly beyond the touch of his finger-tips, Jim went mad. He would not shout; he closed his lips in pride of race, pride of that civilization that he had left twelve thousand years ahead of him. Not like the shrieking Drilgoes on the platform, howling as each of them in turn was forced into that maze of revolving knives. But he fought as a madman fights. He hammered at the resilient air, while the sweat ran down his face, he braced his feet

upon the wooden tongue, and sought to stay his forward progress. And all the while that infernal force moved him steadily onward.

He was on the platform now. He was traveling the same route that the Drilgoes had taken. The unseen force was shuffling him, Lucille, and Parrish, pushing and pulling them. And, despite Jim's efforts, it was Lucille who was first of the three ... and Jim second ... and old Parrish third....

Jim heard Parrish's hoarse whisper behind him, "Death! Death! The uranium!" He was fumbling at his breast, but the significance of the words and gestures escaped him. He was staring ahead. Only three living Drilgoes of the whole number of prisoners remained alive, and suddenly it was borne in upon Jim that he knew the last of the three.

It was the Drilgo, Cain, who had been their companion in the Atom Smasher—there, not a dozen feet distant. Cain, his bestial face, with the ridged eyebrows and great jaws convulsed with terror and dripping sweat. Cain, immediately in front of Lucille.

"God, let her not wake! Let her never know!" Jim breathed. The agony would be but momentary. And there was nothing a man could not endure if he must. He could even endure to see Lucille become—what the Drilgoes had become. It would soon be over now.

The Eye was blinking overhead. The hideous stone faces of the Atlantean gods looked down in leering mockery. Another of the Drilgoes had gone the same route as the others. Cain was the second now, Lucille the third victim, and he, Jim, would be the fourth.

Gritting his teeth, Jim saw the next Drilgo propelled forward into the whirling knives. He saw the man fling up his arms, as if to shield his head—and then he was a man no longer, and the horrible knives revolved, and "Aiah! Aiah! Aiah!" cried the multitude.

Once more the mechanism whirred.... Once more the arms revolved. A howl of terror broke from Cain's lips as he was propelled onward....

Then suddenly the whirring stopped. The arms of the stone gods, with their hooked, razorlike claws, to

which clung particles of flesh, were arrested in mid-air. Cain, unharmed, was leaning backward, his features set in a mask of awful fear.

Simultaneously Jim knew that the force which had held him in thrall was gone. He flung his arms out. He was free. He grasped Lucille, held her tightly against his breast, stood there drawing great, labored breaths, waiting—for what?

A film was creeping over his eyes, but he was aware that the Eye had suddenly gone out. And out of the dark the priest was chanting.

Then came a deep-drawn sigh from the spectators, followed by a ringing shout. In place of the Eye the full moon appeared, sailing overhead. And, holding off that deathly weakness, Jim understood. The sacrifice had ended; a new month had begun....

Chapter 7: *Back to Long Island*

Jim, seated beside Lucille, was listening to Cain's gruntings and chucklings as he expounded the

situation to old Parrish.

It was the day following the scene in the amphitheatre. The four had been escorted back along the tongue of flooring into a hall with walls of fretted stone and sumptuous colorings. The floor was strewn with rich rugs woven of some vegetable fibre. There were divans and low chairs. At brief intervals, servitors, always smiling, passed carrying trays with wines and foods. And in the corridors were always glimpses of the guards.

"It was the rising of the full moon saved our lives, Dent," Parrish explained. "It appears they have this sacrifice at each of the moon's phases. The victims, captives or criminals, are eaten by the priests. We've got a week's respite, Dent, and then—God help us."

Jim's arm tightened about Lucille, but the girl turned and smiled into his face. There was no longer any fear there. And Jim swore to himself that he would yet find some way of outwitting their devilish captors.

"What the devil are we supposed to be, criminals or

what?" he asked her father. "Why do they smile at us all the time in that confounded way?"

Parrish questioned the Drilgo, but apparently he was unable to explain himself to him. "Maybe they think it an honor for us, Dent," he answered, "or maybe it's their idea of etiquette. Anyway, we four are to head the list when the moon's at the three-quarters. God, if only we could reach the Atom Smasher, I'm certain I could find out how it works!"

Jim had tried more than once to reach it. Through the colonnades at the end of the hall he could see the mechanism standing on the platform, always being inspected by half a dozen or so of the dignitaries of Atlantis. But all his attempts to cross that tongue of flooring had been vetoed by the guards.

They had presented their hands to him, palms outward, and on the palms were fine steel points, about two inches long, set into leather gauntlets. It had been impossible to try conclusions with them.

Two days went by. Once a group of dignitaries had

entered the hall and, with smiles and profuse bows, inspected the prisoners. Then they had departed. And Jim had paced the floor, to and fro, thinking desperately.

There was no sort of weapon with which to hazard an attack. Jim knew that they were under the closest observation. He could only wait and hope. And if all else failed, he meant to hurl himself, with Lucille in his arms, off the tongue of floor into the depths below when their time came.

On the third morning, after a troubled sleep induced by very weariness, Jim was awakened by one of the guards, and started up to see one of the bowing dignitaries before him, and Parrish and Lucille sitting up among their rugs.

Bowing repeatedly, the smiling old man addressed some words to Jim, and then turned to Parrish.

"He says he wants you to show him the way the Atom Smasher works," said Parrish. "Now's our chance, Dent. He thinks it's simply an apparatus for

neutralizing the blue-white ray. Don't let him guess—"

"I won't let him guess," Jim answered. "Tell him we'll go and show him—"

"I've told him, and he says only you are to go. He's suspicious. Say something quickly, Dent."

"Tell him," said Jim, "that I must have my two assistants and the lady. Tell him I may also need the help of some of his people. It requires many men to operate the machine."

Parrish translated, speaking in the Drilgo tongue, which was their only means of communication. The Atlantean considered. Then he spoke again.

"He says that we three men may go, but Lucille must be left behind," groaned Parrish.

"The answer is no," said Jim.

The old dignitary, who seemed somewhat crestfallen, departed with an expressive gesture. Jim and Parrish

looked at each other.

"That's our end," groaned Parrish.

"No, he'll bite," answered Jim, with the first grin that had appeared on his countenance since their arrival.

"Let's make our plans quickly. We must contrive to get Lucille inside the machine, under the pretense of assisting with the mechanism. And Cain, of course," he added, glancing at the goggly-eyed Drilgo. "You do your best to locate the starting mechanism, Parrish, and signal me the moment you're ready. We'll both leap in, and the four of us will sail—God, I don't care where we sail to, so long as we get away from here! Into eternity, if need be. But I hope it's Long Island!"

Back came the dignitary with two of the guards. Smiling at Jim, he indicated by signs that the three others might accompany him. The Atlanteans had bitten, as Jim had forecast.

The four proceeded along the hall and over the tongue of flooring. This time the force that had previously controlled their movements was not in

action. At the farther end of the bridge they saw the group of dignitaries gathered about the Atom Smasher, examining it curiously. Over their heads the hooked arms of the hideous gods were raised. The Eye was darkened, as if with a curtain, and through the glass roof, high overhead, the sunlight streamed down upon the empty amphitheatre.

In spite of their smiles, the dignitaries of Atlantis were very much on the alert, as their tense attitudes denoted. Two more guards had appeared, and Jim saw that they were uncovering some apparatus at the base of the Eye. They were swinging a camera-like object toward him, its lens focused upon the Atom Smasher. It was not difficult to understand what was in the minds of the Atlanteans. The dignitaries were uneasy and mistrustful, and at the first suspicion of treachery they meant to loose the blue-white Ray contained in the apparatus, and blow the Atom Smasher and the group about it to destruction.

Jim intercepted a sign from Parrish, indicating that he was to make pretense of assisting him. He bent over the machine, Lucille beside him. Parrish was busily

examining the wheels and levers. He was adjusting the thumbscrews, moving the needles along the dials.

One of the Atlanteans spoke, and Cain translated into "Drilgo" for Parrish's benefit. Parrish answered. Then, without raising his head, the old man said quietly, "I've located the starting lever, Dent. You and Lucille get inside quickly and pretend you're doing something to the machinery."

They stepped over the bow of the boat and stood beside Parrish, who continued examining the wheels. "We mustn't forget Cain," whispered the girl to her father. "Oh, I hope he understands!"

But there was no direct evidence that Cain did understand, and Parrish dared not warn him in "Drilgo," for fear one of the Atlanteans might understand the language. Cain was standing close beside the boat. But he was not in the boat.

Again one of the Atlanteans shot a question at Parrish. Parrish beckoned to Cain, and awaited the translation. He answered.

Each moment was growing tenser. It was impossible that the Atlanteans could fail to understand what was being planned. The only saving chance was that they did not realize the possibilities of escape that the vessel offered. A full minute went by.

Suddenly Parrish raised his head. "I've got it fixed, I think, Dent," he said. "I'm going to count. When I reach 'three,' seize Cain and pull him aboard."

Jim nodded. The uneasiness was increasing. The guards at the camera-like object were each holding some sort of mechanical accessory in their hands. It looked like a small sphere of glass, and it connected with the apparatus by means of a hollow tube of fibre. Jim guessed that in an instant the Ray could be made to dart out of the lens. It would be quick work—as nearly as possible instantaneous work.

"Ready, Dent?" asked Parrish in an even voice. In this crisis the old man had become astonishingly calm. He seemed the calmest of the lot. "One!"

Jim beckoned to Cain, who came toward him, his eyes

goggling in inquiry.

"Two!"

Jim reached out and took Cain by the arm. There was a sharp question from the Atlantean who had spoken before.

"Three!"

With all his force Jim yanked Cain over the edge of the boat. The Drilgo stumbled and fell headlong with a howl of terror. But headlong—inside.

What happened was practically instantaneous. A sudden whir of the mechanism, a violet glow from the funnel, the smell of chlorine—a flash of blinding blue-white light. The Atlantean guards had fired—a quarter-second too late!

The thump, thump of the electrical discharge died away. The four were in the boat, whirling away through space. Cain was rising to his knees, a woe-begone expression on his face. And there was a clean

cut, with charred, black edges along one side of the boat, showing how near the Atlanteans had come to success.

The relief, after the hideous suspense of the past days, was almost too much for the three white people. "We're free, we're going back home!" cried Jim exultantly, as he caught Lucille in his arms. And she surrendered her lips to his, while the tears streamed down her cheeks. Old Parrish, at the instrument board, looked up, smiling and chuckling. Even Cain, understanding that they were not to be hacked to bits with knives, gurgled and grinned all over his black face.

"How long will it take us to get back?" Jim asked Parrish after a while.

"I—I'm not quite sure, my boy," the old man replied. "You see—I haven't quite familiarized myself with the machine as yet."

"But we'll get back all right?" asked Jim.

"Well, we—we're headed in the right direction," answered Parrish. "You see, my boy, it's rather an intricate table of logarithmic calculations that that scoundrel has pasted on this board. The great danger appears to be that of coming within the orbit of the giant planet Jupiter. Of course, I'm trying to keep within the orbit of the Earth, but there is a danger of being deflected onto Pallas, Ceres, or one of the smaller asteroids, and finding ourselves upon a rock in space."

Jim and Lucille looked at Parrish in consternation. "But you don't have to leave the Earth, do you?" Jim asked.

"Unfortunately, it's pretty hard sticking to the Earth, my lad," said Parrish. "You see, Earth has moved a good many million miles through space since the time of Atlantis."

But both Jim and Lucille noticed that Parrish was already speaking of Atlantis as if it was in the past. They drew a hopeful augury from that. And then there was nothing to do but resign themselves to that

universal greyness—and to hope.

They noticed that Cain seemed to be watching Parrish's movements with unusual interest. The Neanderthal man seemed fascinated by the play of the dials, the whir of the wheels and gyroscopes.

"Are you setting a course, dad?" asked Lucille presently. "I mean, do you know just where we are?"

"To tell you the truth, my dear," answered her father, "I don't. I'm relying on some markings that Tode made on the chart—certain combinations of figures. God only knows where they'll take us to. But I'm hoping that by following them we shall find ourselves back on Long Island in the year 1930.

"No, that rascal could hardly have written down those figures to no purpose. They seem to me to comprise a course, both going and returning. But the calculations are very intricate, especially in the *time* dimension. I've nearly reached the last row now. Then, we shall have arrived, or—we sha'n't."

Jim and Lucille sat down again. There was nothing that they could do. But somehow their hopes of reaching Long Island in the year of grace 1930 had grown exceedingly slim. Everything depended upon whether or not Tode had meant those figures to represent the course back to the starting point or not.

A desperate hope—that was all that remained to them. They watched Parrish as his eyes wandered along the rows of figures, while his fingers moved the micrometer screws. And then he looked up.

"We're reaching the end of our course," he said.

"We're going to land somewhere. God knows where it will be. We must hope—that's all that's left us."

His hands dropped from the dials. He pressed a lever. The blur of nights and days began to slow. A column of vivid violet light shot from the funnel.

"Grip tight!" shouted Parrish.

Thump, thump! The Atom Smasher was vibrating violently. A jar threw Jim against Lucille. It was

coming to a standstill. Trees appeared. Jim uttered a shout. He stepped across to Parrish and wrung his hand. He put his arms about Lucille and kissed her.

They were back at the Vanishing Place, and all their sufferings seemed to be of the past....

Chapter 8: *A Fruitless Journey*

"Why don't you stop the boat, Parrish?"

"I'm trying to, lad!"

The Atom Smasher was still vibrating, even more violently than before. A column of violet light was pouring from her funnel. The pool, the mud, the walls of heaped up water were discernible, but all quivering and reproduced, line after line, to infinity. It was like looking into the rear-view mirror of a car that is vibrating rapidly. It was like one of those Cubist paintings of a woman descending the stairs, where one had to puzzle out which is the woman and which is the stairs.

A dreadful thought shot through Jim's mind. He remembered what he had said to Tode: "You can't hold the boat still in four-dimensional space."

This was not quite the same. By stopping the infernal mechanism, one re-entered three-dimensional space, and landed. Certainly the Atom Smasher could land. They were not like the motorcyclist who got on a machine for the first time, and rode to the admiration of all who saw him, except that he couldn't find out how to stop.

Yet there was Parrish still fumbling with the controls, and the boat was still vibrating at a terrific rate of speed. It is impossible to dream of leaping out, for there was no solidity, no continuity in the scenery outside.

It was not like attempting to leap from a moving train, for instance. In that case one knows that there is solid earth beneath, however hard one lands. Here everything was distorted, a sort of mirror reflection. And Jim noticed a strange thing that had never occurred to him before. Everything was reversed, as

in a mirror picture. That clump of trees, for instance, which should have been on the right, was on the left.

Parrish looked up. "There's some means of stopping her, of course," he said. "There must be a lever—but I don't know where to look for it in all this mess." He pointed to the revolving wheels. No, it might be a matter of days of experimenting in order to discover the elusive switch.

"It may be a combination of switches," said Parrish. "I don't know what we're going to do."

"Suppose I jumped and chanced it," Jim suggested.

Lucille caught his arm with a little cry. Parrish shook his head.

"That devil—Listen: there was a Drilgo he disliked. He threw him out of the boat just before she landed at the cave. Everything was in plain sight, plainer than things are here. But he was never seen again. For God's sake, lad, sit still. I'll try—"

Hours later Parrish was still trying. And gradually Jim and Lucille had ceased to hope.

Side by side they had sat, watching that glimmering scene about them. Sometimes everything receded into a blur, across which sunlight and shadow, and then moonlight raced, at others the surroundings were so clear that it almost seemed as if, by steadying the boat, they could leap ashore. And once there happened something that sent a thrill of cold fear through both of them.

For where the pool had been there appeared suddenly a hut—and Tode, standing in the doorway, looking about him, a malicious sneer curving his lips.

Jim leaped to his feet, and old Parrish, who had seen Tode too, sprang up in wild excitement.

"Sit down, lad," he shouted. "It's nothing. I—I turned the micrometer screw a trifle hard. I got us back to five years ago, when we were living here with Tode. That's just a picture—out of the past, Jim!"

Jim understood, but he sank down again with cold sweat bathing his forehead. The terrific powers of the Atom Smasher were unveiling themselves more and more each moment. Jim felt Lucille's hand on his arm. He looked into her face.

"Jim, darling, what's going to happen to us if dad can't find how to work the machine?"

"I don't know, dear. I've thought that we might all jump out and chance it. If we held each other tight, we'd probably land in the same place—"

Old Parrish stood up. "I can't work it, Jim," he said. "Tode's got us beat. There's only one thing for us to do. You can guess what it is."

"I think I can," said Jim, glancing askance at Lucille. Yes, he knew, but he lacked the heart to tell her. "If we were all to jump out, tied together—don't you think we might land—somewhere near where we want to land?" he asked.

"Jim, do you realize what each vibration of this boat

means?" asked Parrish. "There's a table on the instrument-board. It's a wave length of four thousand miles in space and nineteen years in time."

"You mean we're moving to London or San Francisco and back—"

"Further than that, every infinite fraction of a second," answered Parrish. "No, Jim, we—we wouldn't land. So we must just go back to where we came from, and—"

He had been speaking in a low voice, calculated not to reach Lucille's ears. The girl had been leaning back, her eyes closed, as if half asleep. Now she rose and stepped up to her father and lover. "You can tell me the truth," she said. "I'm not afraid."

"We've got to go back, Lucille," answered her father. "It's our only chance. By following the course in reverse we can expect to make Atlantis again—"

"Back to that horrible place?"

"No, my dear. The chart will lead us, obviously, back to the cave where Tode has his headquarters. We must try to surprise him, and force him to bring us back to Long Island."

"And then?" asked Lucille.

Parrish shrugged his shoulders. "We'll face that problem when we come to it," he answered.

"But how do you expect to be able to land at the other end any more than this?" asked Jim. "Suppose the machine continues to vibrate instead of coming to a standstill?"

"I think," said Parrish, "that we'll be able to strike a bargain with Tode. Obviously he will be willing to bring the machine to a standstill in order to parley with us. We'll make terms—the best we can. After all, he can't afford to remain marooned on the isle of Atlantis without the Atom Smasher."

"I hate the idea of bargaining with that wretch," said Lucille.

"So do we all, dear," answered Jim. "But there's nothing else that we can do. It's just a matter of give and take. And I'd be glad to consent to any terms that would bring us three safe back to earth, with all this business behind us."

"I'll start back, then," said Parrish, turning back to the instrument board.

And, to the familiar thump, thump of the electrical discharge, the Atom Smasher took up its backward journey once more.

A long time passed. With her head resting against Jim's breast, Lucille rested. Jim bent over her, trying to discover whether she was asleep or not. Her eyes were closed, her breathing so soft that she hardly seemed alive. An infinite pity for the girl filled Jim's heart, and, mingled with it, the intense determination to overcome the madman who had subjected her to these perils. He glanced across at Parrish, fingering his screws. Old Parrish looked up and nodded. There was a new determination in the old man's face that made him a different person from the crazed old man

whom Jim had encountered at the Vanishing Place.

"We can beat him, Parrish!" Jim called, and Parrish looked back and nodded again. "We're nearly back to the top of the column," he answered.

Not long afterward Parrish looked up once more.

"Stand by, Jim!" he called. "And be ready. Tode will be aware of our approach by means of the sensitive instruments he keeps in his laboratory. But don't harm him. We want him aboard, and we want him badly. He won't be able to play any more tricks with us. I've learned too much about the Atom Smasher."

He pressed a lever, and the greyness dissolved into its component parts of light and darkness. A jar. Thump, thump! The violet light! Lucille looked up, raised herself, uttered a low cry and caught at Jim's arm, trembling.

They had run their course truly. The Atom Smasher was vibrating outside the entrance to Tode's cave. And that was Tode, standing there, watching them, that devilish grin of his accentuated to the utmost. A

blurred figure that appeared and vanished, and a surrounding crowd of Drilgoes—how many it was impossible to guess, for they looked like a crowd of apes in motion.

Suddenly Tode disappeared, and a moment later Lucille uttered a terrified cry as his voice spoke in her ear:

"I thought you'd be back. I knew you'd got away from Atlantis when my recorder showed the waves of electrical energy proceeding from the city. You were clever, Dent, but you see, you had to come back to me to get my help."

"Don't be afraid, dear," said Jim, trying to soothe the girl. "That's a wireless receiving apparatus." He pointed to a sort of cabinet enclosed among the rotating wheels, and then it was evident that Tode's voice was proceeding from it.

Tode's figure appeared again, dancing through a haze of lines and patches. He was holding something in his hand which Jim made out to be the mouthpiece of a

microphone. The voice inside the Atom Smasher spoke again:

"Turn all the micrometer screws until the needles register zero, Parrish. Then turn Dial D to point 3, Dial C to 5, Dial B to 1, and Dial A to 2. I'll repeat.... Now press the starting lever, Parrish, and you'll find yourself on firm ground again."

A few moments later the Atom Smasher was pouring out an immense column of the violet light, and slowly the vibration ceased. The blurred forms of Tode, of the Drilgoes grew clear. They had arrived.

Tode stepped over the rail. "And now, my friends, we'll have a talk," he said.

"No tricks, Tode," Jim warned him, "You've probably got a number of deviltries up your sleeve—"

"One or two, Dent," grinned Tode.

"We're willing to negotiate."

"Of course you are. You see, I hold the trumps, Dent. Those dial deflections, which are inevitable in the construction of any piece of mechanism, are not the same for Earth in 1920. Don't think you can use the same figures to land with. You must remember that there has been a precession of the equinoxes since the time of Atlantis, with a consequent shift in the earth's axis. No, Dent, I've got you very much where I want you. But I'm willing to discuss terms with you. First of all, let's get rid of this useless cargo. I don't believe in overburdening a ship," he grinned.

He picked up Cain bodily and heaved the astonished Drilgo over the side before he knew what was happening to him. Cain picked himself up and rubbed his sides, whimpering mournfully. The Drilgoes crowded closer, their faces agape with astonishment. Tode spoke a command sharply, and they scattered.

"Before we come to terms, Dent, I'll give you a piece of news that may interest you," said Tode. "Much has happened during the time you've been away. Ambassadors have been out to see me from Atlantis. With the aid of a Drilgo interpreter, they conveyed to

me that they had been greatly impressed by the disappearance of the Atom Smasher. They have nothing like it, of course, and they think I'm a Number One magician.

"The upshot is, they want me to accept the supreme rule of the city, and use my arts to restore the lost territory that has sunk beneath the waves. They swore on an image of their god, Cruk, that they were sincere. I told them that I'd sent the Atom Smasher away on a journey, but that it would be back shortly, and that I'd then give them their answer.

"Now, Dent"—Tode's face took on that look of fanaticism that Jim had seen on it before—"I'm going to repeat the proposition I made to you before. Join me. I'll make you my chief subordinate, and I'll load you and Parrish down with honors. Everything that a human being can desire shall be yours. And in a year or two, when we're tired of being gods, we'll take the Atom Smasher back to Earth and destroy it, and with our wealth we'll become the supreme rulers of Earth too. I need you, Dent. You don't realize how lonely life can be when one is worshiped as a god. As for Lucille,

there are a thousand maidens more beautiful than she is, in Atlantis. Come, Dent, your answer! Your last chance, Dent! Don't throw it away!"

He read the answer before Jim could speak it. Jim saw Tode's face flicker, and hurled himself upon him. Lucille screamed. The two men wrestled together in the narrow confines of the circular boat. Jim struck Tode a blow that sent him reeling against the rail. Then he felt himself seized from behind. A giant Drilgo had him in his arms. He lifted him over the side and flung him to the earth. In an instant the chattering Drilgoes were crowding down upon him.

Struggling madly, Jim saw Tode fell old Parrish with a blow, push back Lucille as she sprang at him, and quickly press the starting lever. The column of violet fire faded, there came the whirl of the mechanism—the Atom Smasher vanished....

Chapter 9: *The Blinded Eye*

Jim fought with all his strength; he managed to shake off his assailants and regain his feet. Then one of the

Drilgoes poised his stone-tipped spear, ready to hurl it through his body.

But the spear never left the Drilgo's hand in Jim's direction. Like a great black ape, Cain leaped upon the fellow and bore him to the ground, his feet twined around his shoulders, his hands gripping his throat. Not until the Drilgo had been reduced to a heaving, half-strangled hulk did Cain leave him.

Then Cain, bending until his stomach almost touched the ground, came worming toward Jim, making signs of obeisance.

What had happened that Jim had won the Drilgo's faith? Why did Cain now look upon him, apparently, as his master? It was impossible to gauge the processes of the black man's mind, and at the moment Jim was in no mood to wonder. The stunning disaster that had overtaken him monopolized his thoughts.

Lucille and Parrish were once more in Tode's power. That was the dominating fact. The only gleam of comfort in the situation was that Tode had given him

the clue to his movements.

Beyond a doubt Tode had taken his captives into Atlantis with him. It was impossible to disbelieve Tode's statement that he had been offered the supreme power in the city. Tode's egotism would have compelled him to blurt out that fact. Besides, Tode had certainly not gone back to earth.

Jim must force his way into Atlantis. He would find and rescue the two prisoners or die there.

He turned away from the groveling Cain and the chattering Drilgoes, who, inspired by Cain's example, now seemed animated by the same instinct to obey him, and went into the cave. But at the entrance he turned for a moment and looked back.

It was night. The valley was swathed in mists, the volcano opposite was spouting a shaft of lurid fire. On the water was a path of moonlight, where the clouds had been dispersed by the Atlanteans. Jim took in the scene, he raised one arm and shook his fist. Then, without a word, he passed inside.

There was a soft light in the cave, streaming out from an inner chamber, access to which was through a narrow orifice in the rock. Jim passed through, and found himself in Tode's laboratory.

He was astonished at its completeness, still more so at the existence of numerous pieces of apparatus whose purpose it was difficult to understand. There was a radio transmitter and receiver, but improved out of all recognition from those in use in the prosaic year 1930. Three or four tiny dynamos, little more than toys in appearance, were generating as much voltage, from the indicators, as a modern power station. And overhead was a dial, with two series of figures in black and red, and two needles, both of which were swinging briskly, indicating that there was an intense electrical disturbance in the vicinity.

The Atom Smasher! Jim took heart. Tode could not be far away! He looked about him, subconsciously trying to discover some implement that would prove of service to him, but there was nothing that he could see, not even one of the ray tubes. He looked about uneasily.

Then his eyes fell upon something so singularly out of place that it looked, for the moment, like some pre-historic weapon. It was the last thing Jim would have expected to find there—nothing more nor less than a sporting rifle!

Deer shooting had been one of Tode's pastimes in the old days, and more than one fat buck had been surreptitiously shot for the benefit of the larder at the Vanishing Place. There was something almost pathetic in the sight of that rifle and the fifty cartridges in their cardboard carton. Perhaps Tode had pictured himself shooting big game in Atlantis at some period or other. It was a human weakness that for an instant lessened Jim's hate and horror of the man. It brought him to a saner view of the situation. Jim had been on the point of losing his powers of reason. The sight of the rifle restored them.

He turned sharply as he heard a sound in the entrance. Cain was coming toward him, with many genuflexions, and much stomach wriggling. He stopped, straightened himself. There was a look of singular intelligence on the Drilgo's face.

He began chattering, pointing in the direction of Atlantis. Jim could make nothing of what he was trying to convey.

"Yes, they're there," he said bitterly, "but I don't see how that's going to help me."

"Oh my poor Lucille!" said Cain unexpectedly.

The words were like a parrot's speech, the intonation so remarkable a copy of old Parrish's that Jim was flabbergasted. Nevertheless it was evident that Cain knew he was referring to Lucille.

With a strange, slinking motion he crossed the laboratory and bent beneath a huge slab of stone, resting on two great hewn rocks. He emerged, holding in his arms two curious contrivances. He laid them at Jim's feet.

Jim stared at them, and suddenly understood what they were. They were two pairs of wings, of the kind the Atlanteans had used when they made their aerial sortie against the Drilgoes.

Cain picked up one pair and began adjusting it about his body. He made fluttering movements with his arms.

"You mean that you've learned how to fly, you black imp of Satan?" shouted Jim.

And Cain, as if understanding, nodded and beamed all over his black face.

With that Jim's idea was born. If the Drilgoes would follow him, he would lead them against Atlantis. And, before the assault began, he would fly to the great Eye that guarded it, and blind it.

He thought afterward that it was like a supernatural revelation, this scheme, that leaped full-fledged into his brain. And Cain had developed extraordinary executive ability. Outside the cave, through rifts in the swirls of fog, Jim could see innumerable Drilgoes massing in the valley, as if they understood Jim's purpose. From Cain's gesticulations, and the number of times he rubbed his stomach, it was evident that he counted upon sacking Atlantis and was imagining

innumerable meals of fat captives.

Each flash of lurid light from the volcano disclosed further masses of Drilgoes, armed with their stone spears, apparently assembling for the attack.

Whether Tode had summoned them before the Atlanteans offered him the rulership of the city, or whether Jim's own plan had been communicated to them by some telepathic process, it was impossible to guess, but there was not the least doubt but that they were prepared to follow him.

Cain nudged Jim and began strapping the other pair of wings about his body. Jim saw that the energy was supplied by two tiny, lights burning in the base, cold fire, stored energy whose strength he did not guess. For, when Cain took him by the hand, and motioned to him to slide the knob in the groove, he was hurled skyward like a rocket.

There followed a delirious hour. Tossing and tumbling like a pigeon in a gale, Jim by degrees acquired mastery over the apparatus. At the end of the hour he could fly almost as well as Cain, who, like a black

guardian angel kept beside him, reaching out a hand when he overbalanced, and pulling him out of aerial side-slips.

Suddenly Cain motioned toward the volcano, and started toward it in a rocketlike swoop. Jim understood. The Drilgoes were ready for the attack upon Atlantis.

Jim dropped to earth, ran back into the cave, and picked up the rifle and the carton of ammunition. He filled the magazine, and, with the rifle on his arm, rose into the air again. Cain was circling back, uttering weird cries of distress at finding his master absent.

"It's all right, Cain," said Jim. "I'm here."

Side by side they flew steadily toward the base of the great cone, which was pouring out a fan-shaped stream of fire. Rumbblings shook the earth; it was evident that another upheaval was in course of preparation. The long column of the Drilgoes could be seen, extending around the flank of the mountain.

Then of a sudden the Eye opened. And across the causeway came the blue-white Ray, carrying death and destruction.

The Drilgoes, who had learned wisdom, remained concealed out of the Ray's path, and escaped, but a great dinosaur, fifty or sixty feet in length, startled by the light, came blundering out of the ferns, uttered a bellow, and melted into an amorphous mass. Birds dropped from their roosting places with a sound like that of falling hail. Black paths were cloven through the midst of the jungle.

Rifle in hand, Jim soared into the air, and shot forward, high above the causeway toward the glowing Eye.

He had noticed that the blue-white ray appeared in cycles of about two minutes, and had made his plans accordingly. Two minutes in which to accomplish his task, or take the chance of a hideous death. Some thirty seconds carried him right into the glowing heart of the winking Eye: he hovered and raised his rifle.

Underneath him the breakers thundered: round the Eye a myriad sea-birds fluttered, dashing themselves against it, falling into the waves. Huge and high the great city towered into the skies, lit by its soft incandescence. Jim could see the throngs in the streets, the traffic. But what was happening in the other side of the Eye?

Suddenly he saw the moon in her third quarter sailing through the skies, and a hideous fear overcame him. Suppose Tode had met with treachery; suppose that this very night Lucille were doomed to be sacrificed to the terrible god Cruk!

Suppose that even at that moment her tender flesh were being sacrificed by the awful hooks!

He drew a bead upon the Eye and fired—and missed. The bullet went wide. But even if it struck, what guarantee had he that it would shatter the glass, or whatever substance it was that covered the orb?

He lost position, and knew that the two-minute interval was drawing to a close. He soared and fired

again. The Eye still glowed.

Then of a sudden a blinding ray shot forth from it, so dazzling that it seemed to sear Jim's eyeballs. The interval was ended.

It shot beneath him, but no more than a few feet, and turning his eyes shoreward, Jim saw it sweep along the causeway and tear a black path through the forest. Frantically he soared, and circled around the temple.

The ray went out. Two minutes more. And now the temporary panic had passed; Jim's nerves grew steady as a rock. He eased the controls and floated in toward the glowing orb. Sea-mews, screaming, dashed themselves against it and fell, wounded and broken, into the breaking seas below. They fluttered past Jim's face, one impacted against his chest with a thud that rocked him where he hovered.

But Jim knew that he could not fail. At a distance of fifty feet he drew a bead upon the centre of the Eye and pressed the trigger.

And instantly the light went out....

Chapter 10: *The Fight in the Dark*

He dropped down softly to the causeway. Within the city he heard a sound such as he had never heard before, as if some ancient prophecy of doom had been fulfilled, a wailing "Aiah! Aiah! Aiah!" that was caught up from throat to throat and rose upon the wind in a clamor wild and mournful as that of the sea-birds around the broken Eye. It was the death-keening of proud Atlantis, Queen of the Atlantic for fifty thousand years. She was dying in darkness.

For, with the blinding of the Eye, all the soft lights within the city had gone out. Dense, utter, impenetrable darkness reigned, and even the gibbous moon, floating overhead, seemed to give no light.

Jim dropped to the causeway and began running in the direction of the city. But, feeling the drag of his wings, he unbuckled the strap and flung them away. He might need them, but his one thought was to get to Lucille, if she were still alive. And he felt that each

moment lost might mean that he would be too late.

Through the blackness he raced forward, hearing that sobbing ululation within the walls. But behind him he heard another sound, and shuddered at it, all his hopes suddenly reversed. For that sound was the shouting of the Drilgoes as they rushed forward to conquest. And now it seemed a monstrous thing that proud Atlantis should be at the mercy of these hordes. He had let loose destruction upon the world. But it was to save Lucille.

That was his consolation. Yet he hardly checked the racing thoughts within his mind even for a moment, to meditate on what he had done. Those thoughts were all of Lucille. He must get to her before the Drilgoes entered. And he ran faster, panting, gasping, till of a sudden the portals loomed before him, and he saw a crowd of frenzied Atlanteans struggling to pass through, and a file of soldiers struggling to keep them back.

He could distinguish nothing more than the confused struggle. He hurled himself into the midst of the

crowd and swept it back. He was within the walls now, and struggling to pass through the mob of people that was swarming like homeless bees.

He fought them with flailing fists, he clove a pathway through them, until he found himself in a great shadowy space that he recognized as the central assembly of the city. More by instinct than design he hit upon the narrow court that was the elevator. But the court was filled with another mob of struggling people, and in the darkness there was no possibility of discovering the secret of raising it.

He blundered about, raging, forcing a path now here, now there. He ran into blind alleys, into small threading streets about the court, which led him back into the central place of assembly. It was like a nightmare, that blind search under the pale three-quarter moon and the black, star-blotched sky.

Suddenly Jim found himself wedged by the pressure of the crowd into a sort of recess leading off the elevator court. So strong was the pressure here that he was unable to move an inch. Wedged bolt upright,

he could only wait and let the frenzied mob stream past him. And louder above the sound of wailing came the roars of the Drilgoes swarming along the causeway.

Suddenly something gave behind him—a door, as it seemed, broken off its hinges by the mob pressure. Jim was hurled backward, and fell heavily down a flight of stone stairs, bringing up against a stone balustrade. He got up, unconscious of his bruises, ran to the top of the flight, and saw the dim square of palest twilight where the door had been.

But over him he could faintly see the stairs and the balustrade, winding away to what seemed immeasurable height. That stairway must lead to the top of the building, and thence there should be some access to the amphitheatre. Jim turned toward it.

Suddenly a tremendous uproar filled the streets, yells, the clicking grunts of the Drilgoes, the screams of the panic-stricken populace. The invaders had arrived, and they were sweeping all before them. No chance of recognition in that darkness. Lucille! Shouting her

name, Jim began to ascend the stairs in leaps of three at a time.

But long before he reached the top he was ascending one by one, with straining limbs and laboring breath. Red slaughter down below, a very inferno of sound; above, that shadowy stairway, still extending almost to the heavens. Step after step, flight beyond flight!

Jim's lungs were bursting, and his heart hammering as if it would break his chest. One flight more! One more! Another! Suddenly he realized that his task was ended. In place of the stairs stood a vast hall, and beyond that another hall, dim in the faint light that filtered through the glass above.

Jim thought he remembered where he was. Beyond that next hall there should be the tongue of flooring, crossing the amphitheatre and joining the platform of the idols. But he stopped suddenly as he emerged, not upon the tongue, but upon still another stairway.

He had gone astray, and out of his bursting lungs a cry of rage and despair went up. For a moment he

stood still. What use to proceed further?

And then, amazingly, there came what might have been a sign from heaven. Down through a small, square opening overhead, no larger than a ventilator, it came ... a glimmer of violet flame!

And Jim hurled himself like a madman against the stairs, and surmounted them with two bounds. There were no more. Instead, Jim found himself looking down into the amphitheatre.

The thick walls had cut off all sound from his ears, save a confused murmur, but now a hideous uproar assailed them. The whole floor of the amphitheatre was a mass of moving shadows, of slayers and slain.

The Drilgoes had broken in and trapped the multitudes that had taken refuge there. Their fearful stone-tipped spears thrust in and out, to the accompaniment of their savage howls and the screams of the dying.

Never has such a shadow-play been seen, perhaps, as

that below, where death stalked in dense darkness, and the slayer did not even see his victim. Only the thrust of spears, the soft, yielding flesh that they encountered, the scream, the wrench of stone from tissue, and the blended howl of triumph and scream of despair.

Yet only for a moment did Jim turn his eyes upon that sight. For he knew where he was now. He had emerged upon the other side of the amphitheatre, upon the platform where he had seen the priests and dignitaries gathered when he was led forward to be sacrificed.

There, in the rear, were the hideous, shadowy gods, looming up out of the darkness, their outstretched arms interlaced. And there upon the platform was the Atom Smasher, a little thread of violet light seeping out of the central tube.

Beside it stood a group of figures, impossible to distinguish in the darkness, but of a sudden Lucille's scream rang out above the din below.

With three leaps Jim was at her side. He saw the girl, Tode, and Parrish, struggling in the grasp of a dozen priests. They were dragging them toward the idols, and Jim understood what that scene portended.

In despair at the irruption of the Drilgoes, the priests were seeking to propitiate their gods by sacrificing the three strangers whom they held responsible for all their woes.

Jim caught Lucille in his arms, shouting her name. She knew him, turned toward him. Then one of the priests, armed with a great stone-headed club—for no metal is permitted within the precincts of the god Cruk—struck at him furiously.

Jim leaped aside, letting the club descend harmlessly upon the floor. He shot out his right with all his strength behind it, catching the priest upon the jaw, and the man crumpled.

Whirling the club around his head, he fought back the fanatics, all the while shouting to Tode to start the Atom Smasher. In such a moment he only

remembered that Tode was a white man, and of his own generation.

He struck down three of the priests; then he was seized around the knees from behind, and fell heavily. The club was wrenched from his hand. In another moment Jim found himself helpless in the grasp of the Atlanteans.

As he stopped struggling for a moment, to gather his strength for a supreme effort, he heard a whir overhead, and saw the arms of the stone gods begin their horrible revolution. The priests had started the machinery. And high above the din below rang out the wild chant of the high priest.

Jim saw him now, a figure poised upon a platform behind the arms, his own arms raised heavenward.

"Aiah! Aiah! Aiah!"

Jim was being dragged forward, with Lucille beside him, old Parrish following, still making a futile struggle for life, while pitiful screeches issued from

his mouth.

Jim saw the revolving arms descend within a foot of his head. One more fight—one more, the last.

Suddenly, with loud yells, a band of Drilgoes leaped forward from the head of the stairs and rushed upon the struggling priests and victims. And, dark as it was, Jim recognized their leader—Cain.

And Cain knew Lucille. As the priests rallied for a desperate resistance, Cain hurled his great body through the air, landing squarely upon the shoulders of the priest nearest the revolving arms, and knocking him flat.

Then the arms caught priest and Drilgo, and the steel hooks dug deep into their flesh. A screech of terror, a howl that reverberated through the amphitheatre, and nothing remained of either but a heap of macerated flesh.

But in that instant Jim had fought free again. He caught Lucille and dragged her back toward the Atom

Smasher.

Tode had already broken from his captors and was working at it frantically.

"Hold on!" screeched old Parrish. "Hold on!"

They had a moment's leeway. The Drilgoes had driven the priests back into the hooks. With awful shrieks the fanatics were yielding up their lives, in the place of their selected victims.

But more Drilgoes were pouring up the stairs. A moment's leeway, and no more, before the savage band would impale the four upon their stone-pointed spears. There was not the slightest chance that they would be able to make their identity known.

"For God's sake hurry!" Jim yelled in Tode's ear.

The wheels were revolving, a stream of violet light, leaping out of the central tunnel, cast a lurid illumination upon the scene.

But it was too late. A score of Drilgoes, with leveled spears, were rushing on the four.

"Hold tight!" screeched Parrish. He thrust his arm into his breast, and pulled out a little lever. Jim recognized it and remembered. It was the instrument of universal death—the uranium release of untold forces of cataclysmic depredation.

"Take that!" screamed the old man, inserting the lever into the secret groove in the Atom Smasher and jerking it in the direction of the priests.

Chapter 11: *Tode's Last Gamble*

A roar that seemed to rend the heavens followed. Roar upon roar, as the infinite momentum of the disintegrating uranium struck obstacle after obstacle. The Drilgoes vanished, the amphitheatre melted away, walls and roof.... Overhead were the moon and stars.

And proud Atlantis was sinking into the depths of the sea.... Not as a ship sinks, but piecemeal, her walls and towers crumbling and toppling as a child's sand-

castle crumbles under the attack of the lapping waves. Down they crashed, carrying their freight of black, clinging, human ants, while from the sea's depths a wave, a mile high, rose and battered the fragments to destruction. From the crater of the volcano a huge wave of fire fanned forward, and where fire and water met a cloud of steam rose up.

A boiling chaos in which water and earth and fire were blended, spread over land and sea. And then suddenly it was ended. Where the last island of the Atlantean continent had been, only the ocean was to be seen, placid beneath the stars.

The Atom Smasher was vibrating at tremendous speed. Jim, with one arm round Lucille, faced Tode at the instrument board. Near by sat Parrish, watching him too.

"That took a whole year," said Tode. "That pretty little scene of destruction we've just witnessed. The good old Atom Smasher has been doing some lively stunts, or we'd have been engulfed too. We're not likely to see anything so pretty in history again, unless we go

to watch the destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii by lava from Vesuvius. But that would be quite tame in comparison with this."

Tode's jeering tone grated on Jim's ears immeasurably.

"I don't think any of us are craving any more experiments, Tode," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "Suppose you take us back to Peconic Bay. We'll dump the Atom Smasher into the pond, and try to forget that we've had anything except a bad nightmare."

"Don't trust him, Jim," whispered Lucille.

Tode heard. "Thank you," he answered, scowling. "But seriously, Dent, we can't go back with nothing to show for all our trouble. Those fools tried to betray me, and then the Eye went out. Perhaps I have you to thank for that performance? However, the sensible thing is to let bygones be bygones. But we must make a little excursion. How about picking up a little treasure from the hoards of Solomon or Genghis Khan? A few

pounds of precious stones would make a world of difference in our social status when we reach Long Island."

Jim felt a cold fury permeating him. Tode saw his grim look and laughed malignantly.

"Well, Dent, I'm ready to be frank with you," he said. "The game's still in my hands. I want Lucille. I'm willing to take you and Parrish back, provided you agree she shall be mine. I'll have to trust you, but I shall have means of evening up if you play crooked."

"Why don't you ask my girl herself?" piped old Parrish.

"He needn't trouble. He knows the answer!" cried Lucille scornfully.

"There's your answer," said Jim. "Now, what's the alternative?"

"The alternative is, that I have already set the dial to eternity, Dent," grinned Tode. "Eternity in the fifth

dimension. Didn't know I'd worked that out, did you? A pleasant little surprise. No, don't try to move. My hand is on the lever. I have only to press it, and we're there."

Jim stood stock still in horror. Tode's voice rang true. He believed Tode had the power he claimed.

"Yes, the fifth dimension, and eternity," said Tode, "where time and space reel into functionlessness. Don't ask me what it's like there. I've never been there. But my impression of it is that it's a fairly good representation of the place popularly known as hell.

"You fool, Dent," Tode's voice rang out with vicious, snarling emphasis, "I gave you your chance to come in with me. Together we'd have made ourselves masters of Atlantis and brought back her plunder to our Twentieth Century world. You refused because of a girl—a girl, Dent, who loved me long before you came upon the scene."

"That's a lie, Lucius," answered Lucille steadily. "And you can do your worst. There's one factor you haven't

reckoned in your calculations, and that's called God."

"The dark blur on the spectral lines," old Parrish muttered.

Tode laughed uproariously. "Come, make your choice, Dent," he mocked. "It's merely to press this lever. You'll find yourself—well, we won't go into that. I don't know where you'll find yourself. You'll disappear. So shall I. But I'm desperate. I must have Lucille. Choose!" His voice rang out in maniac tones. "Choose, all of you!"

"Lucille has answered you," Jim retorted.

"And how about you, old man?" called Tode to Parrish.

Parrish leaped forward, making a swift movement with his hand. "Go to your own hell, you dev—"

A blinding light, a frantic oscillation of the Atom Smasher, a sense of death, awful and indescribable—and stark unconsciousness rushed over Jim. His last thought was that Lucille's arms were about him, and

that he was holding her. Nothing mattered, therefore, even though they two were plunged into that awful nothingness of the fifth dimension, where neither space nor time recognizably exists. Love could exist there.

Chapter 12: *Solid Earth*

"He's coming around, Lucille. Thank God for it!"

Jim opened his eyes. For a few moments he looked about him without understanding. Then the outlines of a room etched themselves against the clouded background. And in the foreground Lucille's face. The girl was bending over Jim, one hand soothing his forehead.

"Where am I?" Jim muttered.

"Back on earth, Jim, the good old earth, never again to leave it," answered Lucille, with a catch in her voice. With an effort she composed herself. "You mustn't talk," she said.

"But what place is this?"

"It's Andy Lumm's house. Now rest, and I'll explain everything later."

But the first explanation came from Andy Lumm.

"Well, Mr. Dent, my wife and me sure were glad to be on the spot when you and Miss Parrish got bogged on the edge of the Black Pool," he said. "Mean, treacherous place it is. Thar was a cow got mired thar last month, up to her belly. If us hadn't found her, and dragged her out with ropes, she'd have gone clear under. Granpop Dawes says thar's underground springs around the edge, and that it runs straight down to hell, though that seems sorter far-fetched to me.

"Yessir, and if I hadn't heard WNYC giving Miss Parrish on the list of missing persons, and as having been seen near here, I reckon I'd never have found you. Made me and my wife uneasy, that did. 'Andy,' she says. 'I got an inkling you oughter go to the Vanishing Place and see if she ain't there.' And there I found you two, mired to the waist, and Mr. Parrish

dancing around and fretting, and his clothes burned to cinders.

"It sure seems strange to me, to think Mr. Parrish got away safe after that explosion five years ago, and of his wandering around with loss of memory, till you found him, and brung him back here to restore it, but thar's strange things in the world—yes, sir, thar surely is!"

In the happiness of being back on Earth once more, Jim was content to let further explanations go. The return of Parrish had been duly chronicled in the newspapers, and had provoked a mild interest, but fortunately the public mind was so occupied at the moment with the trial of a night club hostess that, after the first rush of newspaper men, the three were left alone.

Day after day, in the brilliant autumn weather, Jim and Lucille would roam the tinted woods, recharging themselves with the feel of Earth, until the memory of those dread experiences grew dim.

"Well, Jim, I reckon I'd better tell you and get it over," said old Parrish one morning—Parrish, quite his old, jaunty self again. "Tode had got the dials pointing to the fifth dimension—eternity, he called it, though actually I believe it's nothing more than annihilation, a grand smash. Well, he pressed that lever. But something had gone wrong.

"You remember how poor Cain seemed to take great interest in the Atom Smasher. There's no way of telling what had been going on in that brain of his, but it looks to me like he'd known that that lever meant death. It was sealed up in wax, and Tode had got it free on the way out of Atlantis.

"Well—this it what I made out from examining the thing afterward. Cain had been monkeying with the lever. He'd pried loose one of the wires that hooked to the transformer, and short-circuited it, not knowing, of course, just what he was doing. The result was that when Tode pressed that lever, instead of blowing the whole contraption to pieces, he got a couple of billion volts of electricity through his body, combined with a larger amperage than has ever been imagined. It

burned him to a few grease spots. He simply—
vanished. You don't remember what you did at the
moment, boy?"

"I don't seem to remember anything," said Jim.

"Well, your response was an automatic one. You
jumped him. Luckily you were too late, for Tode
vanished like that!" Old Parrish snapped his fingers.

"But you must have got into the field of magnetic
force—any way, you were almost electrocuted. Lucille
and I thought you were dead for hours.

"We laid you down and set a course for home. I used
those dial numberings Tode had given me. He'd said
they wouldn't work, but he'd lied. They did work.
They brought us back to the Vanishing Place.

"We carried you out, and then I saw your eyelid
twitch. We worked over you with artificial respiration
till it looked as if there was a chance for you. Then I
shut off the power and let the waters rush in over the
Atom Smasher, and swam ashore. And there it lies at
the bottom of the pool, and may it lie there till the

Judgment Day."

"Tode was a genius," said Jim, "but he never understood that character counts for more than genius."

"Let's think no more about him," said Lucille. She had come up to them, and the two looked at each other and smiled. Love is self-centred; other things it forgets very quickly.

"To-morrow we go back to New York," said Jim. "You think you're able to face the world and take up life again?"

"I think so, Jim," said Lucille.

"You're not remembering him after all?"

"No, Jim. I was thinking of poor Cain. He died for me."

"But that was twelve thousand years ago, my dear, and to-day's to-day," said Jim. "And to-morrow a new life begins for you and me."

He drew her closer to him. No, he would never quite forget, but that was twelve thousand years ago ... and to-morrow was his wedding day.

The Readers' Corner, May 1930

June 1930

#29 Out Of The Dreadful Depths, By Charles Willard Diffin:

Robert Thorpe seeks out the nameless horror that is sucking all human life out of ships in the south pacific.

Aproximate word count: 10,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Robert Thorpe reached languidly for a cigarette and, with lazy fingers, extracted a lighter from his pocket.

"Be a sport," he repeated to the gray haired man across the table. "Be a sport, Admiral, and send me across on a destroyer. Never been on a destroyer except in port. It ... would be a new experience ...

enjoy it a lot...."

In the palm-shaded veranda of this club-house in Manila, Admiral Struthers, U. S. N., regarded with undisguised disfavor the young man in the wicker chair. He looked at the deep chest and the broad shoulders which even a loose white coat could not conceal, at the short, wavy brown hair and the slow, friendly smile on the face below.

A likable chap, this Thorpe, but lazy—just an idler—he had concluded. Been playing around Manila for the last two months—resting up, he had said. And from what? the Admiral had questioned disdainfully.

Admiral Struthers did not like indolent young men, but it would have saved him money if he had really got an answer to his question and had learned just why and how Robert Thorpe had earned a vacation.

"You on a destroyer!" he said, and the lips beneath the close-cut gray mustache twisted into a smile.

"That would be too rough an experience for you, I am afraid, Thorpe. Destroyers pitch about quite a bit, you know."

He included in his smile the destroyer captain and the young lady who completed their party. The young lady had a charming and saucy smile and knew it; she used it in reply to the Admiral's remark.

"I have asked Mr. Thorpe to go on the *Adelaide*," she said. "We shall be leaving in another month—but Robert tells me he has other plans."

"Worse and worse," was the Admiral's comment. "Your father's yacht is not even as steady as a destroyer. Now I would suggest a nice comfortable liner...."

Robert Thorpe did not miss the official glances of amusement, but his calm complacency was unruffled. "No," he said, "I don't just fancy liners. Fact is, I have been thinking of sailing across to the States alone."

The Admiral's smile increased to a short laugh. "I would make a bet you wouldn't get fifty miles from Manila harbor."

The younger man crushed his cigarette slowly into

the tray. "How much of a bet?" he asked. "What will you bet that I don't sail alone from here to—where are you stationed?—San Diego?—from here to San Diego?"

"Humph!" was the snorted reply. "I would bet a thousand dollars on that and take your money for Miss Allaire's pet charity."

"Now that's an idea," said Thorpe. He reached for a check book in his inner pocket and began to write.

"In case I lose," he explained, "I might be hard to find, so I will just ask Miss Allaire to hold this check for me. You can do the same." He handed the check to the girl.

"Winner gets his thousand back, Ruth; loser's money goes to any little orphans you happen to fancy."

"You're not serious," protested the Admiral.

"Sure! The bank will take that check seriously, I promise you. And I saw just the sloop I want for the

trip ... had my eye on her for the past month."

"But, Robert," began Ruth Allaire, "you don't mean to risk your life on a foolish bet?"

Thorpe reached over to pat tenderly the hand that held his check. "I'm glad if you care," he said, and there was an undertone of seriousness beneath his raillery, "but save your sympathy for the Admiral. The U. S. Navy can't bluff me." He rose more briskly from his chair.

"Thorpe...." said Admiral Struthers. He was thinking deeply, trying to recollect. "Robert Thorpe.... I have a book by someone of that name—travel and adventure and knocking about the world. Young man, are you *the* Robert Thorpe?"

"Why, yes, if you wish to put it that way," agreed the other. He waved lightly to the girl as he moved away.

"I must be running along," he said, "and get that boat. See you all in San Diego!"

* * *

he first rays of the sun touched with golden fingers the tops of the lazy swells of the Pacific. Here and there a wave broke to spray under the steady wind and became a shower of molten metal. And in the boat, whose sails caught now and then the touch of morning, Robert Thorpe stirred himself and rose sleepily to his feet.

Out of the snug cabin at this first hint of day, he looked first at the compass and checked his course, then made sure of the lashing about the helm. The steady trade-winds had borne him on through the night, and he nodded with satisfaction as he prepared to lower his lights. He was reaching for a line as the little craft hung for an instant on the top of a wave. And in that instant his eyes caught a marking of white on the dim waters ahead.

"Breakers!" he shouted aloud and leaped for the lashed wheel. He swung off to leeward and eased a bit on the main-sheet, then lashed the wheel again to hold on the new course.

Again from a wave-crest he stared from under a sheltering hand. The breakers were there—the smooth swells were foaming—breaking in mid-ocean where his chart, he knew, showed water a mile deep. Beyond the white line was a three-master, her sails shivering in the breeze.

The big sailing ship swung off on a new tack as he watched. Was she dodging those breakers? he wondered. Then he stared in amazement through the growing light at the unbroken swells where the white line had been.

He rubbed his sleepy eyes with a savage hand and stared again. There were no breakers—the sea was an even expanse of heaving water.

"I could swear I saw them!" he told himself, but forgot this perplexing occurrence in the still more perplexing maneuvers of the sailing ship.

This steady wind—for smooth handling—was all that such a craft could ask, yet here was this old-timer of the sea with a full spread of canvas booming and

cracking as the ship jibed. She rolled far over as he watched, recovered, and tore off on a long, sweeping circle.

The one man crew of the little sloop should have been preparing breakfast, as he had for many mornings past, but, instead he swung his little craft into the wind and watched for near an hour the erratic rushes and shivering haltings of the larger ship. But long before this time had passed Thorpe knew he was observing the aimless maneuvers of an unmanned vessel.

And he watched his chance for a closer inspection.

The three-master *Minnie R.*, from the dingy painting of the stern, hung quivering in the wind when he boarded her. There was a broken log-line that swept down from the stern, and he caught this and made his own boat fast. Then, watching his chance, he drew close and went overboard, the line in his hand.

"Like a blooming native after cocoanuts," he told himself as he went up the side. But he made it and

pulled himself over the rail as the ship drew off on another tack.

Thorpe looked quickly about the deserted deck. "Ahoy, there!" he shouted, but the straining of rope and spars was his only answer. Canvas was whipping to ribbons, sheets cracked their frayed ends like lashes as the booms swung wildly, but a few sails still held and caught the air.

He was on the after deck, and he leaped first for the wheel that was kicking and whirling with the swing of the rudder. A glance at the canvas that still drew, and he set her on a course with a few steady pulls. There was rope lying about, and he lashed the wheel with a quick turn or two and watched the ship steady down to a smooth slicing of the waves from the west.

And only then did the man take time to quiet his panting breath and look about him in the unnatural quiet of this strangely deserted deck. He shouted again and walked to a companionway to repeat the hail. Only an echo, sounding hollowly from below, replied to break the vast silence.

It was puzzling—inconceivable. Thorpe looked about him to note the lifeboats snug and undisturbed in their places. No sign there of an abandonment of the boat, but abandoned she was, as the silence told only too plainly. And Thorpe, as he went below, had an uncanny feeling of the crew's presence—as if they had been there, walked where he walked, shouted and laughed a matter of a brief hour or two before.

The door of the captain's cabin was burst in, hanging drunkenly from one hinge. The log-book was open; there were papers on a rude desk. The bunk was empty where the blankets had been thrown hurriedly aside. Thorpe could almost see the skipper of this mystery ship leaping frantically from his bed at some sudden call or commotion. A chair was smashed and broken, and the man who examined it curiously wiped from his hands a disgusting slime that was smeared stickily on the splintered fragments. There was a fetid stench within his nostrils, and he passed up further examination of this room.

Forward in the fo'c'sle he felt again irresistibly the recent presence of the crew. And again he found

silence and emptiness and a disorder that told of a fear-stricken flight. The odor that sickened and nauseated the exploring man was everywhere. He was glad to gain the freedom of the wind-swept deck and rid his lungs of the vile breath within the vessel.

He stood silent and bewildered. There was not a living soul aboard the ship—no sign of life. He started suddenly. A moaning, whimpering cry came from forward on the deck!

Thorpe leaped across a disorder of tangled rope to race toward the bow. He stopped short at sight of a battered cage. Again the moaning came to him—there was something that still lived on board the ill-fated ship.

He drew closer to see a great, huddled, furry mass that crouched and cowered in a corner of the cage. A huge ape, Thorpe concluded, and it moaned and whimpered absurdly like a human in abject fear.

Had this been the terror that drove the men into the sea? Had this ape escaped and menaced the officers

and crew? Thorpe dismissed the thought he well knew was absurd. The stout wood bars of the cage were broken. It had been partially crushed, and the chain that held it to the deck was extended to its full length.

"Too much for me," the man said slowly, aloud; "entirely too much for me! But I can't sail this old hooker alone; I'll have to get out and let her drift."

He removed completely one of the splintered bars from the broken cage. "I've got to leave you, old fellow," he told the cowering animal, "but I'll give you the run of the ship."

He went below once more and came quickly back with the log-book and papers from the captain's room. He tied these in a tight wrapping of oilcloth from the galley and hung them at his belt. He took the wheel again and brought the cumbersome craft slowly into the wind. The bare mast of his own sloop was bobbing alongside as he went down the line and swam over to her.

Fending off from the wallowing hulk, he cut the line, and his small craft slipped slowly astern as the big vessel fell off in the wind and drew lumberingly away on its unguided course.

She vanished into the clear-cut horizon before the watching man ceased his staring and pricked a point upon his chart that he estimated was his position.

And he watched vainly for some sign of life on the heaving waters as he set his sloop back on her easterly course.

* * *

It was a sun-tanned young man who walked with brisk strides into the office of Admiral Struthers. The gold-striped arm of the uniformed man was extended in quick greeting.

"Made it, did you?" he exclaimed. "Congratulations!"

"All O.K.," Thorpe agreed. "Ship and log are ready for your verification."

"Talk sense," said the officer. "Have any trouble or excitement? Or perhaps you are more interested in collecting a certain bet than you are in discussing the trip."

"Damn the bet!" said the young man fervently. "And that's just what I am here for—to talk about the trip. There were some little incidents that may interest you."

He painted for the Admiral in brief, terse sentences the picture of that day break on the Pacific, the line of breakers, white in the vanishing night, the abandoned ship beyond, cracking her canvas to tatters in the freshening breeze. And he told of his boarding her and of what he had found.

"Where was this?" asked the officer, and Thorpe gave his position as he had checked it.

"I reported the derelict to a passing steamer that same day," he added, but the Admiral was calling for a chart. He spread it on the desk before him and placed the tip of a pencil in the center of an unbroken

expanse.

"Breakers, you said?" he questioned. "Why, there are hundreds of fathoms here, Mr. Thorpe."

I know it," Thorpe agreed, "but I saw them—a stretch of white water for an eighth of a mile. I know it's impossible, but true. But forget that item for a time, Admiral. Look at this." He opened a brief case and took out a log-book and some other papers.

"The log of the *Minnie R.*," he explained briefly.

"Nothing in it but routine entries up to that morning and then nothing at all."

"Abandoned," mused the Admiral, "and they did not take to the boats. There have been other instances—never explained."

"See if this helps any," suggested Thorpe and handed the other two sheets of paper. "They were in the captain's cabin," he added.

Admiral Struthers glanced at them, then settled back

in his chair.

"Dated September fourth," he said. "That would have been the day previous to the time you found her." The writing was plain, in a careful, well-formed hand. He cleared his throat and read aloud:

"Written by Jeremiah Wilkens of Salem, Mass., master of the *Minnie R.*, bound from Shanghai to San Pedro. I have sailed the seas for forty years, and for the first time I am afraid. I hope I may destroy this paper when the lights of San Pedro are safe in sight, but I am writing here what it would shame me to set down in the ship's log, though I know there are stranger happenings on the face of the waters than man has ever seen—or has lived to tell.

All this day I have been filled with fear. I have been watched—I have felt it as surely as if a devil out of hell stood beside me with his eyes fastened on mine. The men have felt it, too. They have been frightened at nothing and have tried to conceal it as I have done. —And the animals....

"A shark has followed us for days—it is gone to-day. The cats—we have three on board—have howled horribly and have hidden themselves in the cargo down below. The mate is bringing a big monkey to be sold in Los Angeles. An orang-outang, he calls it. It has been an ugly brute, shaking at the bars of its cage and showing its ugly teeth ever since we left port. But to-day it is crouched in a corner of its cage and will not stir even for food. The poor beast is in mortal terror.

"All this is more like the wandering talk of an old woman muttering in a corner by the fireside of witches and the like than it is like a truthful account set down by Jeremiah Wilkins. And now that I have written it I see there is nothing to tell. Nothing but the shameful account of my fear of some horror beyond my knowing. And now that it is written I am tempted to destroy—No, I will wait—"

"And now what is this?" Admiral Struthers interrupted his reading to ask. He turned the paper to read a coarse, slanting scrawl at the bottom of the page.

"The eyes—the eyes—they are everywhere above us—
God help—" The writing trailed off in a straggling
line.

The lips beneath the trim gray mustache drew
themselves into a hard line. It was a moment before
Admiral Struthers raised his eyes to meet those of
Robert Thorpe.

"You found this in the captain's cabin?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And the captain was—"

"Gone."

"Blood stains?"

"No, but the door had been burst off its hinges. There
had been a struggle without a doubt."

The officer mused for a minute or two.

"Did they go aboard another vessel?" he pondered.

"Abandon ship—open the sea-cocks—sink it for the insurance?" He was trying vainly to find some answer to the problem, some explanation that would not impose too great a strain upon his own reason.

"I have reported to the owners," said Thorpe. "The *Minnie R.* was not heavily insured."

The Admiral ruffled some papers on his desk to find a report.

"There has been another," he told Thorpe. "A tramp freighter is listed as missing. She was last reported due east of the position you give. She was coming this way—must have come through about the same water —" He caught himself up abruptly. Thorpe sensed that an Admiral of the Navy must not lend too credulous an ear to impossible stories.

"You've had an interesting experience, Mr. Thorpe," he said. "Most interesting. Probably a derelict is the answer, some hull just afloat. We will send out a general warning."

He handed the loose papers and the log book to the younger man. "This stuff is rubbish," he stated with emphasis. "Captain Wilkins held his command a year or so too long."

"You will do nothing about it?" Thorpe asked in astonishment.

"I said I would warn all shipping; there is nothing more to be done."

"I think there is." Thorpe's gray eye were steady as he regarded the man at the desk. "I intend to run it down. There have been other such instances, as you said—never explained. I mean to find the answer."

Admiral Struthers smiled indulgently. "Always after excitement," he said. "You'll be writing another book, I expect. I shall look forward to reading it ... but just what are you going to do?"

"I am going to the Islands," said Thorpe quietly. "I am going to charter a small ship of some sort, and I am going out there and camp on that spot in the hope of

seeing those eyes and what is behind them. I am leaving to-night."

Admiral Struthers leaned back to indulge in a hearty laugh. "I refused you a passage on a destroyer once," he said, "and it was an expensive mistake. I don't make the same mistake twice. Now I am going to offer you a trip....

"The *Bennington* is leaving to-day on a cruise to Manila. I'll hold her an extra hour or two if you would like to go. She can drop you at Honolulu or wherever you say. Lieutenant Commander Brent is in command—you remember him in Manila, of course."

"Fine," Thorpe responded. "I'll be there."

"And," he added, as he took the Admiral's hand, "if I didn't object to betting on a sure thing I would make you a little proposition. I would bet any money that you would give your shirt to go along."

"I never bet, either," said Admiral Struthers, "on a sure loss. Now get out of here, you young trouble-

shooter, and let the Navy get to work." His eyes were twinkling as he waved the young man out.

* * *

Thorpe found himself comfortably fixed on the *Bennington*. Brent, her commander, was a fine example of the aggressive young chaps that the destroyer fleet breeds. And he liked to play cribbage, Thorpe found. They were pegging away industriously the sixth night out when the first S.O.S. reached them. A message was placed before the commander. He read it and tossed it to Thorpe as he rose from his chair.

"S.O.S.," said the radio sheet, "*Nagasaki Maru*, twenty-four thirty-five N., one five eight West. Struck something unknown. Down at the bow. May need help. Please stand by."

Captain Brent had left the room. A moment later, and the quiver and tremble of the *Bennington* told Thorpe they were running full speed for the position of the stricken ship.

But: "Twenty-four thirty-five North," he mused, "and less than two degrees west of where the poor old *Minnie R.* got hers. I wonder ... I wonder...."

"We will be there in four hours," said Captain Brent on his return. "Hope she lasts. But what have they struck out there? Derelict probably, though she should have had Admiral Struthers' warning."

Robert Thorpe made no reply other than: "Wait here a minute, Brent. I have something to show you."

He had not told the officer of his mission nor of his experience, but he did so now. And he placed before him the wildly improbable statement of the late Captain Wilkins.

"Something is there," surmised Captain Brent, "just awash, probably—no superstructure visible. Your *Minnie R.* hit the same thing."

"Something is there," Thorpe agreed. "I wish I knew what."

"This stuff has got to you, has it?" asked Brent as he returned the papers of Captain Wilkins. He was quite evidently amused at the thought.

"You weren't on the ship," said Thorpe, simply. "There was nothing to see—nothing to tell. But I know...."

He followed Brent to the wireless room.

"Can you get the *Nagasaki*?" Brent asked.

"They know we are coming, sir," said the operator.

"We seem to be the only one anywhere near."

He handed the captain another message. "Something odd about that," he said.

"*U. S. S. Bennington*," the captain read aloud. "We are still afloat. On even keel now, but low in water. No water coming in. Engines full speed ahead, but we make no headway. Apparently aground. *Nagasaki Maru*."

"Why, that's impossible," Brent exclaimed impatiently.

"What kind of foolishness—" He left the question uncompleted. The radio man was writing rapidly. Some message was coming at top speed. Both Brent and Thorpe leaned over the man's shoulder to read as he wrote.

"*Bennington* help," the pencil was writing, "sinking fast—decks almost awash—we are being—"

In breathless silence they watched the pencil, poised above the paper while the operator listened tensely to the silent night.

Again his ear received the wild jumble of dots and dashes sent by a frenzied hand in that far-off room. His pencil automatically set down the words. "Help—help—" it wrote before Thorpe's spellbound gaze, "the eyes—the eyes—it is attack—"

And again the black night held only the rush and roar of torn waters where the destroyer raced quivering through the darkness. The message, as the waiting men well knew, would never be completed.

"A derelict!" Robert Thorpe exclaimed with unconscious scorn. But Captain Brent was already at a communication tube.

"Chief? Captain Brent. Give her everything you've got. Drive the *Bennington* faster than she ever went before."

The slim ship was a quivering lance of steel that threw itself through foaming waters, that shot with an endless, roaring surge of speed toward that distant point in the heaving waste of the Pacific, and that seemed, to the two silent men on the bridge, to put the dragging miles behind them so slowly—so slowly.

"Let me see those papers," said Captain Brent, finally. He read them in silence.

Then: "The eyes!" he said. "The eyes! That is what this other poor devil said. My God, Thorpe, what is it? What can it be? We're not all insane."

"I don't know what I expected to find," said Thorpe

slowly. "I had thought of many things, each wilder than the next. This Captain Wilkins said the eyes were above him. I had visions of some sky monster ... I had even thought of some strange aircraft from out in space, perhaps, with round lights like eyes. I have pictured impossibilities! But now—"

"Yes," the other questioned, "now?"

"There were tales in olden times of the Kraken," suggested Thorpe.

"The Kraken!" the captain scoffed. "A mythical monster of the sea. Why, that was just a fable."

"True," was the quiet reply, "that was just a fable. And one of the things I have learned is how frequently there is a basis of fact underlying a fable. And, for that matter, how can we know there is no such monster, some relic of a Mesozoic species supposed to be extinct?"

He stood motionless, staring far out ahead into the dark. And Brent, too, was silent. They seemed to try

with unaided eyes to penetrate the dark miles ahead and see what their sane minds refused to accept.

* * *

It was still dark when the search-light's sweeping beam picked up the black hull and broad, red-striped funnels of the *Nagasaki Maru*. She was riding high in the water, and her big bulk rolled and wallowed in the trough of the great swells.

The *Bennington* swept in a swift circle about the helpless hulk while the lights played incessantly upon her decks. And the watching eyes strained vainly for some signal to betoken life, for some sign that their mad race had not been quite vain. Her engines had been shut down; there was no steerage-way for the *Nagasaki Maru*, and, from all they could see, there were no human hands to drag at the levers of her waiting engines nor to twirl with sure touch the deserted helm. The *Nagasaki Maru* was abandoned.

The lights held steadily upon her as the *Bennington* came alongside and a boat was swung out smartly in

its davits. But Thorpe knew he was not alone in his wild surmise as to the cause of the catastrophe.

"Throw your lights around the water occasionally," Brent ordered. "Let me know if you see anything."

"Yes sir," said the man at the search-light. "I will report if I spot any survivors or boats."

"Report anything you see," said Commander Brent curtly.

"You go aboard if you want to," he suggested to Thorpe. "I will stay here and be ready if you need help."

Thorpe nodded with approval as the small boat pulled away in the dark, for there was activity apparent on the destroyer not warranted by a mere rescue at sea. Gun-crews rushed to their stations; the tarpaulin covers were off of the guns, and their slender lengths gleamed where they covered the course of the boat.

"Brent is ready," Thorpe admitted, "for anything."

They found the iron ladder against the ship's side, and a sailor sprang for it and made his way aboard.

Thorpe was not the last to set foot on deck, and he shuddered involuntarily at the eery silence he knew awaited them.

It was the *Minnie R.* over again, as he expected, but with a difference. The sailing vessel, before he boarded it, had been for some time exposed to the sun, while the *Nagasaki Maru* had not. And here there were slimy trails still wet on the decks.

He went first to the wireless room. He must know the final answer to that interrupted message, and he found it in emptiness. No radio man was waiting him there, nor even a body to show the loser of an unequal battle. But there was blood on the door-jamb where a body—the man's body, Thorpe was sure—had been smashed against the wood. A wisp of black hair in the blood gave its mute evidence of the hopeless fight. And the slime, like the trails on the deck, smeared with odorous vileness the whole room.

Thorpe went again to the deck, and, as on the other

ship, he breathed deeply to rid his lungs and nostrils of the abhorrent stench. The ensign in charge of the boarding party approached.

"What kind of a rotten mess is this?" he demanded.

"The ship is filthy and not a soul on board. Not a man of them, officers or crew, and the boats are all here. It's absolutely amazing, isn't it?"

"No," Thorpe told him, "about what we expected. What do you make of this?" He touched with his foot a broad trail that shone wet in the *Bennington's* lights.

"The Lord knows," said the ensign in wonder. "It's all over and it smells like a rotten dead fish. Well, we will be going back, sir." He called to a petty officer to round up the men, and the boat was brought alongside.

Their return to the *Bennington* again through a pathway of light that Thorpe knew was safe under the black muzzles of the destroyer's guns.

Or was it, he asked himself. Safe! Was anything safe

from this devilish mystery that could pluck each cowering human from the lowest depths of this steel freighter, that could drag her down in the water till the radio man sent his cry: "We are sinking!..."

He told Brent quietly, after the ensign had reported, of the struggles in the wireless room and its few remaining traces. And he watched with the commander through the hour of darkness while the *Bennington* steamed in slow circles about the abandoned hulk, while her search-lights played endlessly over the empty waters and the men at the guns cast wondering glances at their skipper who ordered such strange procedure when no danger was there.

With daylight the scene lost its sense of mysterious threat, and Thorpe was eager to return to the abandoned ship.

"I might find something," he said, "some trace or indication of what we have to fight."

"I must leave," said Commander Brent. "Oh, I'm

coming back, never fear," he added, at the look of dismay on Thorpe's face. The thought of leaving this mystery unsolved was more than that young seeker after adventure could accept.

"I'm coming back," Brent repeated. "I've been in communication with the Admiral—Honolulu has relayed the messages through. All code, of course; we mustn't alarm the whole Pacific with our nightmares. The old man says to stick around and get the low-down on this damn thing."

"Then why leave?" objected Thorpe.

Because I am coming around to your way of thinking, Thorpe. Because I am as certain as can be that we have a monster of some sort to deal with ... and because I haven't any depth charges. I want to run up to the supply station at Honolulu and get a couple of ash-cans of TNT to lay on top of the brute if we sight him."

"Glory be!" said Thorpe fervently. "That sounds like business. Go and get your eggs and perhaps we can

feed them to this devil—raw.... And I think I'll stay here, if you will be back by dark."

"Better not," the other objected; but Thorpe overruled him.

"This thing attacks in the dark," he said. "I will lay a little bet on that. It left the orang-outang on the *Minnie R.*—quit at the first sign of daylight. I will be safe through the day, and besides, the beast has gutted this ship. It won't return, I imagine. And if I stay there for the day—live as they lived, the men who manned that ship—I may have some information that will be of help when you get back. But for Heaven's sake, Brent, don't stop to pick any flowers on the way."

"It's your funeral," said Brent not too cheerfully. "The old man said to give you every assistance, and perhaps that includes helping you commit suicide."

But Robert Thorpe only laughed as Commander Brent gave his orders for a small boat to be lowered. A ship's lantern and rockets for night signals were

taken at the officer's orders. "We'll be back before dark," he said, "but take these as a precaution."

One favor Thorpe asked—that the ship's carpenter go over with him and help him to make a strong-barred retreat of the wireless cabin.

"And I'll talk to you occasionally," he told Brent. "I tried the key while I was aboard; the wireless is working on its batteries."

He waved a cheery good-by as the small boat pulled away. "And hurry back," he called. The destroyer commander nodded an emphatic assent.

On board the *Nagasaki Maru*, Thorpe directed the carpenter and his helpers in the work he wanted done. The man seemed to know instinctively where to put his hands on needed supplies, and the result was a virtual cage of strong oak bars enclosing the wireless room, and braces of oak to bar the single door. Thorpe was not assuming any bravado in his feeling of safety, but he was doing what he had done in many other tight corners, and he prepared his

defences in advance.

These included weapons of offense as well. As the boat with the destroyer's men pulled back to the *Bennington*, he placed in easy reach in a corner of the room a heavy calibered rifle he had taken from his belongings.

And, still, with all his feeling of security, there was a strange depression fell upon him when the *Bennington's* narrow hull was small upon the horizon, and then that, too, was gone and only the heaving swells and the wallowing hulk were his companions.

Only these? He shivered slightly as he thought of that unseen watcher with the devil-eyes whose presence Captain Wilkins had felt—and his men, and the poor terrified ape! He deliberately put from his mind the thought of this; no use to start the day with morbid fears. He went below to examine the cabins. But he carried the heavy elephant gun with him wherever he went.

Below decks the signs of the marauder were

everywhere, yet there was little to be learned. The slimy trails dried quickly and vanished, but not before Thorpe had traced them to the uttermost depths of the ship.

There was not a nook or corner that had gone unsearched in the horrible quest for human food. And one thing impressed itself forcibly upon the man's mind. He found a lantern, and he used it of necessity in his explorations, but this thing had gone through the dark and with unerring certainty had found its way to every victim.

"Can it see in the dark?" Thorpe questioned. "Or...." He visioned dimly some denizen of the vast depths, living beyond the limits of the sun's penetration, far in the abysmal darkness where its only light must be self-made. But his mind failed in the attempt to picture what manner of horror this thing might be.

Even in the hold its evil traces were found. There were tiers of metal drums that still shone wet in his lantern's light. Calcium carbide—for making acetylene, he supposed—marked "Made in U.S.A." The

Nagasaki must have been westward bound.

He went, after an hour or so, to the wireless room, and only when he relaxed in the safety of his improvised fortress did he realize how tense had been every nerve and muscle through his long search. He tried the wireless and got an instant response from the destroyer.

"Don't shoot it too fast," he spelled out slowly to the distant operator: "I am only a dub. Just wanted to say hello and report all O.K."

"Fine," was the steady, careful response. "We have had a little trouble with our condensers—" There was a short pause, then the message continued, this portion dictated by the commander. "Delay not important. We will be back as agreed. Have picked up *S. S. Adelaide* bound east in your latitude. Warned her to take northerly course account derelict. See you later. Signed, Brent, commanding *U. S. S. Bennington*."

The man in the barred room tapped off his

acknowledgement and closed the key. He suddenly realized he had had no breakfast, and the hours had been slipping past. He took his gun again and went down to the galley to prepare some coffee. It was not the time or place for an enjoyable meal, but he would have relished it more had he not pictured the *Adelaide* and her lovely owner steaming across these threatening seas.

He knew the captain of the *Adelaide*. "Obstinate pigheaded old Scotchman!" "Hope he takes Brent's advice. Of course Brent couldn't tell him the truth. We can't blat this wild yarn all over the air or the passenger lines would have our scalps. But I wish the *Adelaide* was safe in Manila."

His explorations in the afternoon were half-hearted and perfunctory. There was nothing more to be learned. But he had seen in his mind some vague outline of what they must meet. He saw a something, mammoth, huge, that could grasp and hold an ocean freighter—against whose great body he had seen the waves dash in a line of white spray. Yet a something that could force its way down narrow passages, could

press with terrific strength on bolted doors and crush them inward, wrecked and splintered. Some serpentine thing that felt and saw its way and crawled so surely through the dark—found its prey—seized it—and carried off a man as easily as it might a mouse.

No octopus, no matter what proportions, filled the description. He gave up trying to see too clearly the awful thing. And he kept away from the ship's rail when once he had ventured near. For there had come to him a feeling of fear that had sent the waves of cold trickling and prickling up his spine. Was there something really there?... A waiting lurking horror in the depths?

"The eyes," he thought, "the eyes!..." And he went more quickly than he knew to his barred retreat where again he might breathe quietly.

* * *

The position of the deserted ship was south of the regular steamer lanes on the TransPacific run. Only a trace of smoke on the northern horizon marked

through the afternoon the passage of other craft. It was a long and lonely vigil for the waiting man. But the *Bennington* would return, and he listened in at intervals hoping to hear her friendly signal.

The batteries operating the *Nagasaki's* wireless were none too strong; Thorpe saved their strength, though he tried at times to raise the *Bennington* somewhere beyond his reach.

The sun was touching the horizon when he got his first response. "Keep up the old nerve," admonished the slow, careful sending of the *Bennington's* operator. "We have been delayed but we are on our way. Signed, Brent."

The man in the wireless room placed the oak bars across the door, and tried to believe he was nonchalant and unafraid as he laid out extra clips of cartridges. But his eyes persisted in following the sinking sun, and he watched from within his cage the coming of the quick dark.

The protecting glare of day must be unbearable to

this monster from the lightless depths, and daylight was vanishing. Thorpe's mind was searching for additional means of defense. He found it in the cargo he had seen. The drums of carbide! He could scatter it on the deck—it reacted with water, and those slimy arms, if they came and touched it, could find the contact hot. He took his lantern and went hastily below to stagger back with a drum upon his shoulder.

In the half-light that was left him he forced the cover and then rolled the drum about the swaying deck. The gray, earthly lumps of carbide formed erratic lines. Useless perhaps, he admitted, but the threatening dark forced the man to use every means at his command.

He was scattering the contents of a second drum when he stiffened abruptly to rigid attention.

The ship, thrown broadside to the wide-spaced swells, had rolled endlessly with a monotonous motion. But now the deck beneath him was steadying. It assumed an abnormal levelness. The boat rose and fell with the waves, but it no longer rolled. There was something

beneath holding, drawing on it.

Thorpe knew in that frozen second what it meant. The drum clattered to the rail as he dashed for his room. Gun in hand, he watched with staring eyes where the deserted deck showed dim and vague in the light of the stars and the bow of the ship was lost in the uncertain dark of night.

Wide-eyed he watched into the blackness, and he listened with desperate attention for some slightest sound beyond the splashing of waves and the creaking of spars.

Far in the west a light appeared, to glow and vanish and glow again in the tumbling waters. The *Bennington*! His heart leaped at the thought, then sank as he knew the destroyer's lights would not appear from that direction.

Through a slow hour that seemed an eternity the oncoming ship drew near, and he knew with a sudden, startling certainty that it was the *Adelaide*—and Ruth Allaire—coming on, through into the horror awaiting.

He leaned forward tensely as a sound reached his ears. A ghostly echo of a sound, like the softest of smooth, slipping fabric upon hard steel. And as he listened, before his staring eyes, a something came between him and the lighted yacht.

It wavered and swung in the darkness. It was formless, uncertain of outline, and it swung in the night out beyond the ship's rail till it suddenly neared, waved high overhead, and the cold light of the stars shone in pale reflection from an enormous, staring eye.

It surmounted a serpentine form that took shape in the dim radiance without and came lower in undulating folds to crash heavily upon the deck.

Thorpe's hand was upon the wireless key. He had wanted to warn off the yacht, but not till the thud of the creature on the bare deck proved its reality could he force his cold fingers to press the key.

Then, fast as his inexperience allowed, he called frantically for the *Adelaide*. He spelled her name, over

and over.... Would the sleepy operator never answer?

The *Bennington* broke in one. "Is that you, Thorpe? What is up?" they demanded.

But Thorpe kept up his slow spelling of the yacht's name. He must get a warning to them! Then he realized that the *Bennington* could do it better.

"*Bennington*," he called, "*Adelaide* approaching. I am attacked. Warn them off. Warn them—" His frantic, hissing dots and dashes died immediately. Beneath his feet the *Nagasaki Maru* was rolling again, swinging free to the lift and thrust of the swells beneath.

"Good God!" he shouted aloud in his lonely cabin. "It's gone for the yacht. *Adelaide*—turn north—full speed—" he clicked off on a slow, stuttering key. "Head north. You are being attacked!" He groaned again as he saw the *Adelaide's* shining ports swing away from the safety of the north; the ship broached broadside to the waves and came slowly to a stop.

"*Bennington*," he radioed. "Brent—it has got the

Adelaide. Help—hurry! I am going over."

He tore wildly at the barred door, and he made a dash across the deck to slip sprawling in a heap against the rail where the slimy traces of the recent visitor stretched glistening on the deck.

How he lowered the boat Thorpe never knew. But he knew there was one that the men from the *Bennington* had swung over the side, and tore madly at the tackle to let the boat crash miraculously upright into the sea. He slung the rifle about his neck with a rope end—there were cartridges in his pocket—and he went down the dangling lines and cast off in a frenzy of haste.

What could he do? He hardly dared form the question. Only this stood clear and unanswerable in his mind: The yacht was in the monster's grip, and Ruth Allaire was there on board. Ruth Allaire, so smiling, so friendly, so lovable! Food for that horror from the depths.... He rowed with super-human strength to drive the heavy boat across the wave-swept distance that separated them.

Between gasping breaths he turned at times to glance over his shoulder and correct his course. And now, as he drew near, he saw though indistinct the unmistakable, snakelike weaving of horrible tenuous fingers, rolling and groping about the yacht.

They were plain as he drew alongside. The trim ship rose and fell with the water, while over her side where Thorpe approached swung a long, white monstrous rope of flesh. It retreated like the lash of a whip, and the horrified watcher saw as it went the struggling figure of a man in the grasp of flabby lips. And above them a single eye glared wickedly.

Another vile, twisting arm rose from the afterdeck with a screaming figure in its grasp and vanished into the water beyond the yacht. There were others writhing about the decks. Thorpe saw them as he made his boat fast and clambered aboard.

A wave of reeking air enveloped him as he reached the deck; the nauseous stench from the monster's tentacles was horrible beyond endurance. He gagged and choked as the stifling breath entered his lungs.

A huge rope of slippery, throbbing flesh stretched its twisted length toward the stern. It contracted as he watched into bulging muscular rings and withdrew from the afterdeck. The deadly end of it stopped in mid-air not twenty feet from where he stood. The jawlike pincers on it held the limp form of an officer in its sucking grip, while above, in a protuberance like a gnarled horn, a great eye glared into Thorpe's with devilish hatred.

The beak opened sharply to drop its unconscious burden upon the deck, and the watching man, petrified with horror, saw within the gaping maw great sucking discs and beyond them a brilliant glow. The whole cavernous pit was aflame with phosphorescent light. Dimly he knew that this light explained the ability of the beastly arms to grope so surely in the dark.

The eye narrowed as the gaping, fleshy jaws distended, and Robert Thorpe, in a flash that galvanized him to action, was aware that his fight for life was on. He fired blindly from the hip, and the recoil of the heavy gun almost tore it from his hands.

But he knew he had aimed true, and the toothless, seeking jaws whipped in agony back into the sea.

There were other arms whose eyes were searching the stern of the yacht. Thorpe plunged frenziedly down a companionway for the cabin he knew was Ruth Allaire's. Was he in time? Could he save her if he found her? His mind was in a turmoil of half-formed plans as he rushed madly down the corridor to find the body of the girl a limp huddle across the threshold of her cabin.

She was alive; he knew it as he swung her soft body across one shoulder and staggered with his burden up the stairs. If he could only breathe! His throat was tight and strangling with the reeking putrescence in the air. And before his eyes was a picture of the strong oak bars of his own retreat. Somehow, some way, he must get back to the abandoned ship.

An eye detected him as he came on deck, and he dropped the limp body of the girl at his feet as he swung his rifle toward the glowing light within the opening jaws. The sucking discs cupped and wrinkled

in dread readiness in the fleshy, toothless opening. He emptied the magazine into the head, though he knew this was only a feeler and a feeder for a still more horrible mouth in the monstrous body that rose and fell tremendously in the dark waters beyond. But it was typical of Robert Thorpe that even in the horror and frenzy of the moment he rammed another clip of cartridges into his rifle before he stooped to again raise the prostrate figure of Ruth Allaire.

The forward deck for the moment was clear; it rose high with the weight of the writhing, twisting arms that weighed down the stern of the yacht where the crew had taken refuge.

To think of helping them was worse than folly—he dismissed the thought as another great eye came over the rail. Once more he used the gun, then lowered the girl to the waiting boat, and cast off and rowed with the stealthiest of strokes into the dark.

Behind him were whipping points of light above the white brilliance of the yacht *Adelaide*. The boat was tossing in great waves that came from beyond, where

a body, incredibly huge, was tearing the waters to foam. There were ghostly arms that shone in slimy wetness, that lashed searchingly in all directions, as the monster gave vent to its fury at Thorpe's attack. There were screaming human figures grasped in many of the jaws, and the man was glad with a great thankfulness that the girl's stupor could save her from the frightful sight.

He dared to row now, and his breath was coming in great choking sobs of sheer exhaustion when at last he pulled the senseless form of Ruth Allaire to the deck of the *Nagasaki* and drew her within the frail shelter of the wireless room.

Stout had the oaken bars appeared, and safe his refuge in the barricaded room, but that was before he had seen in horrible reality the fearful fury of this monster from the deep. He placed the braces against the door and turned with hopeless haste to seize the wireless key.

"*Bennington*," he called, and the answer came strong and clear. "Where are you.... Help—" His fingers froze

upon the key and the answering message in his ears was unheeded as he watched across the water the destruction of the yacht.

This craft that had dared to resist the onset of the brute, to fight against it, to wound it, was feeling the full fury of the monster's rage. The gleaming lights of the doomed ship were waving lines that swept to and fro in the grip of those monstrous arms. The boat beneath Thorpe's feet was tossing in the waves that told of the titanic struggle. He had meant to look south for some sign of the oncoming destroyer, but in fearful fascination he stared spellbound where the masts of the trim yacht swept downward into the waves, where the green of her star-board lantern glowed faintly for an instant, then vanished, to leave only the darkness and the starlit sea.

A voice aroused him from his stupefaction. "Where am I ... where am I?" Ruth Allaire was asking in a frightened whisper. "That terrible thing—" She shuddered violently as memory returned to show again the horror she had witnessed. "Where are we, Robert? And the *Adelaide*—where is it?"

Thorpe turned slowly. The insane turmoil of the past hour had numbed his brain, stunned him.

"The *Adelaide*—" he mumbled, and groped fumblingly for coherent thoughts. He stared at the girl. She was half-risen from the floor where he had laid her, and the sight of her quivering face brought reason again to his mind. He knelt tenderly beside her and raised her in his arms.

"Where is the yacht?" she repeated. "The *Adelaide*?"

"Gone," Thorpe told her. "Lost!" A thought struck him.

"Was your father on board, Ruth?"

Ruth was dazed.

"Lost," she repeated. "The *Adelaide*—lost!... No," she added in belated response to Thorpe's question.

"Daddy was not there. But the men—Captain MacPherson ... that horrible monster...." She buried her face in her hands as she realized what Thorpe's silence meant.

He held the trembling figure close as the girl whispered: "Where are we, Robert? Are we safe?"

"We may win through yet," he told her through grim, set lips. He realized abruptly that he was seeing the face of Ruth Allaire in the light. He had left a lantern burning! He withdrew his arms from about her and sprang quickly to his feet to put out the tell-tale light. In darkness and quiet was their only safety. And he knew as he sprang that he had waited too long. A soft body crashed heavily on the deck outside.

The girl's voice was shrill with terror as she began a question. Thorpe's hand pressed upon her lips in the dark where he stood waiting—waiting.

A luminous something was glowing outside the cabin. It searched and prodded about the deserted deck to whip upward at the audible hiss of wet carbide. Another appeared; the rifle came slowly to the man's shoulder as a pair of jaws gaped glowingly beyond the windows and an eye stared unblinkingly from its hornlike sheath. It crashed madly against the walls of the wireless room to shatter the glass and make

kindling of the woodwork of the sash. Thorpe fired once and again before the specter vanished, and he knew with sickening certainty that the wounds were only messages to some central brain that would send other ravening tentacles against them. But the oak bars had held.

He reached in the brief interval for the key, and he sent out one final call for help. He strained his ears against the head-set for some friendly human word of hope.

"—rocket," the wireless man was saying. "Fire rockets. We can't find—" A swift, writhing arm wrapped crushingly about the cabin as the message ceased.

Thorpe seized his rifle and fired into the gray mass that bulged with terrible muscular contractions through the window. He fired again to aim lengthways of the arm and inflict as damaging a wound as his weapon would permit.

The arm relaxed, but a score of others took up the

attack. Again the sickening stench was about them as gaping jaws gleamed fiery beneath the hateful eyes and tore at the flimsy structure. Thorpe jammed more cartridges into the gun and fired again and again, then dropped the weapon to fumble for the rockets that Brent had given him.

He lighted one with trembling fingers; the first ball shot straight into a waiting mouth. Another ignited a searing flame of acetlylene gas where a wet arm writhed in the hot carbide trail. The man leaned far out through the broken window.

No time to look around. He let the red flares stream upward high into the air, then dropped the rocket hissing on the deck to seize once more the rifle.

A mass of muscle crashed against the door; it went to splinters under the impact, and only the two oak bars remained to hold in check the horrible tentacles and the darting heads. One mouth closed to a pointed end that forced its way between the bars. The oak gave under the strain as Robert Thorpe pulled vainly at an empty gun. Beside him rose shrieks of terror as the

monstrous thing came on, and Thorpe beat with frantic fury with his clubbed rifle at the fleshy snout.

He knew as he swung the weapon that the shrieks had ceased, then smiled grimly in the numbing horror as he realized that Ruth Allaire was beside him. A piece of oak was in her hands, and she was striking with desperate and silent fury at the slimy flesh.

It was the end, Thorpe knew, and suddenly he was glad. The nightmare was over, and the end was coming with this girl beside him. But Robert Thorpe was fighting on to the last, and he tried to make his blows reach outward to the hateful devilish eye.

He saw it plainly now, for the deck was a glare of white light. He saw the eye and the thick arm behind it and the score of others that made a heaving, knotted mass were brilliant and wetly shining. He could see now how best to strike, and he turned his gun to thrust with the barrel at the eye.

It withdrew before his stroke—the jaws slid backward to the deck. There were sounds that hammered at his

ears. "The guns! The guns!" a girl was screaming. Across the deck, where a search-light played, huge arms were lashing backward toward the sea. The waves beyond had vanished where a monstrous body shone wetly black in a blinding glare.

And the man hung panting, helpless, on the one remaining bar across the doorway to look where, beyond, her forward guns a spitting stream of staccato flashes, the *Bennington* tore the waves to high-thrown spray. Her four clean funnels swung far over as the slim ship, with her stabbing, crashing guns, swung in a sweeping circle to bear down upon the black bulk slowly sinking in the search-light's glare.

The vast body had vanished as the destroyer shot like one of her own projectiles over the spot where the beast had lain. And then, where she had passed, the sea arose in a heaving mound. The big ship beneath the watching man shuddered again as another depth charge grumbled its challenge to the master of the deeps.

The warship went careening on an arc to return and throw the full glare of her search-lights on the scene. They lighted a vast sea, strangely stilled. An oily smoothness leveled waves and ironed them out to show more clearly the convulsions of a torn mass that rose slowly into sight.

Thorpe in some way found himself outside the cabin. And he knew that the girl was again beside him as he stared and stared at what the waters held. A bloated serpent form beyond believing was struggling in the greasy swell. Its waving tentacles again were flung aloft in impotent fury, and, beneath them, where their thick ends jointed the body, a head with one horrible eye rose into the air. A thick-lipped mouth gaped open, and the gleam of molars shone white in the blinding glare.



[Image description: A black and white illustration of the sea monster assaulting a ship, with part of its central body with the large eye just above the surface of the water, and its smaller feelers snaking out of the water in every direction and latching onto the ship, which is tilting in the roiling waters. Image description end.]

The twisting body shuddered throughout its vast bulk, and the waving arms and futile staring eyes dropped helpless into the splashing sea. Again the revolting

head was raised as the destroyer sent a rain of shells into its fearful mass. Once more the oily seas were calm. They closed over the whirling vortex where a denizen of the lightless depths was returning to those distant, subterranean caverns—returning as food for what other voracious monsters might still exist.

The man's arm was about the figure of the girl, trembling anew in a fresh reaction from the horror they had escaped, when a small boat drew alongside.

"They're safe," a hoarse voice bellowed back to the destroyer, and a man came monkeywise up a rope where Thorpe had launched his boat.

And now, as one in a dream, Thorpe allowed the girl to be taken from him, to be lowered to the waiting boat. He clambered down himself and in silence was rowed across to the destroyer.

"Thank God!" said Brent, as he met them at the rail. "You're safe, old man ... and Miss Allaire ... both of you! You let off that rocket just in time; we couldn't pick you up with our light—

"And now," he added, "we're going back; back to San Diego. The Admiral wants a word of mouth report."

Thorpe stilled him with a heavy gesture. "Give Ruth an opiate," he said dully. "Let her forget ... forget!... Good God, can we ever forget—" He stumbled forward, heedless of Brent's arm across his shoulders as the surgeon took the girl in charge.

* * *

Admiral Struthers, U.S.N., leaned back from his desk and blew a cloud of smoke thoughtfully toward the ceiling. He looked silently from Thorpe to Commander Brent.

"If either one of you had come to me with such a report," he said finally, "I would have found it incredible; I would have thought you were entirely insane, or trying some wild hoax."

"I wish it were a damn lie," said Thorpe quietly. "I wish I didn't have to believe it." There were new lines about the young-old eyes, lines that spoke what the

lips would not confess of sleepless nights and the impress of a picture he could not erase.

"Well, we have kept it out of the papers," said the Admiral. "Said it was a derelict, and the wild messages floating about were from an inexperienced man, frightened and irresponsible. Bad advertising—very—for the passenger lines."

"Quite," Commander Brent agreed, "but of course Mr. Thorpe may want to use this in his next book of travel. He has earned the right without doubt."

"No," said Thorpe emphatically. "No! I told you, Brent, there was often a factual basis for fables—remember? Well, we have proved that. But sometimes it is best to leave the fables just fables. I think you will agree." A light step sounded in the corridor beyond. "Nothing of this to Miss Allaire," he said sharply.

The men rose as Ruth Allaire entered the room. "We were just speaking," said the Admiral with an engaging smile beneath his close-cut mustache, "of the matter of a bet. Mr. Thorpe has won handily, and

he has taught me a lesson."

He took a check book from his desk. "What charity would you like to name, Miss Allaire? That was left to you, you remember."

"Some seamen's home," said Ruth Allaire gravely.

"You will know best, if you two are really serious about that silly bet."

"That bet, my dear," said Robert Thorpe with smiling eyes, "was very serious ... and it has had most serious consequences." He turned to the waiting men and extended a hand in farewell.

"We are going to Europe, Ruth and I," he told them.

"Just rambling around a bit. Our honeymoon, you know. Look us up if you're cruising out that way."

#30 The Cavern World, By James P. Olsen:

A great oil field had gone dry—and Asher, trapped far under the Earth among the revolting petrolians, learns why.

Approximate word count: 7,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"Impossible! What sort of creatures would they be, that could live two miles beneath the surface of the earth? Surely, Asher, you are joking!"

R. Briggs Johns, mighty power back of Stan-America Oil Corporation, looked at Blaine Asher closely, expecting to see the chief geologist and scientist of the company laugh. But Blaine Asher did not laugh. Serious, his rather thin face grave as he leaned his tall, muscular body above a torsion machine he was adjusting, there was nothing to indicate he had the

faintest idea of a joke.

"Why damn it, Asher!" Johns insisted wrathfully, "you don't really mean that. And"—he took a nervous turn around the laboratory—"if such a wild thing were possible, what has that to do with our trouble? You haven't led me on to spend a million dollars drilling a thirty-six-inch hole, just so you could test a fantastic theory?"

"You know better than that." Asher wiped his hands and leaned against a table. Johns, looking into the cool gray eyes of the man before him, did know better. Blaine Asher was more than just a geologist or scientist. Well he might be termed a master geo-metallurgist. Johns nodded, wiping beads of perspiration from his brow.

"You say impossible—and want to know how those creatures cause this field, the largest oil field in the world, to start going bone dry over night. All right:

"Remember how you laughed when I told you that oil would some day be mined instead of pumped or

flowed from the earth? You couldn't see how one central shaft could be sunk, then tunnels run back underneath the oil strata, tapping the sand from the bottom and letting the oil run down to be pumped out one shaft. Yet, that way, we would get *all* the oil, instead of the possible one-eighth of the total amount as we get by present methods.

"Now, you have seen that done. And you said that was impossible."

"Yes," Johns objected, "but those test wells we mined were only a few hundred feet deep. Wells in this field are eight thousand feet deep! Think of the heat, man! You can't do it. And as for people—"

"Your great field has suddenly gone dry, almost in a month's time," Asher stopped him. "What is happening here can happen elsewhere. Only, formations in this field are more suited to there being life—or something—below us. Stan-America is going broke. Many others have already gone broke. Still, that oil couldn't have gotten away.

"As for heat—yes, we know that oil is hot when it comes up from the oil sand at eight thousand feet, or from ordinary wells at three to six thousand feet. But"—Asher lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply—"gas coming out of the same well is *cold*! So cold it forms frost inches thick on pipes and tanks.

"Rock pressure—the pressure of the earth—forcing up the gas, causes that. Why couldn't that same pressure cool great caverns below the granite cap below the oil sands? It could. For that matter, I know that same pressure will generate useful power. I'll show you that in a minute."

"All right!" Johns chewed his cigar almost savagely. "Say, then, that you can work down there, nearly two miles underground; granted that we can tunnel from beneath the sands and pump more oil from one central shaft than we now do from fifty wells—what has that to do with this tosh about a race of people?"

"They are not people, perhaps." Asher grinned at the "there, I've stuck you!" look on Johns' face. "Let's say, rather, creatures. Have you ever met Lee Wong, the

great Chinese scientist, or his Russian geological collaborator, Krenski? No?

"Well, I have. I met them in Paris in 1935—five years ago. They're brilliant men, and they've prepared some wonderful papers. Brilliant, I said: they are also dangerous. They claim, you know, that the fossils we now drill up come from a lost race—people who went *into* the earth while man, like us, was coming up onto the earth from the water. Some claim those fossils have been on the surface at one time, and were silted over. But eight thousand feet is a lot of silt, Johns: ever thought of that?"

"Good God!" Johns gasped hoarsely. "You almost make me believe you are right. But, supposing there is such a race of things—what will you do?"

"This." Asher drew back a curtain that was stretched across one end of the laboratory. "You know I was working on a cage in which to descend into that eight-thousand-foot well you've drilled—the well you're going to use to try and find why this field is suddenly gone dry. This it it."

Johns stared, shook his head wonderingly and stared again. Before him, ready to be transported to the well that was larger than any ever drilled before, stood what Blaine Asher called his Miner, for want of a better name.

A thick steel tube, it was. Twelve feet long and large enough around that a man might stand inside of it. The top was welded on in much the manner a top is welded on an ordinary hot-water heater, and had connections for hose in it. At the height of a man's eyes heavy windows were set in, and in one side was a door just large enough to admit a man's body. This door sealed tight the minute it closed.

"It looks like—like some sort of a deep sea diving outfit," Johns said as he walked around the braces that held the Miner upright. "But all those gadgets inside and on the bottom—?" He indicated the strange instruments that could be seen when the door was opened, and the queer glass tubes that projected from the very bottom.

"Pressure-power units—my own invention," Asher told

him. "For ten years I've been working on this. I knew that some day I would want to explore the oil caverns beneath the earth, so I made ready.

"As I told you, rock pressure, or earth pressure, is a tremendous thing. It is power, so I figured how to use it. Under artificial pressure, I have tried out my Miner and its equipment.

"Those tubes sticking from the bottom contain something you are familiar with: non-burning and non-explosive helium gas. I have discovered a way, by their use, to create power that will melt away rock or iron—literally dissolve it into nothing! Not in an hour, or minutes. In seconds, Johns!

"The pressure of the earth acts as my generator. The pressure action on the filaments of platinum, and several compositions I have no time to explain now, causes heat. Call it friction of compressed air, if you wish. As neon gases carry an electric spark, so does this helium carry the power generated by earth pressure. The pressure below earth acts on the delicate coils and points of my generator. This bit of

power is carried into the helium tubes, and by a system of vacuum power, is increased millions of times. Thus, the tiny spark of a cigar lighter would electrocute a hundred men!"

"I—you mean somewhat like a violet ray is increased in the lightning tubes?" Johns strove to grasp the foundation of the thing.

"Yes, the foundation of it all—with the earth's pressure the power motive," Asher nodded. "So, after my Miner is on the bottom of our well, I can burn—or dissolve—a room as large as this laboratory in a few minutes. The whole thing is no mystery after you learn it—not nearly so much as radium, or radio, was. Merely creating a spark of electricity and fanning it through a vacuum and a conductor of massed gases."

"But"—Johns had unconsciously dropped his voice to a whisper—"what of these strange creatures? How would you deal with them? Damn it, Asher, I think I'm beginning to believe this nutty idea of yours. Any man who can generate power with the pressure of air as it is packed by earth must know what he is talking

about!"

"I have but one protection against anything down there that tries to harm me," Asher said simply. "That is this—see?"

What he held up looked like an old-fashioned six shooter. It was fitted with a platinum-sealed box in the place where a cylinder would have been. The barrel looked like some queer, blue glass.

"Do you see that test tube?" Asher pointed to a glass tube on a table a few feet away. "Now watch."

He pressed a tiny ratchet under his thumb. A snapping, buzzing noise filled the laboratory. Johns gave an exclamation of wonder and awe. Quickly, the test tube started to melt into a pool of molten glass. Asher increased the pressure of his ratchet trigger. The tube was knocked to the floor.

"Static electricity—always some form of electricity," said Asher grinning at the astonished oil baron.

"Conductor coils here," he continued as he tapped the

sealed cylinder, "are charged much as a flash-lamp battery. The charged conductors attract the static electricity of the air, and, in a manner similar to the action of the power generator, increase power. There is a slight difference: by turning quick power on my static gun, I can cause the charge to knock down and merely electrocute, as I knocked the half-melted tube from the table."

"I can understand that, a little," Johns sighed profoundly. "It's the same juice that causes a gasoline truck to catch fire if you don't have a ground chain on it somewhere. But, just the same, I claim it's remarkable."

"Not half as remarkable as what I expect to find two miles down when I descend to-morrow." Asher had a dreamy look in his eyes. "I wonder: new ways to get petroleum wealth ... a strange people...."

"Men,"—Asher, a tight-fitting asbestos composition suit covering him from foot to neck, spoke tersely—"when you get me on bottom, stop every bit of machinery, and don't dare pull up until I give the

signal. If I'm down there the entire day, all right. But"—he smiled, trying to make light of the danger—"if I don't signal within thirty-six hours, pull up anyhow."

From the bull-wheels of the drilling rig Asher spooled out some of the air-hose cable through which air blown over ice would be pumped into the Miner; then when the long steel cylinder was over the hole and ready, he turned to the company officials and government scientists and engineers around him in the boarded-up derrick.

"Possibly I can get a survey in an hour. Perhaps I'll have to come back to the surface and make adjustments to my equipment. That remains to be seen.... Now, let's get low."

He adjusted a helmet over his head. It looked much like the helmet worn by a sea diver, except that it had no connecting hose for air. The windows in the helmet, which contained pressure lights, worked on the same principle as the disintegrating rays of the Miner. When Asher turned the ratchet that set the

little pressure machine into motion, a violet tinged green ray of great lighting power shot out and increased, by weight of air, or atmosphere beneath the earth, the power of one tiny spark a million times.

Without ceremony or farewell, Asher crawled inside his tube. The door was closed and he fastened it from inside. For a moment, wild panic assailed him. But he fought it off, becoming again less the feeling human and more the cold calculator of advanced science. The light from outside, coming in through the windows of the Miner, was shut off. The long steel cage clanked against the sides of the special casing in the well, and Blaine Asher was on his trip into a lower world never before visited by man.

That was what Asher believed. But, had he known what waited for him, two miles into the bowels of the earth....

At five hundred feet, the descent stopped, giving him time to adjust himself to the pressure change. The gas and oil had been eased out of the hole. That is, the casing had been run on through the producing strata,

shutting it off. Asher signaled by buzzer, and a stream of the ice-washed air flowed down to him.

Three thousand feet! Six thousand feet! More than a mile down! Sweat poured from his body in streams, and the air coming into the Miner through the hose did not relieve him. It was hot—almost unbearably so. His ears were roaring. The dark of his tube was relieved as he turned on his pressure lamps. He adjusted the pressure discs over his ears by twisting a thumbscrew on his helmet, and the pounding of his ear-drums ceased.

Gasping, he watched the depth meter in front of him. It did not seem as if he was moving, but the indicator now showed more than seven thousand feet. It moved around slowly and more slowly; trembled at eight thousand—and stopped.

Like the snapping of a man's fingers, the temperature inside the Miner changed. Asher was now fifty feet below the bottom of the oil and gas sands, and if his theory about rock pressure worked.... It *was* working. Frost was forming on the inside of the Miner!

"I'm right—right—right!" Asher thought, elated, sending his buzzer signal up to those so far above. The icy air through his hose changed to air of normal temperature. He signaled for slack in the lowering cable, then prepared for the greatest test of all.

Cramped, with hardly room to move, he studied his gages. Helium tubes at the proper pressure for compressing the tiny spark of the pressure generator, so it would flare a million times stronger under the action of the vacuum tubes: diamond and cut-glass tubes in the bottom of the Miner, thermoed with layers of quicksilver: everything cleared, everything ready.

His hand shaking, Asher pushed the tiny switch that brought his filament points trembling together under the atmospheric pressure so far underground. A tiny spark danced and throbbed through the tiny glass tube before him, beginning to buzz as it started the circuit of increasing coils, and soon humming and vibrating as the helium and vacuum tubes swelled it to full power. Spark after spark, increased almost beyond imagination, followed one after another. The

Miner throbbed and shook.

White-faced, Asher touched the little lever that opened the blasting outlets in the bottom. Almost instantly the Miner dropped a full six inches—went on, down to a foot. Asher, pride of success choking him, pulled the lever hard over, which brought some of the tubes beneath him spreading out, to blast away the earth on each side of him.

He signaled for more and more slack as the depth indicator showed he had burned, or disintegrated, his way down to thirty feet beyond the original bottom of the hole. He was below the bottom of the protecting wall of casing now—at the mercy of the pressure of two miles of earth.

Slowly, setting all his bottom tubes to cutting away on all sides of him, he started hollowing out enough room to step out into. His lights, when he looked through the windows, showed ghostly on earth ten feet on each side of him. Ten more minutes and he had created a room nearly twenty-five feet square—a man-made cave, two miles below the surface.

There was something akin to awe in the feelings of Asher when he opened the little door, crawled out and stood erect. The pressure lamps in his helmet lit up the room he had made. There were no sounds, just a vague, ringing silence.

Then so quickly that it robbed him of his senses, two things happened. A hundred yards away from the well in which he had descended, another well, drilled by another oil company, was shot. Three hundred quarts of nitro-glycerine were set off in the hole.

Asher screamed and clamped his ear discs down tight. It seemed the very gods of thunder were shrieking and raging in his head; every nerve and fiber in his body throbbed and tingled with the hellish vibration.

On his knees, where the shock had thrown him, in darkness beyond description, Asher realized the lights from the Miner no longer shone out. Frantically, he adjusted the small lights in his helmet and got them to sending off their rays again. Then, an icy hand seemed to squeeze his heart, turning his blood to ice-

water in his veins. He cursed himself for not foreseeing that some company might shoot a well close by, while he was underground.

He turned. The Miner was all right, but Blaine Asher was trapped! For the walls of the hole below the bottom of the casing had caved. Thirty feet of rock, sand and conglomerate matter were between him and the bottom of the pipe.

He was trapped—two miles below the earth. There was no hope of rescue, the hope that miners feel in deep shafts. There could be no rescue for Asher. No one could get to him. He cried out his horror, fighting to keep from swooning.

The helmet hampered him. He turned on a small pressure lamp attached to the belt at his waist, and chanced taking the helmet off. Dank and nauseous was the air that he breathed, since it no longer came through the filters in his helmet. But it was air that would serve, nevertheless.

A crackling, rumbling sound caused him to turn

quickly. Eyes wide, he stared at the long crack that was opening before him.

Asher was between two layers of granite—one layer under him, and another above him, just below the oil sands. Now, as the crack between these two layers widened, he could see it slope downward until it ended in a great cavern that stretched endlessly away beyond the beams of his light.

It wasn't this crack that caused Blaine Asher, an iron-hearted man of science, to choke and sag down to a sitting position, his knees refusing to support him. No—it was the terrible, Godless, unbelievable *Things* that scurried around in the smooth rock hall that stretched away into the cavern.

Frozen with soul-chilling fear, Asher stared with eyes that bulged. What were they? Spawned neither of God nor Satan—what could they be? Black-skinned—or was it skin?—like rubber, with round bodies, like black basket balls inflated to triple size; bodies that seemed to ripple, distort, swell and contract with life within life.

Short, foot-long stems that must have been legs, ending in round balls that served as feet, no doubt. Tentacles, Asher would have called them, six feet in length, thick as mighty cables and dotted with suckers like the tentacles of an octopus. And heads—Asher gagged and vomited!

Not heads. Just masses of the black body substance as large as the two fists of a man. In each head was a crooked black gash for a mouth. There were no eyes that Asher could see. Yet, these Things seemed to see one another, and emitted strange, chill, squeaking sounds!

As Asher watched, the Things sensed his presence. A half hundred of them rose and started toward him. They did not walk, nor did they crawl. Undulating, contorting strangely, they came on with incredible speed, long tentacles waving before them; slithering on the rocky floor of the cavern; making those odd squeaking noises.

As they neared him, Asher sprang to his feet, backing up against the pile of cavings beside the Miner. A long

tentacle whipped out and wrapped around his leg. A short, snout-tentacle quivered toward his face. There was strength beyond imagining in the grip on him.

With an almost animal snarl the man from the earth's surface moved to protect himself from these creatures, surely of the lowest living order. He grabbed into the pocket of his loose asbestos composition suit, and his fingers closed comfortingly around the static gun.

He aimed it, and the Thing gripping him was hurled back upon the others.



[Image description start. A black and white illustration, showing Asher, in a pressure suit, weilding a gun and firing it at one of the black, tentacled shapes attacking him. Image description end.]

Crackling, snapping viciously, the charges of

electricity that were drawn from the very earth increased in the gun and spumed out like lightning bolts. The Things squeaked excitedly and surged forward. Asher's finger pulled the ratchet trigger full force, and like dew before a strong shaft of sunlight, the gruesome Things were knocked away.

Hating the sight, Asher changed the charge of his gun, cutting the size of the path the volts covered, thereby increasing the potency of the discharge. The piled bodies sizzled, and to Asher's nose came a sulphurous smell. Then, there was nothing at all....

Sick, he put the gun back into the deep pocket and leaned on the wall. He turned around again to the pile of cavings that barred his way from the surface, and dug like a madman with his bare hands. The Miner was weighed down, and he could not use it anyhow. The blasting tubes were on the bottom, and could not be shifted to the top.

Suddenly he stopped his crazed work, raised his head and listened. "My God!" he gasped hoarsely, "am I stark mad?" He thought he must be, for the voice of a

human being came to his ears.

"You will be pleased, Blaine Asher, to turn around!
And do not make any foolish moves, I warn you."

"Lee Wong! Krenski!" Asher turned, face to face with the super-scientists of whom he had spoken to R. Briggs Johns the day before. Asher shook his head. More of the terrible dream, this meeting two humans down in the earth's core.

"Most right, honorable Asher." Lee Wong bowed mockingly. He and Krenski were garbed in loose-fitting garments of much the same style as Asher. In their hands, they carried static guns. Not the small gun, such as Asher had concealed in his pocket. More like heavy air drills, they were.

Asher frowned at the lamps they carried. He knew by the dazzling action of the rays that they were pressure lamps. But they gave off much better light than those of his own invention. They had gone him one better there.

"Did—did you see them?" Asher gulped. "And how—how did you get down here? Tell me!" He took a step toward Lee Wong, intending to lay his hand on the Chinaman, to make sure he was live flesh and blood, and not a figment of his disordered brain.

"Stand where you are!" Lee Wong snapped. He held the heavy static gun up and Asher felt a light charge tingle his body. "Those Things of which you speak—I assume you mean the Petrolia. Ah, yes, we see them. Every day, we see them. For us they work. They work, my dear Blaine Asher, tapping upward into the oil sands; sands that are burial places of countless millions of generations of Petrolia; of lost races that once ruled supreme over these underground worlds.

"How simple, to take the oil from below—the oil you want so much above. Someone must do the work. I and Krenski found the Petrolia ready and willing. Being creatures of feeling, with little sense, we were able to bend their dying wills to do our work. You see, we made them feel we would save them, a dying race, from extinction! They do our bidding."

Asher was bewildered by the enormity of the thing. "You mean these Things you have called Petrolia actually work for you? And that you saved them from becoming extinct?"

"Exactly," Lee Wong nodded, seeming to be enjoying himself. "Like humans of the surface, Petrolia live on the dead. I mean, wherever we get our living food from the earth, we plant our dead back in that earth. Petrolia are spawned in beds of petroleum. Just as eels seek deep water to lay their eggs, so do Petrolia go to the oil strata to spawn future tribes.

"When we pump out the oil, they have no—shall we say "hatching?"—beds. But now, by tapping and bringing down the oil, we have assured them more spawning pits. They will increase, and we have made them sense it. For that matter, the very oil they breed in, gives them sustenance. That is why they are black fleshed and blooded, and have suckers instead of mouths, as a black man is black through ages beneath hot suns.

"It's easy for us, who are wiser than other men, to

figure what oilfield might contain such people. We have a rapid elevator connecting us to the surface. And—"

"Then," Asher almost shouted, "I'm not trapped!"

"No?" Lee Wong wrinkled his forehead quizzically. "You should realize that we cannot allow you to go back to the surface—alive, or any other way. We intend to increase the Petrolia, spreading them to other underground, yet uninhabited worlds. You would spoil that.

"No, you will never return to the surface. They cannot haul your tube to the top, so they will think you perished in it. And"—Lee Wong shrugged—"it might have been better if you had, Mr.—"

"*I wouldn't!*" the yellow man snarled. He rolled the ratchet of his static gun and Asher was hurled to the floor by the heavy shock. Wisely, he stood up, keeping his hands well away from the pocket in which his own gun rested. He doubted whether his little static gun could compete with the guns of the others, but it was

something. They had not thought to search him—perhaps they might not. It was his only hope.

Lee Wong bowed low again, motioning Asher to go ahead. "Now you shall see what we have done. We are proud, and we know you can appreciate our workings. You will be glad to learn why we do as we are doing; you will be intrigued as a fellow scientist. Then, so sad to say, you must perish for having gained that very knowledge."

Asher shrugged, and through half-closed lids he eyed Lee Wong and the rather small, slender Krenski, of the high brow and large head. Then he walked ahead of them. Head up, shoulders back, he walked carelessly down the wide hall—a hall that led into the main cavern of that underground empire.

It was large—fully a hundred feet in a rough square. Not fifteen feet from floor to ceiling at any point, it followed the course of the two layers of granite between which it was sandwiched. Other long halls, or crevices, ran in every direction out of this main cavern. In the walls, in niches and cracks, the

superior pressure lamps had been placed, throwing a bright, eery light over it all.

Asher recoiled suddenly at the sight of hundreds of Petrolia that swarmed the hallways, and they seemed to sense another presence beside that of Lee Wong or Krenski. A choked, gurgling sound came from the Chinaman, and they disappeared down the halls, squeaking angrily as they went.

"Our control room," explained Lee Wong waving his hand about him. He pointed to a dozen twenty-four inch pipe-lines that ran along the low ceiling, coming from as many different halls into the room, but all going out the same large hall, larger than the rest. "There are the arteries of our system. There is the oil that is so—shall we say strangely?—missing in your wells." He smiled, a taunting, mocking light in his eyes.

"You well understand how we do it. Above us, just below the oil strata, is a steel, trough-shaped roof. The oil, tapped from below, drains into these, and then into these pipe-lines. If we were working from

above, now, we would run it to a central shaft, and pump it out. We do not want it on the surface, however."

"Then why in the name of hell do you want it?" Asher barked, a tense note of anger in his voice. "And what do you do with it?" These two were humans. At least, they were in man-form, if not in feeling. And the Petrolia could be handled. Asher was getting mad, and his fear ebbed.

"Come." Lee Wong led the way under the pipe-lines, down the large hall. Krenski, his heavy static gun ready, walked at Asher's back. They came out into another cavern that stretched beyond the powerful lights. The sound of their voices echoed like thunder of the drums of Thor, and Asher realized this cavern might stretch away in Stygian blackness for hundreds of miles.

Asher marveled, for the floor of this cavern dropped at least five feet below the level of the control room or incoming hallways, forming a natural reservoir. A reservoir for the big streams of oil that were pouring

into it from the pipe-lines.

The rumble of the oil as it came in and splashed out in a never-ending stream, and the rumble of the oil streams above them as the precious fluid flowed down into the plated drain roof, sounded like the tramp of the weary feet of the damned, as it echoed back and forth across the mighty cavern.

"Our storage." Lee Wong stood at the edge and explained. "Also, as you may see, a concentration incubator, or spawning bed and food storage for our Petrolia."

Blaine Asher looked again at the rippling oil at his feet. He choked brokenly and stepped back a pace. For the oil near the bank was alive! It rippled and splashed, teeming with life. By the strange alchemy of breeding in oil and living on oil as man lives on bread, that lake of oil was a mass of growing Petrolia. Millions—yes, countless billions—of them! Hideous, foul Things that would be turned loose with the rest in that nightmare world—that would be taken to other buried worlds to start new races.

"But why—why?" Asher almost screamed the words at Lee Wong.

"Petrolia will be our armies, protecting our underground wealth," Lee Wong answered him. "They will be our faithful workers, under no command but mine. For, even Krenski has not mastered the over-control it takes to handle them!

"Gradually, as happened to the field we are now under, all oil fields will go dry. We will be getting the oil from below, and putting it in storage in mother earth. Think, Blaine Asher, what it will mean!" There was a fanatical light in Lee Wong's beady eyes.

"A world without petroleum is a world without power. No oil for fuel; no gasoline, lubricants or by-products of any sort. No airplanes could fly; tanks, tractors, oil-burning trains and ships; mechanical appliances—nothing could run. We now take the oil from America. Later, when our Petrolia have increased and we have devised means of moving them, we will go to all oil-producing countries.

"We will secrete the oil and paralyze the world. Now, in Russia and China and India, our societies are organizing and growing. They will handle the weakened, powerless nations, and I shall be ruler of the universe, surface and beneath, with Krenski to aid me, you see. It is wonderful, is it not? And, knowing what you do, having seen what you have, could you call it impossible?"

Blaine Asher groaned. It was not impossible, he knew. Unreal; monstrous—but never impossible. A region of hideous Petrolia; a world stripped of automotive and mechanical power, its fuel held in the hands of a few, far underground—it was terrible to think of.

And Asher the only one who knew. The only one who could avert such a thing. The fate of an entire world was in his hands. And he would soon die.

Die? No! Blaine Asher swore silently to himself that no power in existence should keep him from destroying these two fiends. It had to be done!

He dared not fail.

"Wonderful, stupendous thing," he forced himself to smile. "I'd like to grasp the hand of the genius who devised and carried out such a wonderful thing."

He took a step toward Lee Wong, right hand extended, his left slipping toward the pocket where his own static gun rested.

Lee Wong extended his own right hand. Something in the chill, flint look of Asher's eyes must have warned him. Even as Asher's fingers closed around his hand, he tried to jerk back.

"Destroy him!" he cried out to Krenski.

Asher dropped to one knee, letting his static gun remain in his pocket. His left hand closed around Lee Wong's wrist as the Oriental tried to pull away. Krenski was bringing the heavy, cylinderlike gun up and aiming it at Asher.

Asher twisted on one knee, his teeth gritted, braced to receive the shock from the gun. He jerked Lee Wong's arm down, heaved and came to his feet.

Crying out, arms and legs flailing, the Chinaman catapulted toward Krenski—and just at the instant Krenski fired!

The sickening smell of cindered flesh was in Asher's nostrils as he turned and ran back up the main hallway. He glanced back over his shoulder as he ran, and shuddered at the black mass lying at Krenski's feet. Lee Wong was no more. Wide-eyed, the Russian stared at the thing at his feet. Then, with a fiendish shriek, turned and brought the gun into line on the fleeing Asher.

A crackling charge of electricity singed the back of Asher's head as he dove head first around the corner of the hall into the control cavern. He reasoned that Krenski had sent a full charge after him, and hope kindled higher in his breast. For Asher believed his smaller static weapon was as strong as that of the other. At that, it would be a test, and Asher dared not take chances.

He crouched in the door of another hallway, waiting. Cursing, Krenski dashed into the control cavern.

Asher brought his gun up and fired. But even as he pulled the trigger, a long tentacle reached from the dark crevice behind him and jerked his arm. His charge snapped by the Russian, warning the other that Asher, too, was dealing with powerful electric rays that meant death should they touch.

Asher yielded to the tug of the slimy, sulphur-smelling tentacle, letting it pull him into the crevice, the charges of Krenski's weapon crackling by him, leaving his skin dry, and a powdery sensation in his mouth.

In the shelter of the crevice, Asher turned his gun upon the Petrolia that gripped him. The tentacles fell away, fading to nothingness before the charges that showed quivery blue in the dark. Like catacombs, one crevice opened into another. Asher darted into the next crevice and edged cautiously toward the control cavern.

The angry buzzing and snapping of Krenski's weapon caused him to duck instinctively, although no deadly charges came his way.

"Oh, God!" he heard the Russian's high-pitched voice, agonized, wailing, "they're coming in—they're coming in!"

A squeaking and slithering, now greater than ever, rose above all other sounds. And Asher realized what Krenski meant. Lee Wong had said that only he could control the Petrolia. They were swarming into the control room now. That was what Krenski was shooting at.

The squeaking sounds came up the crevice in which Asher was and a cold, clammy sweat broke out all over him. He could blast a thousand of them into nothing. But by sheer force, more body than his light static gun could down, they would overwhelm him.

His mind raced swiftly. He remembered the location, out in the control room, of the cage elevator that ran to the surface. It had not been hurt by the glycerine blast that had trapped Asher. The elevator shaft from the control room was cased clear into the cavern floor, and the blast had not jarred this far.

He wheeled and sent another charge of static electricity into the crevice back of him, then lunged out into the control room. It would be his own weapon against Krenski's, and a chance to gain the bottom of the shaft.

Krenski—piled, charred heaps of the Petrolia around him, which had momentarily cleared the attack—was running across the control room. Like a seething wave, the foul Petrolia undulated from every crevice and hallway, coming in to fresh attack. The Russian, terror lending him speed, raced for the cage at the foot of the shaft that led to the surface. At the same time Asher ran out.

Nearly a hundred feet apart, on opposite sides of the cavern, they stopped. Krenski turned his heavy weapon toward Asher at the same time Asher sent his own gun crackling and snapping out blue, fiery flame.

Side-stepping, now crouching, now dodging to this side and that, they fought their strange duel. Asher's right arm was burned, his hair singed from his head, and his body jarred again and again as Krenski

touched him. Krenski, groaning through gritted teeth, suffered burns all over his chest and left leg.

As the Petrolia came on, and the lightning play of deadly electric charges continued, Asher made a discovery. He noticed that the rays, or charges, of the two guns, when they met in mid-air, caused blue flame, and that the charge went no farther.

It did it again. The two charges met, crackled to explosion in the air. Krenski, too, noticed it, and he also noticed that the Petrolia were almost upon them again. Coming on in a wave that could not be hurled back.

He looked at Asher, and met the dare in Asher's eyes. Straight at each other, neither moving, they shot their static charges. Neither would move: it was a challenge from Asher that Krenski had to meet. One of them would have to die before the other would be able to gain the cage in the shaft. There could be no compromise, and only one man at a time could go surfaceward. If they continued to dodge and fight, the Petrolia would overwhelm them.

Power against power, they fought it out.

Asher's finger tightened on his trigger release until it seemed the skin would split; then he caused his hand to tremble just enough to make his electric charges cover the space in which Krenski's charges traveled. Hissing, spitting, flashing explosions, giving off sounds and light like big explosions of flash powder, the charges met.

Asher tingled from head to foot, and thrilled to the very marvel of the thing. Two deadly beams of electricity, holding each other off!

In one long, continuous flash, the contact point of the charges began to shift. Closer and closer, as the force of superior charges cleaved through the other, the contact points neared Krenski. He saw death upon him, for in another instant, Asher's charges would hurl his own bolts back upon him. The smaller weapon of Blaine Asher, attracting more static electric currents by reason of having a small attracting battery inside, where the larger gun of the other depended upon magnets for attraction, was

triumphing.

Krenski's mustache and light beard singed and curled. He cried out, stepped back, throwing up his arms as death flashed through his body.

His gun playing about him, Asher raced toward the big valves and gates that shut off the drain of the pipe-lines. Burning, reeking of sulphur and burned leather, the Petrolia vanished before him. But, as he turned, the drainage system that was robbing the field shut off. They had blocked his way again!

Too many to blast away altogether, they pressed in. Asher leaped forward, feet kicking, left fist smashing out, static gun crackling as if to tell him that nothing could stop them. Tentacles gripped at him, the foul, stinking smell gagged him. But the squeaks of the Petrolia maddened him.

"Squeak, damn you!" Asher shouted wildly, kicking, shooting and hitting, gaining toward the shaft.

"Squeak—for all the damned Things that ever bred below the earth cannot stop one surface man!"

He burned and fought his way through and jumped into the cage as his gun electrocuted two of the Petrolia that tried to weave in after him. As he slammed the door, Asher was conscious that something was happening. He hesitated, just long enough to see the cavern start buckling and caving. The pressure of the oil, now shut off, was filling back toward the surface, creating a mighty pressure downward. The surface wells would produce man's power-fuel once more.

Asher slammed the door, turned on the power, and the cage shot upward.

A half hour later, those waiting on the floor of the derrick above the hole in which Asher had gone down, started. Asher, burned, wounded, blood streaming from his battered body, staggered in and collapsed at their feet.

“I can't believe it! Insane! Impossible! Yet, every well in this field has started producing again! And when we went to that old, abandoned wildcat well, we found the shaft opening! I had it covered up, as you

ordered."

R. Briggs Johns paced up and down the laboratory floor, talking to Asher, who had just arisen from his bed, two weeks after he had collapsed at their feet in the derrick. Still bandaged, he was a different Blaine Asher. His face was lined, and the hair next to his scalp nearly snow white.

"I'll be able to do some walking around outside in a few days," Asher declared as he cleaned a test tube and placed it in a rack. "I can locate several wells over that underground storage cavern, and you can recover that oil. But you can't mine this field.

"Twenty years, perhaps, and you can. But it will take that long for those Petrolia to die out. We've got to get the oil out from below to a point where they can no longer spawn. We will apply mining in other fields—but not here!"

"Not here," Johns repeated, shuddering.

"It's up to you to see no one else tries it." Asher lit a

cigarette and nodded at Johns. "Get control of the field—anything. Tell the oil men something. But don't tell them the truth. They wouldn't believe you. They would call you raving mad.

"The world does not know. It would not believe. Can we do other than remain silent?"

R. Briggs Johns, sick of thinking of the cavern world and horrible things below them, knew they could not.

#31 Giants Of The Ray, By Tom Curry:

Madly the three raced for their lives up the shaft of the radium mine, for behind them poured a stream of hideous monsters—giants of the ray!

Aproximate word count: 9,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"I tell you I'm not crazy," insisted the tall man.

"Durkin, they got a big mine."

Bill Durkin laughed roughly, and sneered openly at his partner, Frank Maget. "G'wan, you're drunk."

"Well, I was last night," admitted Maget. "But I'd slept it off this morning. I was lying under that table in the Portuguee's, and when I opened my eyes, there were these three birds sitting near me. They hadn't spotted me. I heard 'em talking of wealth, how their mine was

of unbelievable richness and greater than any other deposit in the world. Well, that means something, don't it?"

"That's all right," said Durkin. "But whoever saw a cricket fifteen inches long?"

"Listen. There were three of these guys. One was a hell of a looking fellow: his face was piebald, with purple spots. His skin was bleached and withered, and one eye looked like a pearl collar button! They called him Professor, too, Professor Gurlone. Well, he takes out this damn cricket thing and it was sort of reddish purple but alive, and as long as your forearm. This professor guy says his son had taken an ordinary cricket and made it grow into the one he had. But the mine was what interested me. I kept my mouth shut and my ears open, and it's in the Matto Grosso. May be emeralds, diamonds, or gold. Boy, I'm heading for it, right now. The old guy's going back to-morrow, get me?"

"It's a lot of bunk," growled Durkin, who was stout and red of countenance.

"Yeh? Well, Otto Ulrich don't put fifty thousand into bunk."

Durkin whistled. "You mean the German loosened up that much?" he asked, and his eyes showed interest.

"Sure. He paid this Gurlone fifty thousand dollars—credit, of course."

"Well—maybe there's something in the mine story. But boy, you were drunk when you saw that cricket. No cricket ever grew that big. You always see things when you get too much rum in you."

"The hell you say," cried Maget. "I saw it, I tell you!"

Durkin feigned elaborate politeness. "Oh, all right, Frank. Have it your own way. You saw a cricket that big and this Gurlone feller took a couple of pink elephants out of his pocket to pay the check. Sure, I believe you."

But money never failed to attract the two tropical tramps. They were looking for trouble, not work, and

the idea of a raid on a rich mine in the Matto Grosso was just what they would enjoy.

An hour later, they had cornered a small, inoffensive peon named Juan. Juan, Maget and Durkin had discovered, had come out of the wilderness with Professor Gurlone, the strange looking gentleman who spoke of a fabulously wealthy mine and commanded checks for fifty thousand dollars from a reputable banking firm. Such a man was worth watching.

The two rascals were expert at pumping the little half-breed. They knew peons, and the first thing that happened was that Durkin had slipped Juan several dollars and had pressed a large glass of whiskey on the little man.

The conversation was in broken English and Spanish.

"Quien sabe?"

Durkin and Maget had this phrase flung at them often during the course of the talk with Juan, and there

were many elaborate shrugs.

There was a mine, way back in the Matto Grosso, said Juan. He thought it might contain silver: there had been the shaft of an old mine there. But now they were deep down in the ground, digging out reddish brown ore, and the cavern smoked and smelled so badly a man could work but an hour or two before being relieved. But the pay was very high. Also, Juan, in his rambling way, spoke of grotesque animals. What were these creatures like? asked Durkin. Then came a shrug, and Juan said they were like nothing else on earth.

Durkin discounted the part of the story having to do with the strange animals. He thought it was peon superstition. But now he was sure there was a rich mine to be raided.

"It's a tough part of the Grosso," he said, turning to Maget.

"Sure. Hard to carry enough water and supplies to make it. Say, Juan, who was that big Portuguese with

Professor Gurlone? He's blind, ain't he? His eyes were white as milk, and his face tanned black as river mud. Surely is a great big guy, and tough looking, too."

Durkin drummed on the table, considering the matter, while Juan spoke of the big Portuguese. The swarthy man with the colorless blind eyes was Espinosa, former owner of the mine. He had sold part of his claim to the Gurlones, but had remained with them as an assistant. Though blind, he knew the depths of the mine and could feel his way about, and direct the peons in their labors.

"I've got it," said Durkin, turning back to Juan and Maget. "Juan, it's up to you. You've got to blaze the trail so we can follow you in. And you can steal food and cache it for use on the way, see? We'll come along a day or so after the Gurlones."

It took some persuading to make Juan consent to their plot, but the peon yielded at last to money and the promise of part of the spoils. "Maybe you can steal Gurlone's samples and they'll give us a line on what he's up to out there. Whether it's emeralds or

diamonds or gold that they're taking out of the mine."

Juan was stupid and superstitious, like most of his fellows. He had obeyed orders, digging out the red ore, and that was all he knew. But prompted by the two tramps, he was ready for trouble, too.

Juan told them that Professor Gurlone carried a small lead case which he seemed to prize greatly.

"Get it, then," ordered Durkin.

The two tramps saw Gurlone's party start on the morrow. There were many cases of supplies loaded into launches, some marked Glass, Acids, and so on. Then there were boxes of food and various things needed in a jungle camp.

Juan, their tool, was working with the other peons, and at ten o'clock in the morning the launches set out, pushing into the current of the Madeira.

Old Gurlone, of the livid face, was in charge of one boat, and the gigantic Portuguese, with his colorless

eyes and burned complexion, sat beside him.

That night, the two tropical tramps stole a small boat with a one-cylinder motor, and started up the river.

It was a hard journey, but they were used to river and jungle work, and the object they had in view was enough to make them discount trouble. They speculated upon what manner of treasure it was they would find in the cavern of the Matto Grosso mine. It might be precious stones, it might be gold. Certainly it was something very valuable.

They carried little supplies, but they were heavily armed. For food, they might hunt and also depend on the caches left by their friend, Juan the peon.

Three hundred miles from Manaus, they came to the landing where old Gurlone had unloaded his boats. The two tramps drew their own craft up on shore a quarter of a mile away, keeping out of sight, and hid the boat in dense brush. Then they crept up the river bank, keeping out of sight of the boatmen, who were preparing for the return voyage, and cut into the

jungle so as to strike the trail of the caravan ahead.

For several hours they followed the path easily. They found palm trees blazed with new marks, and these they were sure their friend Juan had left for them. But the trail was easy to keep without these. The supplies had been loaded on burros, which had been awaiting the boats.

That night, they camped beside a small stream. They were but twenty-four hours behind Professor Gurlone and his party, and the food Juan had cached for them was in good condition.

They were up at daybreak, and pressed on, armed to the teeth and ready for a fight.

"What's that?" said Durkin, stopping so suddenly that Maget ran into him.

They had been walking at a swift pace along the jungle path, the giant trees forming a canopy overhead. Monkeys screamed at them, birds flitted a hundred feet above them in the roof of the forest.

The sun beat on the jungle top, but few rays lightened the gloom beneath.

From up ahead sounded a frightful scream, followed by a long drawn out wailing. Maget glanced at Durkin, and the latter shrugged, and pressed on. But he gripped his rifle tightly, for the cries were eery.

From time to time the two stopped to catch better the direction of the wails. At last, they located the spot where the injured person lay.

It was under a great bombax tree, and on the shaded ground writhed a man. The two stopped, horrified at the squirming figure. The man was tearing at his face with his nails, and his countenance was bloody with long scratches.

He cursed and moaned in Spanish, and Durkin, approaching closer, recognized Juan the peon.

"Hey, Juan, what the hell's the matter? A snake bite you?"

The bronzed face of the sturdy little peon writhed in agony. He screamed in answer, he could not talk coherently. He mumbled, he groaned, but they could not catch his words.

At his side lay a small lead container, and closer, as though he had dropped it after extracting it from its case, lay a tube some six inches in length. It was a queer tube, for it seemed to be filled with smoky, pallid worms of light that writhed even as Juan writhed.

"What's the trouble?" asked Durkin gruffly, for he was alarmed at the behavior of the peon. It seemed to both tramps that the man must have gone mad.

They kept back from him, with ready guns. Juan shrieked, and it sounded as though he said he was burning up, in a great fire.

Suddenly the peon staggered to his feet; as he pushed himself up, his hands gripped the tube, and he clawed at his face.

Perplexity and horror were writ on the faces of the two tramps. Maget was struck with pity for the unfortunate peon, who seemed to be suffering the tortures of the damned. He was not a bad man, was Maget, but rather a weakling who had a run of bad luck and was under the thumb of Durkin, a really hard character. Durkin, while astounded at the actions of Juan, showed no pity.

Maget stepped forward, to try and comfort Juan; the peon struck out at him, and whirled around. But a few yards away was the bank of the stream, and Juan crashed into a black palm set with spines, caromed off it, and fell face downward into the water. The glass tube was smashed and the pieces fell into the stream.

"God, he must be blind," groaned Maget. "Poor guy, I've got to save him."

"The hell with him," growled Durkin. He grasped his partner's arm and stared curiously down at the dying peon.

"Let go, I'll pull him out," said Maget, trying to

wrench away from Durkin.

"He's done for. Why worry about a peon?" said Durkin. "Look at those fish!"

The muddy waters of the stream had parted, and dead fish were rising about the body of Juan. But not about the dying man so much as close to the spot where the broken tube had fallen. White bellies up, the fish died as though by magic.

"Let's—let's get the hell back to Manoas, Bill," said Maget in a sickly voice. "This—this is too much for me."

A nameless fear, which had been with Maget ever since the beginning of the venture, was growing more insistent.

"What?" cried Durkin. "Turn back now? The hell you say! That damn peon got into a fight with somebody and maybe got bit by a snake later. We'll go on and get that treasure."

"But—but what made those fish come up that way?" said Maget, his brows creased in perplexity.

Durkin shrugged. "What's the difference? We're O. K., ain't we?"

In spite of the stout man's bravado, it was evident that he, too, was disturbed at the strange happenings. He kept voicing aloud the question in his mind; what was in the queer tube?

But he forced Maget to go on. Without Juan, the peon, to leave them caches of food on the trail, they would have a difficult time getting provender, but both were trained jungle travelers and could find fruit and shoot enough game to keep them going.

Day after day they marched on, not far from the rear of the party before them. They took care to keep off Gurlone's heels, for they did not wish their presence to be discovered.

When they had been on the journey, which led them east, for four days, the two rascals came to a

waterless plateau, which stretched before them in dry perspective. Before they came to the end of this, they knew what real thirst was, and their tongues were black in their mouths before they caught the curling smoke of fires in the valley where they knew the mine must be.

"That's the mine," gasped Durkin, pointing to the smoke.

The sun was setting in golden splendor at their backs; they crept forward, using great boulders and piles of reddish earth, strange to them, for cover. Finally they reached the trail which led to the hills overlooking the valley, and a panorama spread before them which amazed them because of its elaborateness.

It seemed more like a stage scene than a wilderness picture. Straight ahead of them, as they lay flat on their stomachs and peered at the big camp, yawned the black mouth of a large cavern. This, they were sure, was the mine itself. Close by this mouth stood a stone hut. It was clear that this building had something to do with the ore, perhaps a refining

plant, Durkin suggested.

There were long barracks for the peons, inside a barbed wire enclosure, and they could see the little men lounging now about campfires, where frying food was being prepared. Also, there was a long, low building with many windows in it, and houses for supplies and for the use of the owners of the camp.

"Looks like they were ready in case of a fight," said Durkin at last. "That fence around the peons looks like they might be havin' trouble."

"Some camp," breathed Maget.

"We got to find somethin' to drink," said Durkin.

"Come on."

They worked their way about the rim of the valley, and in doing so caught glimpses of Professor Gurlone, the elderly man they had spotted in Manaos, and also saw the big Portuguese with his sightless eyes.

At the other side of the valley, they came on a spring

which flowed to the east and disappeared under ground farther down.

"Funny water, ain't it?" said Durkin, lying down on his stomach to suck up the milky water.

But they were not in any mood to be particular about the fluids they drank. The long dry march across the arid lands separating the camp from the rest of the world had taken all moisture from their throats.

Maget, drinking beside his partner, saw that the water glinted and sparkled, though the sun was below the opposite rim of the valley. It seemed that greenish, silvery specks danced in the milky fluid.

"Boy, that's good," Durkin finally found time to say, "I feel like I could fight a wildcat."

The water did, indeed, impart a feeling of exhilaration to the two tramps. They crept up close to the roof of the parallel shaft which they had seen from the other side of the valley, and looked down into the camp again.

Professor Gurlone of the livid face and Espinosa the blind Portuguese, were talking to a big man whose golden beard shone in the last rays of the sun.

"That's the old bird's son," said Durkin, "that Juan told us about. Young Gurlone."

A rumbling, pleasant laugh floated on the breeze, issuing from the big youth's throat. The wind was their way, now, and the valley breathed forth an unpleasant odor of chemicals and tainted meat.

"Funny place," said Maget. "Say, I got a hell of a headache, Bill."

"So've I," grunted Durkin. "Maybe that water ain't as good as it seemed at first."

They lay in a small hollow, watching the activity of the camp. The peons were in their pen, and it was evident that they were being watched by the owners of the camp.

As purple twilight fell across the strange land, the two

tramps began to notice the dull sounds which came to their ears from time to time.

"That's funny thunder," said Maget nervously. "If I didn't know it was thunder, I'd swear some big frogs were around here."

"Oh, hell. Maybe it's an earthquake," said Durkin irritably. "For God's sake, quit your bellyachin'. You've done nothin' but whine ever since we left Juan."

"Well, who could blame me—" began Maget. He broke off suddenly, the pique in his voice turned to a quiver of fear, as he grasped Durkin's arm. "Oh, look," he gasped.

Durkin, seeing his partner's eyes staring at a point directly behind him, leaped up and scrambled away, thinking that a snake must be about to strike him.

He turned round when he felt he was far enough away, and saw that the ground was moving near the spot where he had been lying.

The earth was heaving, as though ploughed by a giant share; a blunt, purplish head, which seemed too fearful to be really alive, showed through the broken ground, and a worm began to draw its purple length from the depths. It was no snake, but a gigantic angleworm, and as it came forth, foot after foot, the two watched with glazed eyes.

Maget swallowed. "I've seen 'em two feet long," he said. "But never like that."

Durkin, however, when he realized that the loathsome creature could not see them and was creeping blindly towards them with its ugly, fat body creasing and elongating, picked up rocks and began to destroy the monstrous worm. He cursed as he worked.

Dull red blood splattered them, and a fetid odor from the gashes caused them to retch, but they finally cut the thing in two, and then they moved away from there.

The dull rumblings beneath them frightened Maget, and Durkin too, though the latter tried to brazen it

out.

"Come on, it's gettin' dark. We can take a look in their mine now."

Maget, whimpering, followed. The booming sounds were increasing.

But Durkin slipped down the hillside, and Maget followed into the valley. They crept past the stone shack, which they noticed was padlocked heavily.

Durkin stopped suddenly, and cursed. "I've cut my foot," he said. "These damn shoes are gone, all right, from that march. But come on, never mind."

They crept to the mouth of the cavern and peered in. "Ugh," said Maget.

He drew back with a shudder. The floor of the mine was covered with a grey slush, in which were seething white masses of slugs weaving in the slime. A powerful, rotten odor breathed in their faces, as though they stood in the mouth of a great giant.

"Ah!" yelled Durkin, throwing his arms across his face.

The greenish, ghostly light which emanated from the slime was weaker than moonlight, just enough to see by; a vast shadow hovered above their heads, as though a gigantic bat flew there. The sweep and beat of great wings drove them back, and they fled in terror from such awful corruption.

But the flying monster, with a wing spread of eight feet, dashed past them, and silhouetted against the rising moon like a goblin. Then came another, and finally a flock of the big birds.

Durkin and Maget ran away, passing the stone house which stood near the cavern's mouth. The booming sounds from the bowels of the earth filled their ears now, and it was not thunder; no, it issued from the depths of the mine.

"We—we got to get somethin' to eat," said Durkin, as they paused near one of the shacks, in which shone a light.

Sounds of voices came from the interior. They crept closer, and listened outside the window. Inside, they could see Espinosa, Gurlone senior, and the big youth with the golden beard, Gurlone junior.

"Yes, father," the young man was saying. "I believe we had better leave, at once. It's getting dangerous. I've reached the five million mark now, with the new process, and it is ready to work with or sell, just as we wish."

"Hear that?" whispered Durkin triumphantly. "Five million!"

"It's all ready, in the stone house," said young Gurlone.

"Why should we leave now?" said old Gurlone, his livid face working. "Now, when we are just at the point of success in our great experiments? So far, while we have struck many creatures of abnormal growth, still, we have overcome them."

"Well, father, there is something in the mine now

which makes it too dangerous to work. That is, until they are put out of the way. You can hear them now."

The three inside the shack listened, and so did Durkin and Maget. The booming sounds swelled louder and the earth of the valley shook.

"I t'ink we better go," said Espinosa gruffly. "I agree with your son, Professor."

"No, no. We can conquer this, what ever it is."

"You see, father, while you were away, we broke through into a natural cavern, an underground river. It was then that the trouble started. You know the effect of the stuff on the insects and birds. It enlarged a cricket one hundred times. You saw that yourself. Six of the peons have disappeared—they didn't run away, either. They went down the shaft and never came back."

"Oh, they probably fell into the water and drowned," said old Gurlone impatiently. "Even if they did not, we can kill anything with these large bore rifles."

"We'd better pull out and let it alone for a while," said young Gurlone gravely. "The peons have been trying to bolt for several days. They'd be gone now if I hadn't penned them in and electrified the fence."

Maget put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm starving," he whispered.

Durkin nodded, and they turned away, toward what they had marked as a supply shack. They heard a low murmur from the peons' pen, as they began to break off the hasps of the lock which held the door of the storehouse.

They got inside with little trouble, and began to feel about in the dark for food. They located biscuits and canned goods which they split open, and these they wolfed hungrily, listening carefully for sounds from outside.

"Here they come," said Maget, gripping Durkin's arm.

They looked out the window of the supply shack, and saw old Gurlone issue from the building outside which

the two tramps had been listening. In one hand, the old Professor, brave as a lion, carried an old fashioned double-barreled elephant gun, and the rays from a powerful electric torch shone across the barrel.

At least, they thought the bizarre figure was old Gurlone, from the size. For the man was clad in a black, shiny suit, and over his head was a flapping hood of the same material in which were large eyeholes of green glass. Behind this strange form came a larger one, armed also with a big bore rifle and with another powerful flashlight.

The blind Portuguese was armed, too, but he was not clad in the black suit. He took his stand beside the mouth of the cavern, and waited while the two Gurlones entered the mine.

"My foot hurts," said Durkin suddenly, breaking the silence.

"I'm going out and see what happens," said Maget.

Durkin limped after Maget, who now took the lead.

They crept close as possible to the mine opening, and saw the big Portuguese standing there in silence, listening carefully. Any sounds the two might have made were drowned in the great bellowing from within the cavern.

These noises, so like the croak of bullfrogs but magnified a thousand times, were terrifying to the heart.

The sweep of wings sounded on the night air, and Espinosa drew back and squatted close to the ground, as immense green creatures, flying on dusty wings, issued from the mine.

"God, those are moths," breathed Maget.

Yes, unmistakably, they were moths, as large as condors. The green ones, but for their size, were lunar moths, familiar enough to the two tramps. More bats came, disturbed by the entrance of the two Gurlones.

Durkin broke, then. "I'm—I'm—I guess you're right,

Maget," he whispered, in a terrified voice. "We should have never come. If my foot wasn't hurt, I'd start for the river now. Curse it, what a place!"

The booming, vast croaks filled the whole valley, reverberating through the hills. Wails sounded from the peon camp.

The big Portuguese was shouting to the Gurlones. "Come out, come out!"

Maget gripped his own rifle, and stood up, bravely. His fear, though it was great, seemed to have brought out the better side of the man, while Durkin, so brave at first, had cracked under the strain.

"Look out, they'll see you," whimpered Durkin.

Maget strode forward. A blast of fetid, stinking air struck his face, and he choked. The noises were now ear-splitting, but above the bellows came the sounds of the big rifles, the echoes booming through the recesses of the cavern.

Then the two Gurlones, running madly, burst from the mine entrance.

"Run," they screamed. "Run for your life, Espinosa!"

"I'll help you," cried Maget, and Durkin could detain him no longer.

The Gurlones hardly noticed the newcomer, as they ran madly towards the shelter of their houses.

Espinosa joined them, going swiftly in spite of his blind eyes.

The croaking made Maget's brain scream with the immensity of the sound. Luminous, white disks, three feet in diameter, glared at him, and the creature, which progressed with jerky leaps toward him, almost filled the mouth of the mine.

It was hot in pursuit of the fleeing Gurlones. It squatted and then jumped, and presently it was out in the night air.

Its form was that of a gigantic frog, but it stood some

twenty feet in height, and from its throat sounded the terrific bellowing which rivalled the thunder.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing a giant frog climbing out of the entrance to a mine while bats and moths fly above it,

and a tiny person flees in fear. Image description
end.]

Maget bravely stepped forward, and began to fire into the huge, soft body. The great mouth opened, and as the dum-dum bullets tore gashes in the blackish green batrachian, the thunderous croaks took on a note of pain.

The odor of the creature was horrible. Maget could scarcely draw his breath as he fired the contents of the magazine into the big animal. Two more jumps brought the frog almost to Maget's feet, and the tropical tramp felt a whiskerlike tentacle touch his face, and bad smelling slime covered him.

The frog was blind, without doubt, from its underground life, but the tentacles seemed to be the way it finally located its prey, for it turned on Maget and made a final snap at him. The great jaws closed like the flap of hell, and Maget leaped back with a cry of triumphant terror.

The bullets had finally stopped the big frog, but at its

heels came a strange, jellylike creature, not quite as bulky as the frog, but pushing along on its legs and with a tail some eight feet thick and fifteen feet in length. This, too, evidently a polywog, was blind, with whitened discs for eyes, but it slid along at a rapid rate because of its size. Maget's gun was empty; he turned so flee, but the polywog stopped and sniffed at the thick blood of its fellow. Then, to Maget's relief, it began to hungrily devour its companion.

Utterly filthy, and ferocious, the polywog in silence snapped great chunks from the dead giant frog.

"Hello. Who are you?"

Maget turned, having forgotten the amenities of life in the excitement. Professor Gurlone and his son, still clad in their black suits, but with their helmets off, were standing beside him, clutching their guns and lights.

The big Portuguese, Espinosa, appeared, and Durkin was beside him.

"Why," said Maget, between gasps, "we just happened to be out exploring, and we saw your camp. We were on our way in when we heard the noises and came to investigate."

"I see," said old Gurlone. "What made you head in this direction, and where's your outfit?"

"Oh, we cached most of it back there," said Maget.

"My partner's hurt his foot, so he can't walk well. Isn't that so, Durkin?"

"Yeh," growled Durkin. "I got a sore foot, all right."

Old Gurlone was suspicious of the vague story which Maget and Durkin concocted as the explanation of their presence in the valley. But evidently the Professor was too worried about the situation in which he and his friends were, to question the two tramps very closely. In fact, he seemed rather glad that he had two more pairs of hands to aid him and he thanked Maget for his bravery.

They dispatched the great polywog as it tore its

parent to bits, and then the five men, the two Gurlones, Espinoza, Maget, and the limping, cursing Durkin, retired to one of the shacks.

The living quarters of the Gurlones was quite elaborate. There were many books on rough shelves, and there was a small bench filled with glass phials and chemicals, though the main laboratory was in one of the long buildings.

Professor Gurlone poured drinks for the five, and welcomed Durkin and Maget as allies.

"We'll need every man we can get, if we are to cope with these great creatures," said old Gurlone. "The peons are too frightened to be of use. Luckily, it was a frog we came upon on the banks of the subterranean river. There is no telling how many more creatures of the same or greater size may be down there. We will have to destroy them, every one."

Maget and Durkin shuddered. "Say," blurted Durkin, his face working nervously, "how the hell did that frog get so big? I thought I was seein' things, Professor."

"No, no," said Professor Gurlone. "You see, the ore in the mine contains radium, that is, salts of radium. It is a pitchblende deposit, and it happens to be so rich in radium content that throughout the ages it has affected all the life in the cavern. The arid land surrounding the ore—this has been, generally, one of the characteristics of radium deposits—has kept most of the jungle creatures away, but underground beings such as reptiles, worms and frogs, have gradually become immune to the effects of the ore and have grown prodigiously and abnormally under the stimulation of the rays given off by the radium.

"Now, this is nothing strange in itself, but never before has such a rich deposit been discovered, so that the amounts of radium available have been too small to really check its effect on growth in animals. That is our chief scientific object in coming here: we realized, from Senor Espinosa's description of the played-out silver mine he had, and from his loss of sight, that he had stumbled upon a valuable deposit of radium. It usually occurs with silver, that is, the uranium mother ore does, through the disintegration

of which radium is formed. The content of radium per ton in this ore proved unbelievably rich: we were delighted. I have always suspected that the animal cell might be stimulated into abnormal growth by exposure to radium salts, for such a thing already has been hinted at in the scientific world. Not till our chance came here, however, has enough radium been available for the experiments."

Maget and Durkin listened with open mouths. Radium meant but vague things to them. They had heard of radium paint which shone in the dark on the dials of watches and clothes, but of the properties of the metal and its salts they were utterly ignorant.

"That radium stuff is what makes the funny light in that mine, then?" asked Maget.

"Exactly. The radio-activity of the elements in the ore give off the light. There are three rays, the alpha, beta and gamma, and—"

The professor forgot himself in a lecture on the properties of radium.

Durkin, breaking in, asked, slyly. "Is this radium worth as much as silver?"

Young Kenneth Gurlone laughed, and even old Professor Gurlone smiled. "Radium is worth more than gold or diamonds or platinum. Its value is fabulous. We have five million dollars worth already, in the form of the chloride."

"Whew," whistled Durkin.

He glanced sidewise at Maget.

"Yes," said Professor Gurlone, "five million dollars worth of it! Those great monsters who have been developed throughout the ages by the action of the radium rays on their bodies, causing them to grow so prodigiously, are but incidents. We must destroy them, so that our work cannot be interfered with. We must use dynamite, blow them to bits. They are powerful enough to crush the stone bank by the mine mouth and ruin the labors of the past two years, gentlemen."

Armed, and once more fortified with whiskey, the five made their way outside. The moon was darkened by an immense shadow, as one of the giant bats winged its way over their heads. But there were no more monster frogs. The ugly, bulky shapes of the dead polywog and its parent lay before them.

"We are safe for the moment," said Professor Gurlone. "Go and quiet the peons, Espinosa: they will listen to you."

The peons still wailed in terror; the blind Espinosa slipped silently away.

"Come," said Professor Gurlone, to his son and to Maget and Durkin. "I will show you the laboratory, so that you can understand better the effects of radium on growth."

The professor led them to the long, low, many-windowed building nearby, and flooded it with light. It contained cage after cage in which were monkeys, pumas, and various jungle folk. These creatures set up a chattering and howling at the light and

intruders.

Maget glanced curiously about him. He saw shining vials and glassware of queer shapes on long black tables, and tubes of chemicals. There were immense screens of dull lead. "Those are for protection," said Professor Gurlone, "as are the lead-cloth suits we wear. Otherwise we would be burned by radium rays."

Maget looked about, to see if his partner was listening, but he had gone away.

However, Maget was intensely interested. He went from cage to cage as Professor Gurlone, rather in the manner of a man giving a lecture to students, pointed out animal after animal that had been treated by the radium.

"This," said the professor, "is a monkey which usually attains a height of two feet. You can see for yourself that it is now larger than a gorilla."

The horrible, malformed creature bared its teeth and shook its bars in rage, but it was weak, evidently,

from the treatment accorded it. Its hair was burned off in spots, and its eyes were almost white.

There was a jaguar, and this beast seemed to have burst its skin in its effort to grow as large as three of its kind.

"You see, we have not so much time as nature," said Professor Gurlone. "These beasts cannot be enlarged too rapidly, or they would die. They must be protected from the direct rays of the radium, which is refined. In the ore, the action is more gradual and gentle, since it is less concentrated. But the metal itself would burn the vital organs out of these creatures, cause them to be struck blind, shrivel them up inside and kill them in a few minutes in the quantity we have. We expose them bit by bit, allowing more and more time as they begin to grow immune to the rays. Here, you see, are smaller creatures which have grown some eight or ten times beyond normal size."

All the animals seemed the worse for wear. Maget, his brain reeling, yet was beginning to grasp what radium did to one. It was not gold that you could pick

up and carry away.

"If a man touched that radium," he asked, "what would happen to him?"

"Just what I said would happen to the animals if we did not give it to them gradually," said Gurlone, with a wave of his hand. "It would kill him, strike him down as though by invisible poison gas. His heart and lungs would cease to function, pernicious anemia would set in, as the red corpuscles in his blood perished by millions. He would be struck blind, fall down and die in agony."

To Maget came the picture of the unfortunate Juan. As though answering his unasked question, Professor Gurlone went on. "We had a peon coming up with us," he said. "His name was Juan. He stole my sample-case, which contained an ounce of radium chloride, and ran off with it. If he opens it, it will kill him in just that way."

Maget shivered. "But—but didn't it hurt you to carry it?" he asked.

"No. For it was incased in a lead container some two inches in thickness, and the rays cannot penetrate such a depth of lead. They are trapped in the metal."

"Father, father, you're wasting time," broke in Kenneth Gurlone, shaking his yellow head. "We must act at once. The peons are almost mad with fear. Even Espinosa cannot quiet them. And every moment is precious, for the monsters may break forth."

But Maget was looking nervously about for Durkin. Where was he? Durkin had his mind on the treasure, and—

As they turned toward the door, the professor saying. "The rays from the ore, which is not so concentrated as the purified metal, do not kill—" Durkin suddenly appeared.

He carried his rifle at his hip, and he limped and cursed angrily. "Come across," shouted Durkin. "Give me the key to that stone house. Snap into it, and no argument."

"The key—to the stone bank?" repeated old Gurlone.

"Yes. I'll give you five counts to throw it over—then I'll shoot you and take it," snarled Durkin savagely. "I want that treasure, whatever it is, and I'll have it. One ... two ... three...." The tramp sent a shot over their heads as a warning.

"Hey, Bill, easy, easy," pleaded Maget. "That stuff is radium. It'll ruin you, boy!"

"Shut up, you yellor-bellied bum," snarled Durkin. "Four...."

A tinkle of metal came on the stone floor of the laboratory, as old Gurlone tossed his keys to Durkin.

"Don't go in that shack," cried young Gurlone. "It'll be your death, man—"

"Liars," yelled Durkin, and backed out the door.

"H'm," said old Gurlone, turning to Maget. "So you came to rob us, eh?"

But Maget thought of Juan, and then he knew he did not want Durkin, in spite of his failings, to perish so. He ran for the door, and across the clearing.

"Durkin—Bill—wait, it's Frank—"

Great bellowings sounded from the bowels of the earth, but Maget ignored these in his effort to save his partner. Durkin had the padlock off the stone shack, and pulled back the door.

As the door disclosed the interior, Maget could see that a greenish haze filled the entire building. Wan liquid light streamed forth like heavy fluid.

Bravely, to save his pal from death, Maget ran forward. But Durkin had entered the stone shack.

Maget went to the very door of the building. Durkin was inside, and Maget could see his partner's thick form as a black object in the strange, thick air.

An eery scream came suddenly from Durkin's lips; Maget wrung his hands and called for help.

"Come out, Bill, come out," he cried.

Durkin evidently tried to obey, for he turned toward the door. But his knees seemed to give way beneath him, he threw his arm across his eyes as he sank to the ground, crying in agony, incoherent sounds issuing from his lips.

Shriek after shriek the unfortunate man uttered. As Maget made a dash forward to take a chance with death and rescue his friend, Professor Gurlone and his son Kenneth ran up and threw a black cloak over the tramp.

The three entered the shack of death. Maget, not entirely covered, felt his heart give a terrific jump, and he gasped for breath. Durkin was quivering on the floor which was lined with lead.

Round vials stood about the room like a battery of search-lights, and from these emanated the deadly green haze.

But almost before Maget touched his pal, Durkin was

dead. Curled up as though sewed together by heavy cords. Durkin lay in a ball, a shaking mass of burned flesh.

The two Gurlones pushed out ahead of them, and raised their hands. They had on their black suits and their helmets.

"It is too late to do anything for him now," said Kenneth Gurlone sadly. "He was headstrong. You can see for yourself that the five million dollars takes care of itself. Certain death goes with it if you are unprotected. These lead-cloth suits will keep off the rays for a short time. We always wear them when we are working with the metal, even when we have a lead screen."

"Poor Bill," sobbed Maget. "It's terrible!"

Professor Gurlone shrugged. "It was his own fault. He was a thief and he would not let us stop him. I hope it's been a lesson to you, Maget."

"Yes, I want to help you," said Maget. "If you'll keep

me with you, I'll work for you and be straight. Give me a chance."

"Good. Then shake hands on it," said Kenneth, and they clasped hands firmly.

Espinosa appeared from the darkness. "The peons are mad with terror," he said morosely. "They cannot be held much longer. They will revolt."

"Well, we must kill the creatures in the cavern: that will quiet them more than anything else," said Professor Gurlone.

"Better close the stone shack," said Kenneth.

But as he spoke, a vast shape, another giant frog, appeared in the entrance of the shaft.

"Get some dynamite and fuses," ordered Professor Gurlone quietly. "Come on Kenneth, and you, Maget, if you care to risk your life. You need not do so unless you wish to."

Bravely, the older man led the way towards the croaking monster. The ground shook at its approach. It was heading for the bodies of the dead frog and polywog, bent on a search for food. Evidently these vast creatures were forced to prey upon one another for sustenance.

The rifles spoke, and Maget and the professor, in their black suits, protected by the lead-cloth and helmets from the rays, advanced. They poured bullet after bullet into the frog.

Kenneth came running to join them, and Espinosa stood by. Kenneth had dynamite bombs with fuses ready for lighting and throwing. He also brought more ammunition, and the three armed themselves to the teeth.

It was well after midnight when they started into the mine. They knew they must act quickly or retreat, for the bellowing sounded nearer and nearer the surface of the earth.

Each man carried big, powerful flashlights, and the

three entered the mine shaft and walked across the seething slugs into the bowels of the earth.

"Stay close together," ordered old Gurlone.

The mine was easy to descend for the first hundred yards. It led in a gentle slope downward. The way, save for a few giant bats and moths, and the big maggots, was clear. The greenish haze, not so bright as that in the death shack, enveloped them, but they needed their flashes to see clearly.

"Slowly, take it easy," counseled old Gurlone.

The mine spread out now, and began a steeper descent. The air was poor, and it was hard to breathe through the mask. Maget, his heart thumping mightily, listened to the roaring within the depths of the mine.

Now the ground seemed to drop away before them. Maget could hear the running of water, the underground river, and every now and then there came an immense splash, as if some great whale had

thrown itself about in the water.

A terrifically loud hissing filled their ears, and suddenly, before them, showed an utterly white snake with a head as big as a barrel. Its white eyes glared sightlessly, but its tongue stuck forth for several feet.

Kenneth Gurlone coolly tossed a lighted bomb at the creature: the explosion shattered their ear-drums, but it also smashed the serpent.

The writhing, wriggling coils, bigger than the body of a horse, slashed about, dangerously near. They picked themselves up, and pushed on, keeping close to the right wall.

A great bat smashed against Maget, and knocked the light out of his hand, but the blow was a glancing one, and he was able to retrieve his light and hurry on.

They were far from the entrance now. The hole which had been broken through by the peons showed before them, and they could see milky water dashing over black rocks.

Pallid eyes looked at them, and they knew they gazed upon another of the giant frogs. They tossed a bomb at the creature, and blew a jagged hole in his back. No sooner had he begun to die than there came a sudden rush of other monsters and a feast began.

"Throw, all together," yelled Kenneth Gurlone.

Into the vast mass of creatures, who crowded one another in the river for their share of the spoils, they threw bomb after bomb. The dynamite deafened them, and acrid fumes choked them, but they fired their rifles at the prodigious animals and there, in the big river cavern, was a seething mass of horrible life, dying in agony.

The bellowings and hissings sounded louder, so loud that the earth shook as if actuated by a mighty earthquake.

Maget gripped Kenneth Gurlone's arm. "My bombs are gone," he shouted.

He had but a few rounds of ammunition left, and still

more of the giant reptiles appeared. A centipede with its creeping, horrible legs topped the mass of squirming matter; they could see the terrific sting of the creature, so deadly when but a fraction of an inch long, and which was now at least a foot, armed with poison.

There came the rush of more bats and moths, a rush that threw the three men off their feet.

"We must have opened the hole more with our bombs," shrieked old Gurlone. "The dead bodies attract the other creatures, more and more of them are coming. It is impossible; we cannot deal with them all."

The vast gobbling of the great animals in the river below them was so prodigious they could not grasp it. It seemed it must be optical illusion. In a few moments, the dead had been eaten, swallowed whole, and fights were progressing between the victors.

They tossed the rest of their bombs, fired the remaining ammunition, and as they prepared to

retreat, several of the big creatures slopped over and started up the river bank into the mine shaft.

They ran for their lives, the three. Madly, with the earth shaking behind them as they were pursued by a hopping monster of a beetle with immense mandibles reaching out at them, they dashed for the open air.

Giant moths and bats struck at them, and Maget fell down several times before he reached the outside, and he was bruised and out of breath.

"Come on, there are too many to fight," gasped old Gurlone, throwing off the lead suit.

But there was no need to talk. The creatures, disturbed by the bombs, had collected in one spot and, shown the way out by one of their number, were coming.

Espinosa, with Kenneth Gurlone holding his hand, ran swiftly for the hills surrounding the valley. Maget helped old Professor Gurlone, who was so out of breath that he could scarcely move.

The great beetle which had been pursuing them was the first to break forth into the valley. Turning back for a look over his shoulder, Maget saw the thing pause, but the cavern belched forth a vast array of monsters, the beasts roaring, hissing, bellowing, in an increasing mass of sound.

They swarmed over the ground, and giant bats and moths winged their way about the heads of the monsters.

At the rim of the valley, the four men paused.

"God help the peons," said Kenneth Gurlone.

Now the horde of monsters swelled more and more; the bats and moths winged in mad frenzy about the open door of the radium shack. There were great beetles, centipedes, ants, crickets, hopping, crawling things, and grotesquely immense in size. Fights progressed here and there, but the majority of them were carried along in the sweep of the multitude.

"See, the radium kills those who get too close," said

Professor Gurlone, in a hushed voice.

The giant moths and bats were unable to withstand the lure of the green light. They flew with mad beatings of wings straight for the open door of the death house, and many of the great creatures, attracted by the light and urged on by an unexplainable force which sent them to death like gnats and moths in a flame, crowded near to the death-dealing radium.

Not until the whole shack was covered with quivering forms of the dead, did the other creatures veer off and with hops, creepings and myriad giant legs, begin to cover the whole valley.

The stone walls of the death shack had crumpled in with the weight; the other buildings, more lightly built, gave at once, with crackings and crashings.

The four men were powerless to assist the unfortunate peons, who were trapped in their barracks. The charged wires stopped many of the big beasts, but soon the electric light was short-circuited,

and the valley, in the moonlight, was a seething mass of fighting, dying, feasting monsters.

Other sounds, besides those made by the big creatures, came to the ears of the stricken men on the hillside. The breaking of glass, the cries of the jungle animals trapped in their cages, the shrieks of dying peons who were eaten at a gulp by the big frogs or stung to death, impaled on the mandibles of some great stinging centipede.

In the spot where the radium death shack had been, was a pulpy mass of livid, smoky light.

Now the bowl of the valley was filled as by some vast jelly. The creatures were slopping over the walls, and battling together.

The shambles was not yet over, but the four could remain no longer. They made their way down the hillside and struck out across the arid lands.

Maget, the tramp, became the leader. He was a trained jungle man, and it was he who finally brought

them safely to the Madeira.

He was their strong man, the one who found the trail and located roots and fruit for the party to subsist on. They nearly perished in the trip for lack of water, but again, Maget was able to supply them with roots which kept them from dying in agony.

They lay upon the river bank now, exhausted but alive. Maget had assisted old Gurlone, acted as his staff, half carried him the last miles of the trip.

Their clothes were almost gone, they were burned to crisps by the tropic sun. Flies and other insects had taken their toll. But Maget had brought them through.

The tall, thin fellow's hair had turned utterly white. But so had his soul.

"You're a good man, Maget," said Professor Gurlone. "You have saved us, and you have been brave as a lion."

Maget shook his head. "Professor," he said. "I came into the jungle to rob you. Durkin and I bribed Juan to steal that radium, and I feel responsible for his death. We thought you had diamonds or gold in the Matto Grosso, and we were after it. That's why I am here."

"You have repaid your debt to us, more than fully," said Kenneth, holding out his hand.

"Yes," said Espinosa.

"Will you keep me with you, then?" asked Maget anxiously. "Are—will you go back there?"

Professor Gurlone stared at him, and then said, in a surprised tone, "Why, of course!"

"But the monsters?" asked Maget.

"Many of them will die in the outer air," said Gurlone. "The survivors of the battles will start eating the dead. They will finally clear away the debris of dead creatures about the radium shack. As each is exposed to the rays of the concentrated metal, it will die. The

others will eat it, and be killed in turn. Thus, they will be destroyed. If there are any survivors after this evident turn of events, then we will cope with them when we return, reinforced. Dynamite, enough of it, will finish them off. And, Maget, in your next pursuit after knowledge of strange things, you may get a few earthly riches. The radium is still there, and you will share in it."

"Thank you," said Maget humbly. "I'm with you to the end."

"You must keep quiet about this," cautioned Kenneth Gurlone. "We do not want the world to know too much of our vast store of radium. It would attract adventurers and we would be annoyed by ignorant men. But we're thankful you lay drunk in that saloon when my father spoke of the millions, Maget."

In Manzos, Maget found himself a changed man. To his surprise, in spite of his white hair, brought on by the horror of what he had seen, he found that he had gained two inches in height, and that he was larger of girth. This, Professor Gurlone told him, was the effect

of the radium rays.

Never again did Maget lie drunk on the floor of a saloon. The events through which he had gone had seared the tramp's soul, and he kept close to his new master, Professor Gurlone.

#32 The Moon Master, By Charles Willard Diffin:

Through infinite deeps of space Jerry Foster hurtles to the moon—only to be trapped by a barbaric race and offered as a living sacrifice to Oong, their loathsome, hypnotic god.

Aproximate word count: 22,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"Now that's a mighty queer noise." Jerry Foster told himself. He dropped the pack from his shoulders and leaned closer to the canyon rim.

Miles behind him was the last beaten trail: Jerry wanted peace and solitude and quiet. And now the quiet of the silent mountains was disturbed.

From far below came a steady, muffled roar. Faint it was, and distant, but peculiar in its unvarying,

unceasing rush.

"Not water," Jerry concluded; "not enough down there. Sounds like—like a wind—like a wind that can't quit.

"Oh well—" He shrugged his shoulders and slipped into the straps of his pack. Then he went back again to the granite ledge. "I wonder if there's a way down," he said.

There was, but it took all of Jerry's strength to see him safely through. On a fan-shaped talus of spreading boulders he stopped. There was a limestone wall beyond. And at its base, from a crevice that was almost a cave, came a furious rush of air and steam.

It touched him lightly a hundred feet away, and he threw himself flat to escape the hot blast. Endlessly it came, with its soft, rushing roar, a ceaseless, scorching blast from the cold rocks.

"That's almighty funny," mused Foster, and sniffed the

air. There was no odor.

"And is it hot!" he said. "Nothing like that in my geology book. And what is beyond? Looks like concrete work, as if someone had plastered up the cave." He picked his way quickly across the rock slope.

It was hard going. Below him the rocks and dirt went steep to the canyon floor. At its foot the blast swept diagonally over the slope. He must see what lay beyond....

"Curious," he thought; "curious if that is nature's work—and a lot more so if it isn't."

A rock rolled beneath his feet. Another! He scrambled and fought desperately for foothold in the slipping earth. Then, rolling and clawing, he rode helpless on the slide straight toward the mysterious blast. He felt it envelop him, hot and strangling. His lungs were dry and burning ... the blazing sun faded from the rocks ... the world was dark....

Darkness was still about him when he awoke. But it was cool; the air was sweet on his lips. And it was not entirely dark.

He turned his head. He was in a room. On a rough-hewn table a candle was burning. Its light cast flickering shadows on walls of stone. Rumbling in his ears was the sound of the blast that had overwhelmed him. It echoed, seemingly, from far back in the stone cliff.

Jerry made a move to sit up. He found that his hands and feet were tied, his body bound to the rough board bed.

At the sound of his stirring, a figure came out from the farther shadow. It was that of a man. Jerry looked at him in silence. He was tall, his thin erectness making him seem abnormal in the low room. The lean face was unshaven, and from under a thatch of black hair a pair of deep-set eyes stared penetratingly at the figure on the rude bed.

"Well," asked Jerry, at length, "what's the big idea?"

There was no reply. Only the intent, staring eyes.

"You got me out of that man-trap of yours," Jerry continued. "You saved my life."

The tall man finally spoke. "Yes, I saved your life. You missed the hottest part of the exhaust. I pumped you full of oxygen."

"Then why tie me up like this?" Jerry Foster was frankly puzzled.

"You are lucky to be alive. Spies are not always allowed—" He interrupted himself abruptly. "You are a reporter," he stated.

"Wrong," said Jerry Foster.

"Who sent you?"

"Nobody sent me. I heard the noise of your infernal blast-furnace and came down to have a look."

"Who sent you?" repeated the man. "Goodwin? The

Stillwater crowd? Who was it?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," protested Jerry. "I don't know who your Goodwin or Stillwater people are. I don't know who you are—I don't give a damn. Take these ropes off and cut out the melodrama. I'll go on my way, and I don't care if I never see you again."

"That's a lie." The tall figure leaned over to shake a bony fist. "You'd report to Goodwin. He stole my last invention. He'll not get this."

Jerry considered the wild figure carefully. "He's a nut," he thought. When he spoke, his voice was controlled.

"Now, see here," he said: "I don't know anything about this. I'm Jerry Foster, live in San Francisco—"

"So does Goodwin."

"Confound you and your Goodwin! So do a million other people live there! I'm getting away from there;

I'm heading into the hills for a short vacation. All I want is to get away from the world. I'm looking for a little peace and quiet."

The thin man interrupted with a harsh laugh.

"Come here spying," he said, "and tell me you want to get away from the world." Again he laughed shrilly.

"And I am going to be your little fairy godmother. I wish you were Goodwin himself! I wish I had him here. But you'll get your wish—you'll get your wish. You'll leave the world, you shall, indeed."

He rocked back and forth with appreciation of his humor.

"Didn't know I was all ready to leave, did you? All packed and ready to go. Supplies all stowed away; enough energy stored to carry me millions of miles. Or maybe you did know—maybe there are others coming...." He hurried across the room to open a heavy door of split logs in the rock wall.

"I'll fool them all this time," he said; "and you'll never go back to tell them." The door closed behind him.

"Crazy as a bed-bug," Jerry told himself. He strained frantically at the ropes that bound him. "Looks bad for me: the old bird said I'd never go back. Well, what if I die now ... or six months from now? Though I know that doctor was wrong."

He tried to accept his fate philosophically, but the will to live was strong. And one of his wrists felt looser in its bonds.

Across the room his pack lay on the floor, and in it was a heavy forty-five. If he could get the pistol.... A knot pulled loose under his twisting fingers. One hand was free. He worked feverishly at the other wrist.

The ropes were suddenly loose. He pulled himself to his feet, took a moment to regain control of cramped muscles, then flung himself at the pack. When the heavy door opened he was behind it, his pistol in his hand.

There was no struggle: the lanky figure showed no maniacal fury. Instead, the man did a surprising thing. He sank weakly upon the rough bunk where Jerry had lain, his face buried in his thin hands.

"I should have let you die," he said slowly, hopelessly. "I should have let you die. But I couldn't do that.... And now you'll steal my invention for Goodwin."

Jerry was as exasperated as he was amazed.

"I told you," he almost shouted. "I never knew anyone named Goodwin! I don't care a hoot about your invention. And as for letting me die—why didn't you? That's a puzzle: you were about to kill me, anyway."

"No," said the other patiently. "I wasn't going to kill you."

"You said I'd never go back."

"I was going to take you with me."

"Take me where?"

"To the moon," said the drooping figure.

Jerry Foster stared, open-mouthed. The pistol lagged in his limp hand. "To the moon!" he gasped.

Then: "See here," he said firmly. "I've got you where I want you."—he held the pistol steady—"and now I'm going to learn what's back of this. I think you are crazy, absolutely crazy. But, tell me, who are you? What do you think you're doing? What was the meaning of that roaring blast?"

The man looked up. "You don't know?" he asked eagerly. "You really don't?"

"No," said Jerry; "but I'm going to find out."

"Yes," the other agreed. "Yes, you can, now that you've got the upper-hand. I guess I was half crazy when I thought I had been spied out. But I'll tell you."

He sat erect. "I am Thomas J. Winslow," he said, and made the statement as if it were an explanation in itself.

"Well," said Jerry, "that's no burst of illumination to my ignorance. Come again."

The man called Winslow was ready—anxious—to talk.

"I am an inventor. I have made millions of dollars"—Jerry looked at the disheveled apparel of the speaker and smiled—"for other people. The Stillwater syndicate stole my valveless motor. Then I developed my television set. Goodwin beat me out of that: he will have it on the market inside of a year. I swore they should never profit by this, my greatest invention."

Jerry was impressed in spite of himself by the man's earnest simplicity.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I've broken the atom," said Winslow. "First tore the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen apart—dissociated them in the molecule of water—and have resolved them into their energy components. That's what you heard—the reaction. It is self-sustaining, exothermic. That hot blast carried off the heat of my retort."

Winslow rose from the bunk. Gone was his listless despondency.

"Put up that gun," he said: "you don't need it now. I think we understand each other better than we did." He crossed with quick strides to the door leading into the cliff.

"Come with me," he told Foster. "I am leaving to-day. You will not stop me. But before I go I will show you something no other man than myself has ever seen."

He led the way through the doorway. There was another room beyond, Jerry saw. It was a cave. Plainly Winslow had taken these caves in the rocks and had made of them a laboratory.

A lantern gave scant illumination: Jerry made out a small electric generator, and that was all. He felt a keen disappointment. Somehow this thin-faced man had communicated to him something of his own belief, his own earnestness.

"What kind of a laboratory do you call this?" he

demanded. But the other was busy.

In the wall an opening had been closed with a small iron door, with cement around it. Winslow opened it and reached through. He was evidently adjusting something.

The little dynamo began to hum. There was a crackling hiss from beyond the iron doorway. The opening was flooded with a clear blue light.

Then the roar began. It was tremendous, deafening, in the echoing cave.

"You may look now," said Winslow, and stood aside.

Jerry peered through. There was another cave beyond. In it was a small metal cylinder, a retort of some kind. The blue light came from a crooked bulb beyond. The retort itself was white-hot, despite a stream of water flowing upon it. A cloud of steam drove continuously out and up through a crevice in the rocks.

The water flowed steadily from some subterranean stream in the limestone formation. It was diverted for its cooling purposes, but a portion also flowed continuously into the retort. Jerry's eyes found this, and he could see nothing else. For, before his eyes, the impossible was occurring.

The retort was small, a couple of feet in diameter. It had no discharge pipes, could hold but a few gallons. Yet into it, in a steady stream, flowed the icy water. Gallons, hundreds of gallons, flowing and flowing, endlessly, into a reservoir which could never hold it.

The inventor watched Foster with complacent satisfaction.

"Where does it go?" Jerry asked incredulously.

"Into nothingness," was the reply. "Or nearly that!"

"See?" He held up a flask of pale green liquid. "And this," he added, exhibiting another that was colorless.

"I have worked here for many months. I have

converted thousands of thousands of gallons of water. It has flowed into that retort, never to return. I have gathered this, the product, a few drops at a time.

"The protons and the electrons," he explained, "are re-formed. They are static now, unmoving. Call this what you will—energy or matter—they are one and the same."

"Still," said Jerry, gropingly, "what has all that to do with the moon? You said you were going there."

"Yes," agreed the inventor. I am going, and this is the driving force to carry me there. I pass a certain electric current through these two liquids. I carry the wires to two heavy electrodes. Between them resolution of matter occurs. The current carries these two components to again combine them and form what we call matter, the gases hydrogen and oxygen.

"Do I need to tell you of the constant, ceaseless and tremendous explosion that follows?"

"But enough of this! You said I was crazy. I gave you a

few bad hours. I have shown you this much as a measure of recompense. You have seen what no other man has ever seen. It is enough."

He motioned Foster through the door. The roaring ceased. The inventor returned shortly, the two flasks of liquid in his hands. He transferred both to two metal containers that were ready for the precious load. He carried them with the utmost care as he went out of doors.

Once he returned, and Jerry knew by the crashes from the inner room that the laboratory work was indeed done. There would be nothing left to tell the secret to whomever might come.

He followed Winslow outside, trailing him toward a wooded knoll. There was a clearing among the trees. And in it, hidden from all sides, his eyes found another curious sight.

On the ground rested a dirigible in miniature. Still, it was small, he reasoned, only by comparison with its monster prototype: actually it was a sizable cylinder

of aluminum that shone brightly in the sun. It was bluntly rounded at the ends. There were heavy windows, open exhaust ports, a door in the side, pierced through thick walls. Winslow vanished within, while Jerry watched in pitying wonder.

Despite its size, it was a toy, an absurd and pitiful toy. Real genius and lunacy had many an over-lapping line, Jerry reflected as he approached to look inside. But he found Winslow in a room surrounded by a network of curving, latticed struts. The machine was no makeshift of a demented builder: it was a beautiful bit of construction that Jerry Foster examined.

"How did you ever get it here?" he marveled. "What you had in the cave you could pack in, but this—all these parts—castings—cases of supplies—"

The inventor did not even turn. He was busy with some final adjustments.

"Flew it in," he said shortly. "Built it in an old shop I owned out near Oakland."

"And it flew?" Jerry was still incredulous.

"Certainly it flew! On a drop or less of the liquids you saw." He pointed to a heavy casting at the center of the machine. There were braces tying it strongly to the entire structure, braces designed to receive and transmit a tremendous thrust.

"This is the generator. Blast expelled through the big exhaust at the stern. These smaller exhausts go above and below—right and left at the bow. Perfect control!"

"And you flew it here!" Jerry was still trying to grasp that incontrovertible fact. "And you were going to take me to the moon, you said."

He looked above him where a pale, silvery segment showed dimly in the sky. "But why the moon?" he questioned. "Even granting that this will fly through space...."

"It will," the other interrupted. "I tried it. Went up to better than fifty miles."

Jerry Foster took a minute to grasp that statement, then continued: "Granting that, why go to the moon? There is nothing there, no air to speak of, no water! It's all known."

The inventor turned to face the younger man in the doorway.

"There is *nothing* known," he stated. "The modern telescopes reach out a million light years into space. But the one place they have never seen—can never see—is less than two hundred and fifty thousand miles away. The moon, as of course you know, always keeps the same side toward us. The other side of the moon has never been seen.

"Listen," he said, and his deep-set eyes were afire with an intense emotion. "The moon is no tiny satellite; it is a sister planet. It is whirled on the end of a rope (we call it gravitation), swung around and around the earth. How could there be water or anything fluid on this side? It is all thrown to the other side by the centrifugal force. Who knows what life is there? No one—no one! I am going to find out."

Jerry Foster was silent. He was thinking hard. He looked about him at the clean hills, the trees, the world he knew. And he was weighing the secure life he knew against a great adventure.

He took one long breath of the clear air as one who looks his last at a familiar scene. He exhaled slowly. But he stepped firmly into the machine.

"Winslow," he said, "have you any rope handy?"

The inventor was annoyed. "Why, yes, I guess so. Why? What do you want of it?"

"I want you to tie me up again," said Jerry Foster. "I want you to carry me off as you planned. I want to go with you."

The tall man stared at the quiet, determined face before him. Slowly his own strained features smoothed into kindly lines. He grasped tight at Jerry's hand.

"I was dreading that part of it," he confessed slowly:

"going alone. It would have been lonely—out there...."

The shining cylinder of aluminum alloy was hurtling through space. No longer was it a ship of the air; it had thrown itself far beyond that thin gaseous envelope surrounding the earth; out into the black and empty depths that lay beyond. And in it were two men, each reacting in his own way to an adventure incredible. One was deep in the computation of astronomical data; the other athrill with a quivering, nerve-shaking joy that was almost breath-taking.

A metal grating that had formed the rear wall of their cabin was now the floor. Winslow had thrown the ship into a vertical climb that made of their machine a projectile shooting straight out from the earth. Gravitation held them now to the grating floor. And, stronger even than the earth-pull, was the constant acceleration of motion that made their weight doubled again and again.

The inventor moved ponderously, with leaden limbs, to take sights from the windows above, to consult his maps of the sky, check and re-check his figures. But

Jerry had eyes only for the earth they had left.

Flat on the grating he lay, his eyes over a thick glass in a proturbance of the shell that allowed him to stare and stare at what lay directly below. He watched the familiar things of earth vanish in fleecy clouds; through them there formed the great ball, where oceans and continents drew slowly into focus.

And now he was filled with a sense of great solitude. The world, in its old, familiar companionship, was gone—probably forever. The earth—*his* earth—*his* world—that place of vast distances on land and on sea, of lofty mountain ranges and heaving oceans, of cities, countries, continents—was become but a toy. A plaything from the nursery of some baby god, hanging so quiet in space he could almost reach and take it in his hands.

Beyond it the sun was blaring, a hard outlined disc in the black sky. Its rays made shining brilliance of a polar ice-cap.

Jerry Foster closed his eyes and drew back from the

glass. Again he was aware of the generator, whose endless roar reverberated in their compartment. A smaller but similar apparatus was operating on one of the liquids from the inventor's laboratory to generate oxygen and release it inside the room. An escape valve had been set to maintain one atmosphere of pressure about them. Water dripped from a condenser where both gases were formed to burn into water vapor and cool to liquid form.

One of the windows below admitted a shaft of direct sunlight; it illumined their room with a faint glow. It would never cease, Jerry knew. They were in a place of eternal sunshine, yet a realm of an endless night. Above him, as Jerry raised his head, the windows framed nothing but utter blackness, save where some brilliant point marked the presence of a star. He missed the soft diffusion of light that makes daylight on earth. Here was only the one straight beam that entered one window to make a circle of light on the opposite wall.

Jerry looked from a window of heavy glass at the side. This had been the bottom of their ship when they left.

And he found in the heavens the object of their quest. Clear-cut and golden was half the circle; the rest glowed faintly in the airless void. He tried to realize the bewildering fact—the moon, this great globe that he saw, was rushing, as were they, to their trysting-place in space.

Jerry stared until his eyes were aching. His mind refused to take hold upon the truth he knew was true. He was suddenly tired, heavy with weariness that was an aftermath of his emotional turmoil. He let his heavy body relax where some blankets had piled themselves upon the grated floor. The roar of the generator faded into far silence as he slipped into that strange spaceless realm that men call sleep.

The human mind is marvelous in its power of adjustment, its adaptability to the new and the strange. The unbelievable is so soon the commonplace. Jerry Foster was to sleep more than once in this tiny new world of Winslow's creating, this diminutive meteor, inside which they lived and moved and thought and talked. The fact of their new existence soon ceased as a topic of wonder.

They alternated in their rest. And they counted the passage of time by the hours their watches marked, then divided these hours into days out there where there were no days. Seven of them had passed when the hour came that Winslow chose for checking their speed.

They were driving directly toward the moon, which was assuming proportions like those of earth. The pilot admitted a portion of the blast to a bow port, and the globe ahead of them gradually swung off. The pilot was reversing their position in space to bring the powerful blast of their stern exhaust toward the moon, so as to resist somewhat its increasing pull.

Now their stern windows showed the approaching globe. It was slowly expanding. They were falling toward it. The inventor moved a rheostat, and from behind them the stern blast rose to a tremendous roar. The deceleration held them with unbearable weight to the rear of the cabin.

No thought now for the shining earth, yellow and brilliant in the velvet sky above. Jerry Foster watched

through the slow hours as the globe beneath them enlarged and expanded in ever-increasing slowness. Slowly their falling motion slackened as they cushioned against the terrific thrust of the exhaust below.

The globe ceased to grow and held constant. Winslow cut the exhaust to a gentler blast. They were definitely within the moon's gravitational field; their last hold upon the earth was severed. The great globe was revolving beneath them.

"How about it?" Foster asked breathlessly. "It doesn't revolve like that—not the moon!"

"We have approached from the earth side," said the other, "but we have overshot it. Say that the moon is revolving, or say that we are swinging about it in an orbit of our own—it is all the same thing."

"And soon," he added slowly, "we shall see...." He faltered and his lips trembled and refused to frame the words of a dream that was coming true. "We shall see ... the lost side of the moon. What will it be ...

what—will—it—be...?"

To Foster the whole experience had now the unreality of a dream. He could not bring himself into mental focus. His thoughts were blurred, his emotions dead.

They were approaching the moon, he told himself. It was the moon that was there below them, slowly enlarging now, as their own earth had hung below them, but dwindling, when they left.

"The moon!" he told himself over and over. "The moon—it is real!" But the numbness in his brain would not be shaken off.

His voice, when he spoke, was casual. He might have been speaking of any commonplace—a ball-game, or a good show.

"The sun is coming from my right," he said. "We are going around toward the dark side of the moon. Shall you land there?"

Winslow shook his head. "Wait," he said, "and watch."

Jerry returned to his circle of glass.

There was a shading of light on the surface below him. From the right the sun's brilliance threw black shadows and bright beams transversely over a wilderness of volcanic waste. And beyond, where the rays could not reach, was a greater desolation of darkness, its blackness relieved only by a dim light. He realized with a start of amazement that the dim light he saw was that of their own earth far above: it was lighting their approach to this sister orb.

Their side-motion was swift as they drew nearer. Another hour and more, and they were drawing toward an expanse of utter darkness. The earth-light was fading where they passed. They were approaching, in very fact, the other side of the moon.

What was below? What mysteries awaited them? He shivered, despite the warmth of the generator, cherry-red, that heated the snug cabin; shivered with unformed thoughts of unknown terrors. But he forced his voice to calm steadiness when he repeated his question to Winslow.

"Must we land there?" he asked. "In the dark?"

The inventor was piloting his ship with ceaseless concentration. Their falling speed was checked; they were close enough so that the whistling of air was heard merging with the thunder of their exhaust. He moved the rheostat under his hand, and the thunder slackened.

"No," he said. "You are forgetting your astronomy. This 'other side' is subject to the same conditions as the near side. The sun shines on them alike, but alternately. We are rounding the limb away from the sun. We find, as you see, a darkness that is absolute except for the light of the stars. Here the earth never shines, and the sun only during the lunar day. But the sun is creeping down this other side. Their day, equal to fifteen of our days, is beginning. We shall come into the light again. I am checking our motion across the surface. We shall land, when it seems best, later on. There will be light."

The thin strong hands of the pilot played over the current and valve controls. Their ship slowly swung

and dipped to a horizontal position. A blast from below held them off from the moon. A bow port was roaring as their speed slowly decreased.

Minutes merged endlessly into long hours as Jerry's eager eyes strained to detect some definite form on the surface beneath. Dimly a glow appeared far ahead; slowly the darkness faded. They were moving ahead, but their wild speed was checked. And slowly the new earth below took on outline and form as the sun's glow crept over it.

What would the light disclose? His mind held irrationally to thoughts his reason would have condemned. He found himself watching for people, for houses, lights gleaming from windows. This, in a region of cold that approached the absolute zero. The reality came as a shock.

The first rays that crept into vision were silvery fingers of light. They reflected up to the heights in glittering brilliance. They gathered and merged as the ship drove on toward the sunrise, and they showed to the watching eyes a wondrous, a marvelous world. A

world that was snowbound, weighted and blanketed with a mantle of white.

To Jerry the truth came as a crushing, a horrible blow. He turned slowly to look at his companion; to look and be startled anew by the happiness depicted on the lean face.

"I knew it," the pilot was saying. "I always knew it. But now—now...." He was speechless with joy.

"It's terrible!" said Foster. He almost resented the other's elation. "It's a hell! Just a frozen hell of desolation."

"Man—man!" was the response, "can't you see? Look! The whiteness we see is snow, a snow of carbon dioxide. The cold is beyond guessing. But the clear places—the vast fields—it's ice, man, it's ice!"

"Horrible!" Jerry shuddered.

"Beautiful," said the other. "Marvellous! Think, think what that means. It means water in the hot lunar day.

It means vapor and clouds in the sky. It means that where that is there is air—life, perhaps. God alone knows all that it means. And we, too, shall know...."

The ship settled slowly to the surface of the new world. Black blobs of shadow become distinct craters; volcanoes rose slowly to meet them, to drift aside and rise above as they sank to the floor of a valley. They came to rest upon a rocky floor.

On all sides their windows showed a waste of torn and twisted rock. Volcanic mountains towered to the heights, their sides streaked with masses of lava, frozen to stillness these countless years from its molten state. The rising sun, its movement imperceptible, cast long slanting rays between the peaks. It lighted a ghostly world, white with thick hoar-frost of solid carbon dioxide. A silent world, locked in the stillness of cold near the absolute zero. Not a breath of air stirred; no flurry of snow gave semblance of life to the scene. Their generator was stillen, and the silence, after the endless roaring of endless days, was overpowering.

But Winslow pointed exultantly from one window, where an icy expanse could be seen. "That will be water," he said; "water, when the sun has risen."

He turned on the generator for warmth. The cold was striking through the thick insulated walls. They sat silent, peering out upon that boundless desolation, upon a world's breathless nakedness, exposed for the first time in all eternity to human eyes.

Jerry's mind was searching for some means of expression, but the words would not come. There were neither words nor coherent thoughts to give vent to the emotions that surged within him.

Their watches showed the passage of nearly two earth days before they dared venture forth. They watched the white mantle of frost vanish into gas. From the darkness that they called "west," winds rushed shriekingly into the sunrise.

"Convection currents," Winslow explained; "off under the sun. In the direct rays the heat grows intense; the air rises. This is rushing in to fill the void. It will serve

our ends, too. It will churn the air into a mixture we can breathe, dispel the thick layer of CO₂ that must have formed close to the ground."

More hours, and the icy sheet was melting. A film of water rippled in the gusts of wind. Winslow opened the release valve that would permit the escape of air from their chamber, equalizing the pressures within and without. The air hissed through the valve, and he closed it so the escape was gradual.

"We must exercise," he told Jerry. "We will decompress slowly, like divers coming up from deep-sea work. But watch yourself," he warned.

"Remember you are six times as strong as you were on the earth. Don't jump through the roof."

The valve had ceased to hiss when Winslow opened it wide. The air in their cabin was thin; their lungs labored heavily at first. Jerry felt as he had felt more than once at some great elevation on earth. But they lived, and they could breathe, and they were about to do what never man had done—to set foot on this place men called the unknown side of the moon.

Earth habits were strong: Jerry brought his pistol and a hunting knife out of his pack and hung them at his belt, as the inventor opened the door and sniffed cautiously of the air.

Jerry Foster's blood was racing; the air was cold on his face as he rushed out. But it brought to his nostrils odors strange and yet strangely familiar. He was oddly light-headed, irresponsible as a child as he shouted and danced and threw himself high in the air, to laugh childishly at the pure pleasure of his light landing.

The sun made long shadows of two ludicrous figures that went leaping and racing across the rocks. Their strength was prodigious, and they were filled with an upwelling joy of living and the combined urge of an eternity of spring-times. The very air tingled with life; there was overpowering intoxication in this potent, exhilarating breath from a world new-born.

The ground that they crossed so recklessly was a vast honeycomb of caves. Between the rocks the soil was soft with the waters from melting ice, and the men

laughed as they floundered at times in the oozing mud. Beyond was a lake, and it was blue with a depth of color that was almost black, a reflection of the deep, velvet blackness of the sky overhead. And beyond that was the sloping side of an extinct volcano.

"Up—up!" Jerry shouted. "From up there we will see the whole world—the whole moon!" He laughed as he repeated the exultant phrase: "The moon—the whole moon!"

Despite their strength which carried them in wild bounds across impassable chasms, their laboring lungs checked them in the ascent. The joyous inebriation was wearing off. Winslow met his companion's eyes sheepishly as they stopped where a sheer cliff of basalt above caught and held the warmth of the sun's rays. Behind them it rose a straight hundred feet, and before stretched a vast panorama. The sun was mounting now in the sky. It brought into strong relief the welter of volcanic waste that extended in bold detail through the clear air far out to the horizon, where, misty and dim, the first

vaporous clouds were forming from the steaming earth.

And as they watched, the depressing bareness and emptiness of that gray-black expanse was changing. Far to the east a pink flush was spreading on the hills. It wavered and flowed, and it changed, as they watched, to deep areas of orange and red. The delicate pink swept in waves over valleys and hills, a vast kaleidoscopic coloration that rioted over a strange world.

In silence it spilled into the valley below. The slope they had traversed was radiant with color.

At their feet the ground was in motion: it heaved and rolled in countless places. Rounded shapes in myriads were emerging. Plants—mushroom growths—poured up from the earth to drink in the sunshine of their brief summer. They burst the earth to show unfolding leaves or blunted, rounding heads, that grew before the men's incredulous eyes.

Winslow was the first to recover from the stupefying

beauty of the spectacle.

"The machine!" he gasped. "Back to the ship! We'll be swamped, overwhelmed...." He rushed madly back down the slope.

Jerry was beside him, a revulsion of feeling driving him to frantic efforts. The piercing beauty that had enthralled him has become a thing of terror. The soft, pulpy, growing things that crushed beneath his feet were a menace in their lust for life.

They were a mile and more from the machine. Could they ever find it, Jerry wondered. The whole landscape was changed; bare rocks were half-hidden now under clinging, creeping vines. Only the sun remained as a guide. They must go toward the sun and a little north.

He followed Winslow, who was circling a huge area of weird growths that already were waist high. They leaped across a gaping chasm and fought their way over a low hill, rank with vegetation, only to be confronted by a maze of great stalks—stalks that

sprouted as they watched, dismayed, and threw out grotesque and awkward branches.

They made one futile effort to force their way, but the trunks, though pliant, were unyielding. To attempt to find their way through the labyrinth was folly.

"We've got to keep on trying," said Jerry Foster.

"We've got to get back, or...."

Winslow, as the look in his eyes showed, needed no ending to that sentence. There was the summer of a lunar day ahead; the inventor did not need to be told of the scorching, broiling heat that would wither the land when the sun struck from straight overhead. And in their ship was food and water and a means of transport to the cooler heights above.

It was Jerry who took charge of the situation. Here was a prodigious laboratory in which Winslow's science was useless, but in fighting with nature—even nature in as weird and terrifying a mood as this—Jerry felt himself not entirely incompetent.

He looked about him. It had been but an hour since they watched the first onslaught of this life that engulfed them. And now they were cut off. Through an opening, where bare rocks made a rift in the vegetation, he saw again the high ground where they had stood. There was more rock there on the volcanic slope: the growing things were in clumps—*islands*, rather than continents of rank growth.

"We must go back," he told Winslow, "and climb while we can. Get to the high ground, take bearings on the place where we left the ship. We'll look over the ground and figure some way to get there."

Winslow nodded. He was plainly bewildered, lost in the new jungle. He followed Jerry, who bounded across a crevice in the earth. The ground was rotten with the honeycomb of caves and cracks.

Jerry forced his way through and over a rock heap, where the thick trunks of nightmare trees were spaced farther apart. There was an opening ahead; he started forward, then stopped abruptly and motioned the other to silence.

From beyond there came sounds. There was rending of soft, pliant tissue. The sound came through the thin air from a grove up ahead, where big plants were waving, though the wind had long since ceased. To their ears came a snoring, blubbering snuffle. A stone was dislodged, to come bounding toward them from the hillside; the soft plants were flattened before it. The men cowered in the shelter of a giant fungus.

Beyond the rocks, above the mottled reds and yellows of the grotesque trees, a head appeared. It waved at the end of a long, leathery neck. All mouth, it seemed to the watchers, as they saw a pair of short forelegs pull the succulent tops of the giant growth into a capacious maw. Below, there was visible a part of a gigantic, grayish body. It was crashing down toward them, eating greedily as it came.

"Back," said Jerry softly. "Go back to that cave. We will hide there in some crack in the ground."

They picked their way noiselessly over the rocks. The cave they had crossed offered a refuge from the beast. It went slantingly down into the ground, a

great tunnel, deep in the rock. They dropped into the opening and started forward, only to recoil at the fetid stench that assailed their nostrils.

"A bear pit," gasped Jerry. "Great Heavens! What a smell!"

They stopped, dismayed. Far below them in the bowels of some subterranean passage was the crashing of loose stone; a scrambling and scratching of great claws came echoing to them. They leaped madly for the outer air.

"Over here," Jerry directed, and led the way, crouching, to the concealment of great stalks and vine-covered rocks. He pointed toward the open ground where they had been a few moments before. The tree-eater was out in full view. Its flabby, barrel-like body was squatted like that of some unearthly, giant toad, on massive hind legs. It sat erect, its forelegs hung in air, as a hoarse, snarling cry came from the cave. The great head, perched on the long leathery neck, waved from side to side.

The noise from the cave ceased. The rift in the earth was in plain sight from where they cowered, and the eyes of the men were upon it. One instant it was empty; the next, in uncanny silence, it was filled with huge hideousness—an enormous, crouching beast.

It was black, a dull leathery black. Its thick, hairless hide hung in creases and folds on a gaunt frame. Shorter than the tree-eater, it was still a thing of mammoth ugliness. Its hind legs were powerful and armed with claws that curved deep into the earth; its front legs displayed the same fearful weapons. A thick, heavy tail slashed forward and back over the ground. And from this to the grinning, heavy-toothed jaws and beady eyes where the long neck ended in a warty head, it was an incarnation of pitiless ferocity.

Was the scent of the hidden, shuddering men in its red nostrils? It forgot them at the sight of the beast in the clearing. The snarling cry echoed hideously in the thin air as the frightful body came erect with neck extended, jaws open and dripping. It hurled itself through the air in one terrific leap.

Had there been any lingering hope in the minds of the men that they had no carnivores to deal with, the ensuing struggle ended it. The attacker tore great masses of living flesh from the struggling, screaming body. The first cumbersome brute was helpless before its destroyer.

Jerry was trembling and sick at the sight, but he grasped his companion's arm and drew him after as he slipped quietly away.

"To the high ground," he whispered. "It's our only hope. Perhaps we can fight them off there—find some steep rock we can climb." They worked their way desperately through the rubbery, obstructing growth.

At the foot of the hill there was better going; the bare rock gave winding and twisting passage to the heights. They could have leaped over the stunted growths here, could have raced frantically for the high ground, but they dared not. To leap up into view of those fierce, searching eyes! It was unthinkable. They crouched low as they darted from their concealment to new shelter, and crawled behind rocks

when open ground must be crossed.

They had dared regain hope when again the paralyzing scream ripped through the silence. It was answered by another and another from distant points. The valley of the caves was spewing out its loathsome dwellers from their winter's sleep.

The men raced openly now for the heights. As he leaped, Jerry turned to see over one shoulder a pursuer appear. It was one of the flesh-eaters, head to the ground on their trail. At sight of them its cry rang out again. It bounded forward in pursuit. And again there were answering screams from the jungle growth.

The men threw themselves frantically up the mountainside. Once Winslow landed in a sprawling heap and groaned as he drew himself to his feet. The beast was below them. Jerry seized a great boulder, whose earth-weight would have made it immovable. He raised it above his head and sent it crashing down the slope.

Another and another he threw. One struck the great beast in mid-air; it was pure luck that drove the stone crashing against the creature's head. It fell back with a blood-chilling snarl that was half shriek. Another monster appeared, to throw itself upon the first and tear at the crushed, waving head.

Jerry took his companion by the arm. His voice came strangled from his straining lungs. "Are you hurt?" he gasped. "Can you run?"

Winslow nodded breathlessly. Again they gathered themselves for their wild, leaping retreat toward the top. An uproar of furious fighting behind them marked where a score of the monsters had gathered for the feast.

Jerry watched vainly for some refuge, some pinnacle of rock or precipice they could climb, and from which they could beat down their attackers. There was nothing but the welter of volcanic waste: rock heaps and boulders and smooth streams of solid lava. Perhaps in the crater, he thought, over the ragged crest of the cone, might be some place of safety.

The pack was in full cry again as they climbed gaspingly to the top. Beyond lay the funnel-shaped crater. Its vast inner slopes were less steep than the hill they had climbed. They were covered with a jungle, like those they had seen—a maze of red toadstools and distorted trees.

Jerry turned savagely to face the oncoming brutes. This, he knew, was the end. For this they had hurled themselves through space—to make a morning morsel for these incredible beasts.

About the men was a confusion of granite rocks, thrown from the crater to provide weapons, crude and futile, for two puny earth-dwellers. The men raised great rocks in the air and threw them with all their strength. Jerry struggled with a mammoth boulder,—Winslow leaping to his aid. They toppled it over to start an avalanche of devastation that swept into the oncoming monsters.

And again there was respite for their aching arms, while the hunger-crazed brutes tore at the bruised bodies of their fellows.

Jerry Foster looked longingly again toward the crater. Should they chance the shelter of the jungle growth? Hopeless, he knew when these monsters could crash their way through while the men were impeded at every step. The mottled, orange-green stalks, as he watched them, seemed to move. He dashed the sweat from his face—his hair hung matted on his forehead—and passed a grimy hand across his eyes. Plainly, one of those stalks crossed a rocky-floored clearing.

Was he dreaming? Was this all a dream—a mad nightmare from which he could force himself to wake? Another moved. He saw definitely a mushroom growth pass swiftly to lose itself in a neighboring clump. Dreaming? No! The screams from behind him and Winslow's hoarse yell proved the stark reality of his surroundings.

The vile creatures were close: Jerry could see their fierce heads dripping with blood. He reached for his pistol, knew instantly it was useless against these mammoth brutes, and joined Winslow, who was straining desperately at another great rock. It toppled and fell. Jerry hurled himself at a heap of smaller

boulders and sent them crashing as fast as he could seize them and throw.

One quick look behind him showed still the impossible vision he had seen. And now there were figures—a mob of them—figures that threw off their wrappings of vegetation as they ran, cast to the ground the toadstool disguises that they held. They were caricatures of men that were swarming up the hill....

He swung again in one last hopeless stand against the first horrible enemy. The two men poured a torrent of stones down the slope; they were useless, except for their delaying the advance. The beasts leaped and dodged. They were close when the rock-rain increased to a deluge.

Jerry was fighting in a red haze through which he saw dimly. He was aware of the hailstorm of boulders that were thick in the air. He saw vaguely the white faces and copper-clad bodies of strange men leaping about him, and he heard the wild bedlam of their shrieks as they joined in the mad battle against the common enemy.

The beasts were swept off in a landslide of loose rock—all but one. Above them, on a high point of stone, it was crouching to spring. A wild human figure, its flesh white as chalk, leaped forward with a tangle of fibers. The tangle was thrown as the brute was in air. A net spread and wrapped around the monster. It fell, clawing and tearing, to roll helplessly down the slope.

The battle was won. Jerry swayed drunkenly on his feet. About him the mountains seemed whirling, where unreal figures of men with dead white skin and shining copper armor danced dizzily.

He met for an instant the look from Winslow's dazed eyes. Out of the past a picture flashed clearly: Winslow—this same Winslow—arguing that the moon might hold mysteries still. He laughed thickly.

"And I said it was all known," he muttered through slack lips. "Nothing on the moon that wasn't known...."

He was still laughing in a wild inebriation as a net settled close to entangle his swaying figure and bear

him helpless to the ground. He saw Winslow similarly bound, saw him lifted to the shoulders of shouting, yelling men, whose stupid, pasty faces were wide-eyed with excitement.

He, too, was raised into the air.... They were being carried toward the crater's mouth....

A fight for life in thin air does not make for clear thinking. Jerry Foster knew only that a nightmare world was whirling about him; that beneath him powerful shoulders supported, while the one who carried him leaped at racing speed down the slope.

They went more slowly down pathways cleared through the rank vegetation. Soft, pulpy vines from the grotesque trees brushed his face. He tried vaguely to shield himself, but his hands were bound fast. He was helpless in the entangling folds of the net.

The touch of cold stone brought him to his senses. He was lying on smooth rock. They were in a clearing. He turned his head to find Winslow, but could not find

him.

Across the open ground were naked men, their bodies, like these others, dead white in the sun's glare. They were dragging giant stalks to earth by means of ropes. Trunks and branches, bright in their colors of yellow and orange and flaming red, were hacked to short lengths and piled on all sides. The workers, as Jerry watched, dropped their implements to race toward him. There was a press of flat, white faces above. His captors, in their copper armor, beat the newcomers back. The babel of chattering voices was deafening.

Again he was lifted into the air—plainly these were no weaklings he had to deal with—and again the warrior band surrounded him as the march was resumed. The milling, shrieking crowd of workers followed in an ear-splitting mob.

The forest ended, and the men went slowly now down smooth, rocky slopes to stop upon a wide, level expanse. Before he was placed on the ground Jerry had a glimpse of a funnel-shaped pit—the mouth of

the extinct volcano. And toward it, bound and helpless, was being carried a struggling form which he thought he recognized.

"Winslow!" he shouted. But the bodies in their gleaming copper armor closed about him in a solid throng and cut off his view.

In the sky the sun had moved slowly upward since first they landed. It slanted brightly now into the eyes of the prostrate man and made a spectacle of his twisting contortions as he tried to get his hands on his knife in its sheath at his belt. This and his pistol were under his coat. But he could not reach them. He lay panting with his exertions.

One of the warriors seemed to have authority, for his arms alone of all the group were sheathed with copper circlets, and the others obeyed his orders. Jerry addressed himself to this one. He knew the words were unintelligible, but he pleaded desperately for a chance.

"Take this off," he said. "We are friendly—friends—"

friends!" He struggled to keep himself from shouting, to keep his voice under control. "The other man," he said, "bring him back." And again he repeated: "We are friends."

He scanned his captors' faces.

The pasty face above him was impassive; the eyes stared uncomprehendingly into his. Then the figure barked an order. One of the warriors swung Jerry lightly to his shoulder, and started toward the pit.

At its edge was a basket, a huge affair of knotted fiber ropes. Dimly, Jerry saw other baskets standing about: they were filled with the fragments of fungus. Still bound, he was placed in the empty container. Hands grasped the meshes, and he was swung out over the edge. A rope was above him: he was lowered steadily into the dark shaft.

Jerry breathed a sigh of relief. This was not death—not yet. And Winslow? Safe, perhaps, for he had traveled this same road.

There were figures outlined above against the circle of light, figures that clambered like apes down swaying ropes. The light glinted and sparkled from their shining armor. His escort was still with him.

The circle of light changed to a glowing ring, where only the rim was lighted. Above was the deep black of the lunar sky. Then the circle faded to a mere point as he went down into the pit.

The rope basket came to rest upon a rock floor, and Jerry was lifted out. He saw plainly the figures about him, and he wondered vaguely at the light that came from the walls of the cavern. There were long lines of soft light, leading off into the dark, lines that marked plainly a labyrinth of passageways, leading in all directions.

Beyond a narrow entrance was one brighter than the rest, a broad avenue that led downward still further into the depths. Here he was carried. He tried vainly to keep some mental map of their course. He would return some day—he *must* return—he and Winslow. They would escape.... But the passage turned and

twisted; there were many branching corridors, each with its lines of light. Jerry gave up the attempt. It was a maze of serpentine streets beyond his power to remember and recall.

Before him the passage was still wider. It was opening into a great room.... Jerry found himself upon the floor. He strained cruelly at the cords about his head as he twisted and turned to get a view of his surroundings.

The room was a cave, its vast vaulted ceiling sprung high above a level floor, where the figures of men—odd, plaster-white figures like animated statues—were small in the distance. His eyes were drawn quickly to the brilliant glow of the farther wall. There was the bright black of basaltic formation, and in it—though he knew the impossibility—was shining the sun.

Jerry blinked his eyes to look again and again; the golden circle was dazzling. It was set at a point well above the smooth floor, and up to it there led a sloping pathway of gold. It was as if they had indeed

captured their god, these worshipers of the sun, had captured and held it for the adoration of the grovelling people.

Jerry saw them upon the floor. The copper of the armored men gleamed bright in the glow from beyond, as they abased themselves and crept slowly toward the light. At each side of the dazzling orb was a platform. There were figures upon it, seated figures, Jerry saw, even at a distance, that were robed in vestments of the sun. Their forms gleamed gold in the light.

The leader that Jerry had noted among his captors crept on in advance of his men. From among the bright figures on the platform above one rose to extend a glowing arm. He spoke, and the tones rolled majestically back from the high vault above. The crawling man below him stopped rigidly where he was. Another word from above, and he rose slowly to his feet. He stood full in the glow of the captive sun, to be outlined in black against the brilliance beyond.

Haltingly he spoke. Then, seeming to gain confidence,

he launched into a torrent of words. He gestured and waved, and, to Foster, the sign language was plain. He saw reenacted the surprise of the warriors upon beholding these intruders; saw how they had spied out upon them, using trunks and branches of the fungus as a screen; saw in pantomime their own battle with the beasts, then the rush of the armed men to the rescue. Again the net was thrown, and the gesturing figure turned to point dramatically where Jerry lay bound, then pounded his armored chest with unconcealed pride.

He ceased to speak, and there was utter silence in the room as the figure above crossed to stand before the golden sun. He too abased himself before the sign of their god, then rose, to stand motionless, listening....

For a breathless interval he waited before the oracle, then prostrated himself again and returned to his place.

He repeated, it seemed, a command, congratulation, to judge by the ecstasy of the figure below. The warrior turned once to throw himself before the

image of the sun; he repeated this again and yet again before he crept back to his fellows. The group arose and rushed swiftly toward the bound man.

They brought him quickly into the presence. With scant ceremony Jerry was unrolled from the net; he lay free and gasping upon the floor. The men scurried like mad from out the pathway of light that shone down from the false sun. Jerry rose to his feet; the brilliance before him almost blinded, but he saw now whence it came.

There was a hollow in the wall, a great parabola, deep and wide, and it was lined throughout with beaten gold. In a straight path the light was reflected from every point—every point but one for at the far end, where the curved sides joined, was a circle of darkness. It stared like an eye, evil, portentous. Jerry nerved himself for an ordeal, unknown but imminent. The black eye glared at him unwinkingly.

Before him was the pathway of light: it shone brilliantly down the sloping ramp where a floor of bright gold led up to the sun god itself.

The figure on the dais raised its hand. Jerry heard the words come from its lips and roll sonorously back from above. The figure waited for an answer.

Jerry's hands slipped beneath his coat to rest reassuringly upon his weapons. He withdrew his hands empty and raised one toward the figure above.

"I do not understand your words," he said. "Your language is strange. No doubt mine is as strange to you. I come as a visitor—I am friendly." He held out both his hands, palms upward.

"We have come, my friend and myself, on a friendly errand." He paused to look vainly about for Winslow. "And you have received us as if we were wild animals."

Jerry Foster, of San Francisco, U. S. A., was suddenly resentful of their treatment. His words were meaningless, but his tones were not. "You have tied us," he said, "bound us—dragged us before you. Is that the way you receive your guests from another world?"

The golden-clad figure stood in majestic silence while Jerry was speaking. It waited a moment after his outburst, then crossed again to bow low in the floodlight of gold. As before, it seemed listening to words from the black heart of the strange sun, words quite inaudible—soundless. He returned quickly and waved Jerry's attention to the place of light.

The sense of a presence there in the central blackness was strong upon the waiting man. In that other life that now seemed so remote—his life on earth—Jerry had once felt the threat of a concealed intruder in the dark. He recalled it vividly now. The sensation was the same.

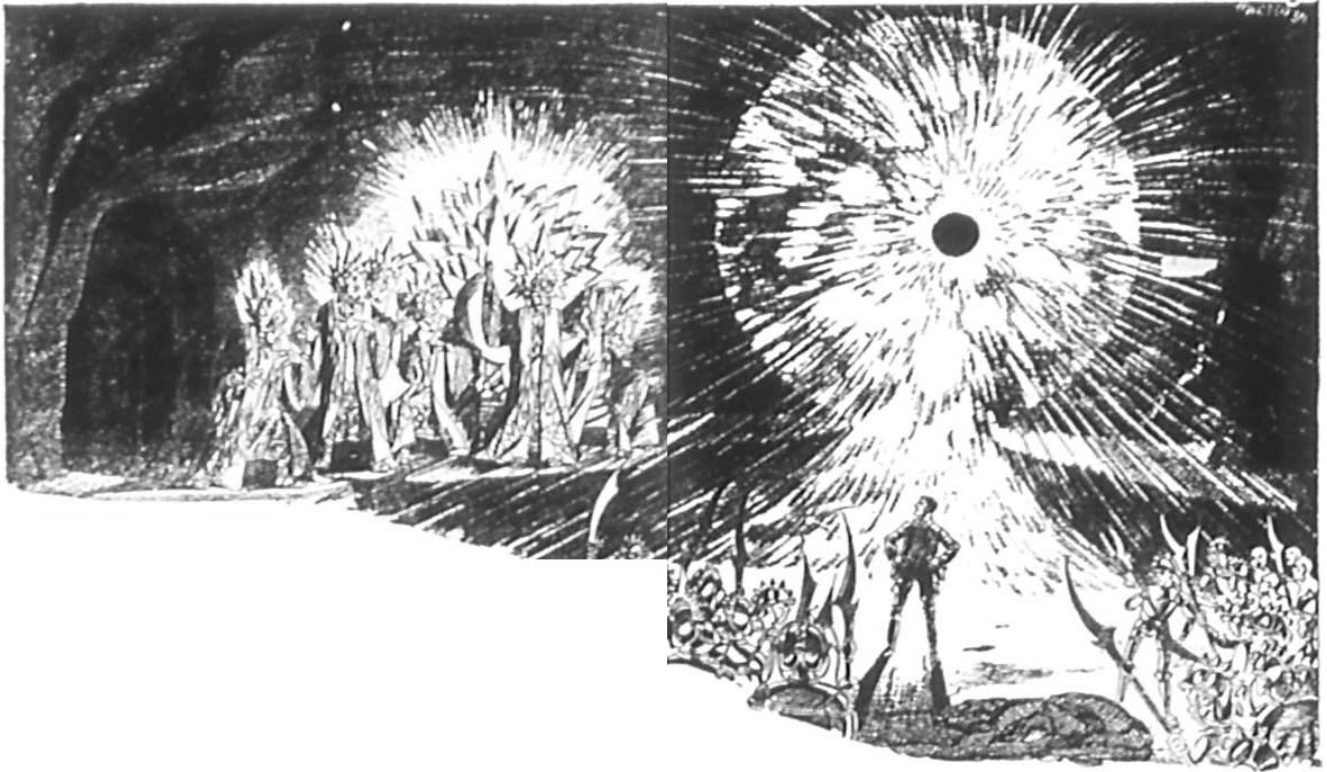
But it was magnified. There was no denying the reality of a malign something at the heart of that golden glow. The black center of it vibrated with cold and venomous hate. It struck upon the waiting man like a physical force. His head was swimming, his thoughts refused to form. He was as if suspended in a great void, where all that was lay deep in the center of that radiant orb. And it drew him irresistibly on.

Like a dazed bird, held and stricken in the hypnotic gaze of a snake, Jerry took one stiff, unconscious forward step. Another, and another. He strove dumbly, helplessly, for realization—there was nothing in the universe but the certain thing ahead.

His foot was upon the golden incline leading to his doom, when that buried something which marks a man—the spark of divinity which sets him apart as one alone—reasserted itself.

"I am," he heard his own voice shouting in strangled tones, "I am Jerry Foster! I am I ... I am myself!"

He awoke from his stupor with a shock that set every nerve-fiber quivering. For long minutes he stood silent. Then, realizing his victory and proving it to his own soul, he looked straight into the black center of the threatening sun god, and he laughed, loudly and contemptuously.



[Image description start: A two-page, black and white illustration showing a crowd of people looking at a big ball of light with a black hole in the center, with one man standing in front, his hands on his hips, with other, ornately dressed people crowded around the edges of the drawing, holding sharp weapons. Image description end.]

Then, turning, and with steady stride, he walked calmly from the light.

The great hall was silent with a silence that was breathless. Then pandemonium broke loose. The

priests and the god had been defied, and screaming and shouts rang throughout the vast chamber to re-echo batteringly from ceiling and walls. There was tumult and confusion where the populace thronged. Even the figures above on the dais were milling about in disorder; the rippling gold of their robes made a spectacle that forced Jerry's involuntary admiration.

Then one from among them sprang forward. His voice roared above the shattering din. The room was still. Another order, and the guard of armed fighting men formed in a circle about the defier of their god.

Jerry waited. Trouble was about due, he told himself. One hand was on his pistol, tense and ready. As the ranks stood silent and made no move to attack, Jerry Foster did a curious thing.

It was not done intentionally, but Jerry Foster had nerves, and they had been under a strain. His hand went unconsciously to his pocket and extracted a cigarette. There were matches there, too, and he struck one and lighted the white cylinder. The match made a tiny flame where he flipped it.

The whole room whispered and hissed with one loud gasp of amazement, but the moan that followed, that echoed and resounded from the roof, was of nothing but horror. Even the warriors drew back in trembling dismay. And before them the stranger they had brought to the very portal of their sanctum of holies blew clouds of white smoke that eddied and whirled as they rose round his head.

The effect was not lost upon Jerry. And his mind was working. Was fire unknown to these strange beings? Here in the deep caverns, far from the surface, was fire a thing of terror to them? He looked back toward the wall.

"If they rush me," he thought, "there's a good place to be. That will feel mighty comfortable at my back."

He walked slowly, the smoke rising thick about his head. The copper-clad figures before him withdrew, the ranks parting to let him through. Unharméd he reached the safety of the wall. The enemy now formed a semi-circle before him.

The inertia of the stricken beings on the platform was broken by his move. Again their head priest gave an order; from another side a second detachment of armed men came on. They were carrying something. Jerry leaned forward in quivering preparedness as he saw, in the floodlight of radiance, the body of Winslow lying on the floor.

Was he injured? Dead? The devastating loneliness that swept him at the sight of the still body was unnerving. He breathed a long sigh of relief as the lanky figure rose slowly to its feet. Winslow was alive! They would show these beastly, unearthly humans something yet.

There was no preparation—no preliminaries. Whether Winslow could have reacted as Jerry had would never be known. He seemed stunned and helpless, and it was with no resisting hesitation that he began the climb to the unknown.

Jerry's crouching tenseness snapped. No thought of the gun as he sprang toward the enemy between him and his friend. "No, Winslow—no!" he shouted as he

leaped at the figures in front of him.

Their strength had seemed startling to Jerry when they had carried him like a child. He had forgotten his lightness here on this unheavy world. And he had forgotten his own great strength.

No panting, exhausted, beaten fighter of beasts was this that hurled himself against the ranks before him. One coppery sword flashed upward above his head. Its bearer was seized in two hands that picked him bodily from the floor and crashed him, a living projectile, among the others. Jerry waited for no more. There was an opening ahead, and beyond was Winslow, walking stiffly, certainly, up that damnable slope. He threw himself in giant leaps across the floor.

His companion was half-way up the glittering ramp when Jerry seized him. Holding him in his arms, he leaped outward, to land rolling on the floor. He was on his feet in an instant. He dragged Winslow to a standing posture.

"Wake up, man," he was shouting. "Winslow—wake

up!"

The onrushing horde was upon them while the tall man was still brushing his hand over weary eyes, and Jerry, for the moment, had the fighting to himself.

No time for anything but parry and strike. He caught one white face on the jaw; the man went bodily through the air. Jerry landed again and again. His weapons were his fists, and they did fearful execution. And he knew, at length, that he was not alone.

The long arms of the inventor tore a sword from an upraised hand. Its owner was thrown, as Jerry had thrown one previously, to catapult among its fellows.

They were clear for an instant. "Back to the wall!" shouted Jerry. He had time and room to reach for his pistol, and drew it quickly from its holster. They backed hastily to the protection of the stone wall. There were scores upon scores of copper-clad figures that followed them held out of reach. With a flashing of gold, the head priest himself sprang to urge on his men.

"Ready!" said Jerry. "I wish you had a gun! Here! Take this!" He handed his companion a long-bladed knife, then turned to aim his pistol with steady hand at the oncoming figure in golden robes.

The priest stopped for a brief scrutiny of this new menace, then screamed out an order and hurled himself into the sheltering press of men.

Jerry fired into the whirl of bodies. The roar of the forty-five tore like a battery of siege guns throughout the great room. But the creatures before them were fighting now in an insane frenzy. Their bodies pressed the two men to the wall. Jerry fired again, and the fall of a limp, gold-robed body gave him a thrill of delight.

The inventor was holding a white body as a shield, while he thrust past it incessantly with a red blade. There were huddled figures before them that lay quiet or crept painfully away. The body of the head priest was being carried off.

The dark mouth of a passage had impressed itself upon Jerry; he remembered it now. It offered a means

of escape.

"Off to your right," he said. "Work off to your right. There's a hole in the wall—"

They fought off the struggling eruption of bodies that drove at them. Jerry was saving his ammunition, but once more he fired as a sword was falling over Winslow's head. He drove strongly with his left and beat at the white skulls with the butt of the gun gripped in his other hand.

The passage was suddenly behind them. One last stand against the screaming, frothing faces, and they backed, panting, into the sheltering dark. Jerry stopped and took Winslow by the arm.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded. The inventor was too breathless for reply.

"Nothing much," he panted, after a moment. "One got me along the cheek—you shot him just in time. How about you?"

"O.K.," was the assurance. "But, man, I've been hammered!"

"What a peach of a fight," he added. "But now what?"

Winslow laughed mirthlessly in the dark. "This looks like a one-way street," he said. "We can't go back.

"Say," he demanded, with sudden, dim recollection. "I remember something of a dream—a ghastly sort of thing. I was ... I was ... where was I when you collared me? Where was I headed?"

"For something too damnable for us to imagine," Jerry stated emphatically.

They were walking as rapidly as they dared through the dark passage. There were high-pitched voices from the rear. From somewhere ahead came the sound of running water.

"Too damnable to imagine!" he repeated. "But we'll hunt the vile thing out if we get a chance, and we'll slaughter—"

The words ended in a startled exclamation as the ground fell beneath their feet. They pitched headlong into nothingness—

There was water in Jerry's face as he fell. A torrent engulfed him as he struck into it, pouring in from a lower passageway to plunge straight down the shaft. The roaring crash of water tore madly at his body; his arm was shot through with stabbing pain as Winslow's falling body was torn from his grasp.

He was conscious only of his bursting lungs when he came to the surface from the depths into which he plunged. With one arm he swam weakly, the other trailing at his side, while he gulped greedily at the air.

A voice came hoarsely from a distance. "Foster," it called. "Jerry—where are you, Jerry?"

Ah, the good air in his lungs—he could swim more strongly now. He managed to gasp an answer: "Here, Winslow, over here!" There was a splashing in response to his voice. He heard it over the noise of the waters he had been swept away from the cataract.

A hand was upon him in the dark. "Hurt?" asked the welcome voice. "Can you swim, Jerry?"

"A little. One arm's working."

The hands fumbled over him quickly, and his good arm was drawn over the other's back. "Hang on," Winslow told him. "I can swim. I'm half fish."

Jerry clung to the folds of the coat. He was light in the water, he felt—riding high—and the man beside him was swimming with strong strokes. He released his hold on the other as he felt strength ebbing back into his body.

"I can paddle," he said: "but stick around. Where are we going?"

"In a circle, probably," was the reply, "though I'm trying to hold a straight course. How big is this lake, I wonder?"

They swam slowly, saving their strength, but it was a time that seemed like endless hours before the

answer to Winslow's question was found. Jerry was fighting weakly, exhausted, and the hand supporting him was failing when they felt sharp rocks against their dragging feet. The hand that had held him still clung tightly to his shoulder as they struggled upward and fell together where great rocks gave safety in the darkness. In his arm the sharp pain had dwindled to numbness; Jerry Foster asked only for sleep.

There was light about him when he awoke. In his stupor he had found again the surroundings he knew so well—the clash and clatter of a distant city—the roaring traffic—signals, and glowing lights. He came slowly back to unwelcome reality. The light was there, but it shone in luminous lines along the wall to illumine the hateful familiarity of the honeycombed rock that composed the moon.

It showed, too, a familiar figure, breathing heavily where it lay on the far side of the small room.

Winslow's face was pale in the dull light, and his eyes were closed. He was on a thick pallet of soft fibers and across his body a cloth was spread, shot through with gold in strange designs.

Jerry Foster threw aside a robe of the same material that covered him. He stifled an involuntary word as a twinge of pain shot through his arm, then crossed noiselessly to shake softly at the shoulder of the sleeping man. Winslow, too, came slowly from his sleep of complete exhaustion, but his eyes were clear when they opened.

"Where are—" he began a question, but Jerry's hand was pressed quickly against his lips.

They stared slowly about. The room that held them was in the natural rock, but whether hewn out by hands or a natural formation they could not tell. The rock was rotten with perforations, through which air flowed in a cool stream.

Jerry came softly to his feet to feel cautiously of the glowing, luminous mounds along the wall. They were spread upon a ledge. The light was cold to his touch, the material like fine soil in his hands.

"Fluorescent," whispered Winslow. "Calcium sulphide, possibly; I saw them spreading it above ground in the

sun. It absorbs light and gives it off slowly." Jerry nodded; the source of the endless glowing lines had been puzzling to him.

Their whispers ceased at a sound beyond a doorway. In the opening a figure appeared, tall and erect, the figure of a girl. Her face was white like the others of these whose lives were lived below the surface, but there was a kindly softness in the eyes, a refinement and intelligence of no low order, that contrasted with the cold eyes of the warriors and the priests. Not beautiful, perhaps, by earth standards, yet it required no straining of chivalry on Jerry's part to find her human and lovely.

In silence the men stood staring. Then Foster, with unconscious gentleness, made a revealing gesture. This woman—this girl—had saved them. He knew it without words, and he was wordless to reply. He dropped swiftly to his knees and pressed a bit of the golden robe against his lips.

A flush of scarlet swept across the white face and receded. The hand dropped from its startled poise

and rested, gently, questioningly, on the brown head bent before her.

She murmured unintelligible words in a guarded voice as Jerry arose. "Marahna," she said, and touched her breast lightly. "Marahna." Her head was erect, the whole attitude imperious, commanding. She questioned them with swift, liquid words. The men shook their heads in utter incomprehension.

Again she spoke, and again they shook their heads. Jerry felt foolish and dumb. He took his turn at questioning, and this time, with a trace of a smile, it was the girl's turn to shake her head. She had mastered one sign at least.

Pointing toward the great hall they knew was somewhere above, she reenacted the scene there; she evidently knew what had transpired. And now Jerry nodded in confirmation. That she approved of the part they had played was evident.

Now she questioned whence they had come. She pointed down, and her fluttering hands and graceful

posture spoke eloquently. She showed them more than a trace of fear, too, as she marked them coming from the depths. Jerry shook his head in vehement denial.

He pointed above, spread his hands wide, tried as best he could to indicate vast distance beyond. She stared, wide-eyed, then in her turn knelt as if before a god.

"She thinks we have come down from the sun," Winslow surmised. "Well, let it go at that." But Jerry Foster was embarrassed in the strange role of a god; he raised the humbled, kneeling young woman to her feet.

He pointed to her gold-clad figure and repeated the name she had given. "Marahna," he said. "Marahna!" Then, placing his hand on his companion, he repeated: "Winslow—Winslow!" And, pointing to himself, he completed the introduction with: "Foster, Jerry—Jerry Foster!"

The pale lips formed themselves slowly to the strange

and unaccustomed sounds.

"Cherrie," she repeated, and smiled in comprehension. "Cherrie."

This was the first of many lessons, and it was amazing to both men how rapidly they learned to get their thoughts across. In turn, they learned to read the messages that the slim hands and graceful, undulating body conveyed. Even words were linked one by one with their indicated objects and meanings.

One syllable the girl used only in a hushed and awe-stricken tone. It was "Oong" that she whispered, while her eyes filled with terror and dread. And they knew this for the name of the horror that waited in the black center of that unholy place where the pathway of light ascended. It was later that they learned to read hatred as well as sheer terror in the emotions that the word *Oong* aroused.

The first lesson ended in a soft exclamation from the girl. She withdrew, to return in a moment with a beaker of hammered gold, filled with cold water. In

her hands, too, were strange fruits and branches of fungus. She ate bits of them to show they were food. And Jerry, as he watched her, was aware that he was famished. But the two men ate sparingly at first of the strange food.

It was tasteless, they found, except for an elusive flavor, but the reception of the food in their gnawing stomachs was satisfactory. Their strength was returning, and with it came hope of release. The moon-people, evidently, were not altogether villainous.

"Thank you," said Jerry in a normal tone, "that was—" White fingers trembled against his lips to enforce silence.

The girl listened intently, then stole softly out into the corridor from which she had come. She motioned the men to follow, and pointed there in the dim light to a far room.

There were others, they saw; a group of young women lying at ease on their pallets, or moving slowly

about. The need for quiet was apparent, more so when the figure of a man appeared as they watched. Quickly the girl, Marahna, stepped before them and motioned them back to their room.

She followed and glanced quickly about. In the farther wall was an opening, close to the floor, and low, but they managed to work their way through at her silent command. A passage, much like the others, lay beyond. It widened and grew higher, until they could stand erect. Back in the circle of light they saw, for a moment, the man, bowing low in respect before Marahna. He carried a basket of light that shone brightly in the room.

"Replenishing the supply of sulphide," whispered Winslow.

A current of air came cool and refreshing from a branching tunnel in the rock. There was no lack of ventilation, as they well knew, throughout all the tortuous passages, but this came with a scent of outdoors that set both men a-tingle with hope. Jerry forgot even the dull ache in his arm as he breathed

deep of this messenger from the outside.

But exploration must wait. They needed to rest, to learn and to plan. They returned when Marahna called softly from the room.

Time had lost all its meaning. They could only guess at the hours that had passed since the hour they left their ship, could only make unanswered surmises as to where was the sun or how much was left of the long lunar day. They must escape—they would escape—but their one stroke for freedom must not be made when darkness and paralyzing cold should force them back into the hands of the enemy tribes.

Marahna was with them much of the time, and always they struggled and strove with desperate concentration to grasp at the meanings of the thoughts she tried to convey. And they learned much.

Of the passage they believed they had found out to the surface, she knew little. But she showed them, with doubt in her face, that there was almost hopeless struggle along that path to the freedom above. Sadly

she touched Jerry's injured arm, and she shook her head in dejection.

The arm had had a bad wrench, Jerry found. No fracture, but the muscles and ligaments had been painfully torn. But Jerry set his teeth firm at the thought of a possible escape.

Once, peering along the dark passage that led to the room where the others had been seen, the men noticed the deep bows that unfailingly marked the entrance of Marahna. They questioned her and learned that here was royalty among the people of the moon. This, as they considered the proud poise of her head and her whole attitude of unassuming superiority was not entirely surprising. But they marveled the more at the truth that she finally made plain to them.

Marahna, she told them, as plainly as if she were speaking in their own tongue, Marahna was chosen for death. And her white face was pitiful and her eyes full of horror as she enacted for them the slow march she must take up the long golden slope and into the

horror that waited.

"A sacrifice to that god!" Jerry spoke with dismay.

"No, no!" But the face of the Princess Marahna of the moon people was unutterably sad with unspoken thoughts as she touched her breast with one slender finger, then indicated the outer room and showed there were two there beside herself who were to go.

"Help us to get out," Jerry begged, and with fierce eagerness he showed them going through the passage to the outside. "We will come back, and we will find some way to end all this damnable thing."

She gave them to understand the time that was left. The sun, she showed, was long past the meridian and was on its return. The day was now reaching a close. And then, as the sun set, the great sacrifice would be made—had always been made—to insure the return of their god.

Their watches were useless, for the water had entered their cases. The two men waited what they judged was the length of a day, while Jerry tried to

believe that his arm was improving. Then, putting a small supply of food in their pockets, they were ready for the attempt.

Jerry saw that his gun and knife were ready at his belt, and patted a pocket where his matches were safe in their watertight container. The prospect of escape almost unnerved him. To breathe the clear air; to stand in the radiant light of the sun—he could understand now how these people made a god of the sun. He turned to Marahna.

"Good-by," he said, "but not for long. We'll be back. And we'll save you, Marahna, we'll save you. Winslow will figure some way to do it.... We'll be back...."

The girl was silent. She touched Jerry's arm, and shook her head slowly, doubtfully.

He reached for the hand. It trembled, he felt, in his. The impulse to take the slim form within his arms, to hold her close, was strong upon him. Would he ever see her again ... would he?

"Won't you say good-by, Marahna?" he asked.

But she smiled, instead—a friendly smile, and encouraging. Then dropped in silence to her knees to press with both her trembling hands his hand upon her forehead. And, still in silence, she rose to vanish from the room.

The men entered the narrow opening to start forward into the dark. But Jerry Foster was puzzled, puzzled and more than a trifle hurt. Marahna could at least have said good-by. She knew the word, for he had taught it to her. And she had let him—them—go....

"Oh, well," he thought, "how can I know how a princess feels—a princess of the moon? And why should I care—why should she? But...." He refused to complete the thought. He hurried instead, as best he could, to follow Winslow, fumbling ahead of him in the dark.

Jerry had used plenty of muttered invective with the massage he had given his arm, but he cursed his handicap wholeheartedly at the end of some several

hours.

They were standing, he and Winslow, in a dark tunnel. They had climbed and clawed their way through the absolute dark, over broken fragments, through narrow apertures, down and up, and up again through a tortuous, winding course. And now they had reached the end. They had found the source of the fresh air, had come within reaching distance, it seemed, of sunlight and all that their freedom might mean. And they had come, too, to a precipitous rock wall.

They stared long and hopelessly at the shaft that reached, vertical and sheer, high, high over their heads. And a curse like that of Tantalus was theirs. For, far at the top, slanting in through some off-shooting passage, there was sunlight. It was unmistakable in its clear glare, beautiful, glorious—and unattainable.

There were roughnesses in the wall, footholds, handholds here and there. "It might be ... it might be...." Jerry tried to believe, but the ache in his arm

made the thought hopeless and incomplete. He turned to his companion.

"I believe you can do it," he said steadily.

Winslow's dark eyes were gleaming in the dimness that surrounded. "Possibly," he replied, and eyed the ascent with an appraising stare. "Even probably. But you know damn well, Foster, that I'm not going to try."

"Don't be an ass." Jerry's tone was harsh, but the tall man must have known what emotions lay underneath.

"We'll play it out together," he said.

Jerry was silent as he reached in the darkness for Winslow's hand.

"Of course I knew you were that sort," he said. He waited a moment, then added: "But you're going, old man, you're going. Don't you see it's our only hope?"

Winslow shook his head emphatically. Jerry could see him in the dim reflection from that radiance above.

"Nothing doing," the calm voice assured him. "Don't bother to think up more reasons why I should desert."

"Listen!" Jerry gripped roughly at the other's shoulder. "Listen to reason."

"If you go and I go back there, what will happen? With Marahna gone we are helpless, and we will be helpless to save her. The long night is ahead. How can we live? Where can we live? We will be wiped out as sure as we're alive this minute."

"If you go—and if you make it to the ship—there's a chance. Alone, I may manage to stick it out." He knew he was lying, knew that the other knew it too, but he went on determinedly. "You can wait for me up above. My arm will be well—" Winslow stopped him with a gesture.

"There's a chance," the older man was muttering, "there's a chance...." He swung quickly toward Foster, to grab hard at the good right hand.

"I'm going," he stated. "I'm on my way. I won't say

good-by; what's the use—I'll be back soon!"

He released his hold on Jerry to leap high in the air for a ledge of projecting rock. He caught it and hung. His foot found a toehold and he drew himself up to where another rough outcrop gave grip for his hand.

Jerry Foster stood frozen to throbbing stillness. Words were strangling in his throat, an impulse, almost irresistible, to call. If there were only a rope....

He was still silent when the tiny figure of his companion and friend was lost in the heights, where it vanished into that tunnel from which came the light. He turned blindly, to stumble back into the dark.

Marahna was waiting when he regained the safety of her room. "Safety!" The thought was bitter when linked with the certain fate that lay ahead.

Silently she stroked the bent head of the man who dropped dejectedly upon the hard stone floor. Her fingers were gentle, comforting, despite the utter

hopelessness and discouragement that lay heavily upon him.

They sat thus, nor counted the flying minutes, while the fog of despair in the mind of the beaten man was clearing. He raised his head finally to meet the look in the dark eyes. And he managed a smile, as one can who has thought his way through to the bitter end and has faced it. He patted the hand that had stroked his bowed head.

"It's all right," he said gently. "What is to be, will be—and we can't change it. And it's all right somehow."

His sleeping, during their long stay, had been a cause for amusement to Marahna, whose habits were tuned to the long days and nights on the moon. And he was sleepy now, sleepy and tired. She spread the robe over him as he rested on the soft fiber bed.

He awoke from a deep sleep with a light heart. For Jerry Foster, as he faced his own certain death, had seen certain things. It was the end—that was one fact he couldn't evade. But he grinned cheerfully, all by

himself in that strange cheerless room, as he thought of what else he had visioned.

"And it will be just one hell of a fight," he said softly aloud. "There will be some of those priests that will know they have been in a war."

He examined again the knife and the automatic, and counted the cartridges left in the magazine. There were more he had found in a pocket of his coat, enough to replace those he had fired. He slipped the pistol into its holster at the sound of soft footsteps approaching.

It was Marahna who entered, a strange and barbaric Marahna. She was clad in a garment of spun gold that enveloped her tall figure. It trailed in rippling beauty on the floor—draped in resplendence her slim body, to end in soft folds about a head-dress that left Jerry breathless.

Her face was entirely concealed. The gold helmet covered her head. It was tall, made entirely of hammered gold in which spirals of jewels reflected

their colors of glittering light. She was quite unrecognizable in the weird magnificence.

Only her voice identified the figure. She murmured chokingly some soft words, then raised her head with its barbaric helmet proudly high as she concluded. There were words become familiar now to Jerry. Together with the spectacle she presented, her meaning was more than plain.

"The time has come," she was telling him. "The sun ... the hour of sacrifice."

Jerry leaped to his feet. His plans for battle were being revised. An idea—a plan, half-formed—was beating in his brain.

A sound was beating upon him, too. There were drums that throbbed in steady unison, that echoed hollowly along resounding walls, that approached in loudly increasing cadence.

The plan was complete. "No!" said Jerry Foster, with a wild laugh. He reached to remove the golden helmet.

He placed it upon his own head, under the startled gaze of the wondering girl. He reached out for the robe.

"You shall not go," he told her. "I will go in your place. And when I reach that room...." His eyes were savage behind the slits in the golden head-dress.

"No—no!" the girl protested. Her face showed plainly the complete hopelessness of what Jerry proposed. To pit himself against that antagonist—she knew how futile was the brave gesture.

Jerry was undaunted. "I've got to die anyway," he tried to explain, "and if I can get in one good crack at whatever is there—well, I may be of help."

His hand was taking off the cloak. Marahna's eyes were steady upon him. She ceased to resist. She whipped one of the covers from the couch about her and helped him with the golden robe.

The throbbing of drums was hammering at Jerry's temples. They were close at hand! Marahna, without

a word, rushed frantically back toward the room where the others waited.

And again Jerry Foster felt that odd tightening of disappointment about his heart. But what was the difference, he told himself, in a hundred years—or a hundred minutes. He set his lips tight and walked slowly out and down the passage.

The room he entered was deathly quiet. There were figures standing about, figures robed in their gold-threaded drapes, that stared strangely, wonderingly, at him, and drew themselves into a huddled group against the wall. And two there were, who stood apart: the other victims—their sacrificial garments wrapped them round where they waited for the third who was to accompany them. Jerry joined them as a guard came in from the outer hall.

The drums were rolling softly in their rhythmic beat. The priests who entered showed annoyance at the delay; they gave a curt order, and motioned the three to follow.

Outside, the corridor was broad, and the double rows of lights on either side glowed brightly to illumine a pageant grotesque and terrible in its barbaric splendor. The drums throbbed louder. Jerry saw them in their fire of burnished metal, beaten by the bands of naked men. Beyond, a group of warriors waited. Stalwart and strongly muscled, they stood erect in copper armor beside a platform of metal bars, whose floor was of latticed gold. The victims were placed upon it to stand erect. Jerry balanced himself upon the golden floor as the warriors raised it slowly to their shoulders.

Priests, in robes of heavy golden rope, were ranged about; they formed a guard and escort ten deep about the living sacrifice. At that the drums increased their volume, and to this was added a nerve-racking, discordant and rasping jangle, when sheets of copper, paper-thin, were struck with a heavy hand. The pulsing, throbbing pandemonium was terrific as the march began.

Slowly they made their way through a winding gallery. Slowly they came to where a portal, high-

arched, gave entrance upon the great hall. Solemnly, proudly, the priests lead the way as they circled the vast room. Their wrappings of gold were a scintillant quiver of light; above each hard face a circle of gold—symbol of the sun—was borne imperiously high.

The priestly guard surrounded the platform where the three standing figures were huddled. And behind, and on either side, the men with the drums and the discordant, ringing sheets gave full force to their blows. The high vault above thundered and roared to the thunder and roar of the drums. And, high over all, a wailing began.

The thin shrillness beat with the tempo of the drums in a pitch that steadily descended. The glittering procession had come to rest at its appointed place in the pathway, of light as the wailing came down to a moan. "*Oong! Oong!*" the voices groaned, while the walls re-echoed the despairing tones. Only from the band of warriors did the ear of Jerry Foster detect anything but misery and despair. The priests were silent, but the warriors, in their shining armor, stood erect and roared out the syllables in exultant joy.

The priests were now upon the dais—the rocky platform, divided by the great, glowing parabola of light. They stood erect as a new high priest, replacing the one Jerry had killed, crossed to bow and grovel in the radiance from their god.

The room was silent with the silence of a great tomb as the march of death began. Softly, from the silence, the drums resumed the merest whisper of their former thunderous booming. Beside him, Jerry heard the soft sobs of a girl. One of the figures swayed and threatened to fall as the platform was lowered to rest upon the floor. The other pressed close to support the drooping figure.

Now the entire directed ray of light from the round, glowing hole struck full upon them. It blinded and dazzled, yet, plain and distinct, Jerry saw at its heart the circle of blackness, the eye of the mysterious, hypnotic parabola—the entrance to what lay beyond.

The beat of the drums was hypnotic. As if in a trance he saw, at the side of the way they must go, the form of the head priest beckon them on. The two victims at

his side took one step on the path to their death. And the same stiff rigidity held Jerry as he, too, moved onward and up the golden ramp.

The drums were bearing them on. Louder they throbbed in a steady crescendo, to carry the three rigid figures a step at a time up the pathway of light.

The priest, Jerry felt more than saw, was beside them. Close ahead was the blackness that held the set stare of his eyes. One of the golden figures was before him. He saw the priest reach out to take the helmet from her head.

The movement aroused him from his numb horror. An impulse to escape surged through him; every nerve was tense and ready for a spring. He looked quickly about. The warriors were behind, the priests ready on their platform to direct them. And in the doorway, from where he first had seen this chamber, on the only way he knew that led to freedom, another figure, tall in its priestly robes, blocked the passage.

Hopeless, he knew. And then there swept through him

a wave of hate. Gone was his horror, and gone the dull deadness of brain and body. There, facing him, was the mouth of the pit, where waited a something—horrible, rapacious—demanding the lives of these people ... of Marahna ... of others—more and yet more.

No thought now of life or escape. For the moment, Jerry Foster's whole being held nothing but hot hate, and the wish for revenge.

Before him the priest was stripping the robe from the girl at his feet. She stood like a statue, a carving of purest alabaster, slim and erect in her white, slender nakedness. And the face that he saw through incredulous eyes was that of Marahna.

Marahna! The realization and quick understanding held him spellbound. She had come, had taken the robes from another poor victim ... to be with him in this, the last hour....

Marahna—a princess among these strange folk—was giving her life when another could have been in her

place. And she smiled tremulously, bravely, as her eyes locked with his, as, speechless and spellbound, he stared through the eyelets of gold.

The priest was reaching for his head-dress, Jerry tensed. The moment had come.

He was ready. As the weight left his shoulders, he dropped, with one swift movement, his golden disguise. The robe fell in folds at his feet. He stared in silence, through narrowing eyes, at the face of the head priest above him. Then, leaping straight up, he fastened one hand, sinewy, sun-browned and strong, on the white neck below the white face. They crashed back, to land on the ramp and roll, struggling, toward the edge.

Jerry's hold never slackened. He felt his fingers sink deep in the flesh. He came to his knees, then up, to hold the writhing figure at arm's length. Then, heaving with all his strength, he whipped the man into the air, to drag him in one leaping bound for the sheltering darkness beyond.

A figure was entering with him—a slim, naked figure, with glowing and worshipping eyes.

Behind them the silence was shattered. Jerry saw, as he stepped from the light, the riot of figures that surged in hysterical frenzy through the great hall. The priests were leaping among them ... the tall priest who had guarded the door was fighting his way through the mob.

Jerry loosed his quivering hand from the throat it held. He cast the figure from him. And he blinked his eyes to make them serve him in the blackness all about.

Beside him, a form, invisible in the dark, was stroking at his face, and a voice was whispering tremulously: "Cherrie ... Cherrie!"

The tumult in the great hall reached them but faintly. Jerry Foster strove desperately to focus his eyes in that darkness of utter night. A dim glow from the portal crept softly in to bring faint illumination to the farther wall. Slowly his eyes found that which they

feared yet sought.

Off in the dark, directly opposite the entrance, was a white and ghostly thing. Formless and vague, it wavered and blurred to his straining eyes. He fumbled clumsily for a match, one of his treasured store. He must see—he must know what was waiting —

The match flared to a point of brilliance in the murky gloom. It showed, on the floor where they stood, a litter of dried vegetation—food, doubtless placed there as an offering. It was dry now, and dusty, and through it there shone the bleak whiteness of bones. Beyond was the floor, and beyond that.... The whiteness that had been but a blur grew sharply distinct.

Jerry could not have told what he expected the light to disclose. Certainly it was not the heaping of coils, milk-white and ghastly, that took shape before his staring eyes. Above them a head hung in air. It was motionless—lifeless, almost—like the coiled body that held it. But the eyes, black and staring, in the bloated,

bulging head, made its poised stillness the more deadly.

Even in the dark Jerry had sensed the hypnotic spell of unseen eyes. Visible, they held him in a rigid, unreasoning terror. Unreal, unthinkable, this serpentlike horror, tremendous and ghastly in its loathsome whiteness. A dweller in the dark, used by the priests as a symbol and a threat for the ignorant folk who trusted and believed them. And it held him, stilled and stricken, in its evil spell.

The flame was scorching Jerry's hand that nervelessly opened to release the match. The man was like a statue, frozen to mental deadness. About his feet a light was playing, unseen. A bit of the dry stuff sprang brightly to yellow flame. Neither seeing nor feeling, the figure of Jerry Foster stood, held in the deadly magic of the malignant eyes.

Dimly he sensed that the prostrate body on the floor was that of Marahna. Vaguely he knew when the form of the priest took a halting step forward. The fire his match had kindled was rising about his feet. The

flames seared and stabbed with a pain that reached his dulled brain. Quivering and shaken, the body of Jerry Foster reacted again to a conscious thought. He leaped quickly as the deadly witchery left him, and he tore at the smoldering cloth about his legs.

And now he knew the thing before him for what it was. Shocking in its gigantic size, more so in the concentrated venom of its gaze, it was the flabby, scaly and crusted whiteness of the thing that filled his being with a deadly nausea. He stared with a sickened fascination at the flabby, drooping pouches beside the mouth, the distorted, bulging head and the short legs, armed with long, curving talons—legs that sprang from out the neck to clutch and tear at what the jaws might hold.

Deadly and hateful—loathsome beyond all imagining—still Jerry Foster found it was something a man could meet. Its devilish power to paralyze and still the soul of him was gone.

He snatched quickly for the gun at his belt and knelt to aim—then checked his finger on the trigger. The

figure of the priest had come between him and the monster.

The golden robe was dragging. It fell to the floor, to gleam dully in the flickering light of the fire. Against the heaping coils of white the priest was outlined, drawn, as Jerry sensed, against the protest of every fiber of his being. Yet, one stiff step at a time, he went faltering on. The hair above his white face was torn in disarray. And the face itself, so exultantly fierce in its hour of triumph, now a mask of quivering, hopeless terror.

The head of the monster came slowly to life. It raised and raised into the air. The mouth gaped open with a hoarse, sucking sound, then struck, like a whip of light, at the doomed priest.

His screams, as the thing descended upon him, rang through the roar of the forty-five. Jerry fired again where the black eyes showed above the writhing body of their prey. The head jerked backward, to tower in the darkness overhead. The mouth disgorged its contents to the floor.

Only for a shuddering instant did the monster pause. Then it launched its great bulk in a counter-attack, while the automatic poured out the rest of its futile lead.

The gun was knocked from his grasp as the great head smashed past, swerved from its aim by the blinding bullets. Jerry knew only that his knife was in his hand as the great scabrous coils closed inevitably about him.

Vaguely he heard the shouting from behind as the writhing folds engulfed him. He stabbed blindly at the scaly mass; again and again his knife ripped slashingly at the abhorrence that drew him close. Then his arm, too, was caught in the crushing loathsome embrace....

He felt no pain—the pressure alone was insufferable. His head was drawn back. Above him the horrible eyes glared into his—there was blood dripping from the jaws....

He saw it in the brilliance of a light that flashed in

blue heat overhead. There came in his ears a vast roaring of sound, a great heat-blast that scorched and burned at his face. The crushing pressure was relaxed. He went reeling to the floor, as the great coils whirled high into the air.

He was stunned by the fall, his body inert and relaxed. But he knew through it all that from somewhere above there was shrieking of gas—blue, roaring fires—a flame that tore blastingly into a writhing contortion beyond.

The tall figure of a priest was bending over him, but it was the voice of Winslow that was in his ears—a blessed, human voice—when he awoke.

"Thank God, I made it," the voice was saying, over and over. "Thank God, I found the ship and got back here in time!"

There was light within the cavern. The burning fungus was extinguished by the smothering coils that had crashed upon it, but beyond was a waving plume of yellow where a blue flame shot against a wall of

rock.

And Jerry, through the stress and riot of emotion that overwhelmed him, laughed chokingly, wildly, at the words of his companion.

"It is sodium," Winslow was saying in explanation, as he saw Jerry's eyes resting on the light. "A hydrogen flame, but there's sodium in the rocks that turns the flame yellow. I rigged up a flame-thrower of hydrogen."

"You would," Jerry gasped through hysterical laughter. "You would do just that, and make your way back to this hell just to save me—you damn fool inventor!"

He clung to Winslow, who was raising him to his feet. Marahna was beside him, robed in the golden garment of the priest. She placed her hands beside his face to turn him toward the further wall. The light was fickle, but it showed him, as it rose and fell, the blackened, swollen body of the monster, still writhing in its death struggle. And beside it, blasted and

charred, the head of the obscene sun god, severed by the cutting, obliterating blast, lay flabby and black in a silent heap.

"Rather effective," said Winslow complacently, "though I didn't have much to work with. Two small vials of my liquid and a hand generator to furnish the current. A tubular strut from the frame of the ship made the blow-pipe."

"And these?" Jerry questioned, and pointed to the priest's vestments that Winslow still wore.

"Oh, it was all quiet up above," said the inventor, "and I came down the rope. But there was one of them waiting at the bottom. He didn't need these any more when I left, so I took them to help get about—"

He stopped, to cross quickly and pick up the flame-thrower as the flame died away. It roared as he worked at the mechanism, then dwindled again. Its light, for an instant, was reflected in a liquid on the floor.

"Broken!" said Winslow in an anguished voice. "The vials are gone—smashed! And I counted on this to hold off the mob, to get us safely out...."

He regarded the instrument with silent dismay. The blue flame, as he held it, flickered and died.

"Not so good!" said Jerry slowly. He stopped to retrieve the knife. This, he reflected, was their sole weapon of defense. In the dim light his eyes met with Winslow's in mutual comprehension of their plight.

There were caverns beyond, dark and forbidding. Did they lead to the outer world? Or, instead, was it not probable that they went to some deep, subterranean dens, from which this monster had learned to come at the priests' summons? Jerry put from his mind all thought of escape in that direction.

"And Marahna, too," he told Winslow. "What will become of her?"

The girl got the essence of the question. Fumbling for phrases that they knew, she made them believe that

she was safe. Her people, she told them, would protect her.

"Yes," Jerry agreed. "I guess that's right. She's a princess, you know," he reminded Winslow, "and the great mass of the people look up to her. Only the priests and warrior gangs will be opposed. But how can we get through them?"

The question was unanswered.

"We've got to knock them cold some way," said the inventor. "Got to give them a fright that will last till they let us get through. Once at the big shaft where we came down, we can make our getaway. But how to do it...." His voice died away in dismal thought.

Jerry's eyes were casting about. The priest's robe? No, not good enough. It had brought Winslow through, but it couldn't take them back. Marahna? No help there: she had enough to do to protect herself from the fury of the priests.

His eyes rested again on the steaming, blackened

mass that still showed the horrible features that had marked the head of the monster. The sun god! There was an idea there.

"Come!" he said to Winslow, and walked swiftly across to the severed head.

He had to steel his nerves before he could lay hands upon the vile thing. The paws were still attached behind the head. He took a grip on one and pulled. The great mass moved.

"I don't get the idea," said Winslow.

"Nor I," Jerry admitted, "but there's an idea here." His thoughts were racing in the moment's silence.

"I've got it," he shouted. "I've got it! If only I can make Marahna understand!" He led the girl nearer to the door, where his signs could be seen more plainly.

"You," he told her, "go out there." He pointed to the place where the priests had stood. "Tell your people"—he took the attitude of the orator declaiming

to his audience—"we have come here from the sun." Again his signs were plain. Marahna nodded. This plainly was literal truth to her.

"Tell them," he continued earnestly, "we have saved them from this thing. Tell them it was no sun god, but a monster that the priests had kept. Monster!" he exclaimed, and pointed to the head and to the body that still writhed and jerked spasmodically. "No god—no!" And again the girl showed her understanding. Her eyes were glowing.

"Then," said Jerry, indicating Winslow and himself, "we will take the head that they have worshipped, and we'll drag it out and throw it to the priests." His gestures were graphic. The girl nodded her head in an ecstasy of comprehension.

"And then," Jerry added softly for Winslow's hearing, "we'll beat it. And, with luck, we'll make it safe."

"There's a chance," said Winslow softly, "there's a chance—and that's all we ask."

It's up to you, Marahna," Jerry told her. His words were meaningless, but the tone sufficed. She drew herself proudly erect, wrapped herself closely in the robe of braided gold, and stepped firmly and fearlessly through the portal and down toward the platform of the priests.

The two men watched from the shadows. Beyond the outline of the platform they saw the warrior clans, a phalanx of protecting bodies. And beyond, drawn back in huddled consternation, were masses of white-faced people—Marahna's people—who listened, now, in wondering silence to their princess.

Marahna made her way slowly to the platform's edge. Of all the countless ones to have gone that road, she was the first ever to return. She stood silent, while her eyes found their way scornfully over the enemy below. Then looking beyond them, she began to speak.

Her soft voice echoed liquidly throughout the room. She gestured, and Jerry knew that she was giving them the message.

From the priests there came once a hoarse, inarticulate growl of hate and unbelief. She silenced them with her hand. She pointed to the heavens, and she told them of the sun and of the two who were true children of the sun, who had come to save them from their false god.

Her voice rose as she told her people in impassioned tones that which she had seen. And she was shouting above the tumult of the priests and pointing directly at them as she made the roof echo with the message: "*Oong devah! Oong devah!*"

"The god is dead," translated Jerry. "*Devah* means death; she said that of herself before we left. Come on!" he shouted, and laid-hold of one great claw. "It's our turn now."

Winslow was tugging at the other foot. Between them they dragged into the light the obscene burden. Down the long ramp they took it and off upon the platform of the priests, where Marahna waited.

The priests, as Jerry's quick glance showed, were

milling wildly about. It seemed that a charge was soon to follow, but the commotion ceased as the two men come upon the platform, hauling between them the great scorched head of "Oong." The vast hall was without movement or sound as they made their way out to the front. Jerry stood erect and faced the crowd.

He pointed, as had Marahna, toward the sun somewhere above those thick masses of rock; he traced it in its course across the sky; he pointed to Winslow and himself. And in loudest tones he roared throughout the room his message. "Oong," he shouted, "*Oong devah!*"

"I'll count three," he whispered in the utter silence. "Then let 'er go!"

Again he took a firm hold on the flabby paw.

"One," he whispered, and swung his body with the word. "Two ... and *three!*"

The men heaved mightily upon the gruesome horror.

The head swung ghastly in scorched whiteness into the air. The dead jaws fell open as it crashed downward among the huddled, stricken priests.

"This way!" commanded Winslow. He had been carefully appraising the openings in the crowd. "And don't hurry! Remember, you're a god to them—or something a darn sight worse."

Heads proudly erect, the two strode firmly down the pathway of golden light. The room was silent as the few they met fell back in cringing fear. Slowly, interminably, the long triumphal march was made across the rocky cavern of the moon.

Not till they reached the portal did the silence break. The shrieks of the priests and the clashing of copper were behind them, as they vanished with steady steps from out the room.

"Now run!" ordered Winslow. "Run as if the devils from hell were after you—and I think they are!" The two tore madly down the corridor whose double rows of brightness made possible their utmost speed.

There was the narrowing of the passage—Jerry remembered it—where they came out at the foot of the great shaft, the dead throat of the volcano. Behind them the shrieks and clamor echoed close. A rope was dangling from far up at the top.

Jerry leaped for it before he recalled the condition of his arm. In the excitement of the encounter he had forgotten that the arm was still in no shape for a long hand-over-hand climb.

"I can't make it," he said, and looked about quickly. There were baskets of fungus growth, already dried from the heat of the mid-day sun that had shone where it grew. He dragged one to the narrow part of the tunnel. Winslow tugged at another and threw it up as a barricade. A chalk-white figure in copper sheathing was clambering upon it as he worked at another of the nets.

Jerry let go the fiber basket he was dragging and drew his knife as he sprang to meet the assault. A sharp cutting edge was unknown to these workers in copper. Jerry slipped under the raised bludgeoning

copper weapon to plunge the knife into a white throat. Then, without a look at the body he helped Winslow, struggling with another load.

They completed the barricade. A heap of fungus made a raised place where Jerry leaped. Commanding the top of the pile that blocked the choked throat of the passage, he was ready for the next figure that leaped wildly up.

It would take them a while, Jerry saw, to learn of this scintillant death that struck at them from close quarters. His knife flashed again and again as he took the men one at a time and let their limp bodies roll back to the passage beyond.

The assault was checked when Jerry shouted to his companion. "Tie the rope around me," he ordered, "up under my arms ... then you go on up. When you get there pull up—and for the Lord's sake pull fast!"

"Go on," he shouted. "I can hold them for a while—" He turned swiftly to take a leaping body upon the red point of his knife.

He felt the rope about him as he fought, knew by its twitching when Winslow started the long climb, and prayed dumbly for strength to hold his weak fortress till the other could hoist himself up to the top.

He was fighting blindly as they came on in endless succession, the figures of frenzied priests leaping grotesquely beyond. Only the strategic position he had taken allowed him to turn the wild assault again and again. They could only reach him by ones and twos, but the end must come soon. There were priests tearing at the foot of the barricade.... The cold winds that came down from above revived him, but it helped the figures ripping at the fiber cords. The dry fungus fragments whirled gaily away and down the passage in the wind.

The wind! The draft was blowing from him, directly upon his attackers. Jerry struggled and clinched with another that bounded beside him, and knew as he fought that a weapon was at hand. His knife found the lower edge of copper, and the figure screamed as he rolled it down the slope. He slipped the knife into his left hand as he fumbled with his right.

His precious matches! He struck one on the rock; it broke in his trembling fingers. Another—there were so few left. He drew it with infinite care on the surface of rock. The figures below tore in frenzy at the weakening barricade, while yet others stood waiting at this sign of some new form of magic.

They shouted again, as they had when, those long days ago, he had lighted a cigarette before their horrified gaze. Jerry shielded the tiny blaze in his hand to bring it beneath a papery leaf beside him.

The flame flashed and dwindled. He dared not drop back to set fire to the base of the heap. But even in the exhaustion and strain of the moment Jerry Foster still knew the value of the showman's tricks in reaching the fears of these white-faced fighters.

With grandiloquent gesture he raised another of the tindery fragments and ignited it from the first. Another, and he had the beginning of a fire. He lit another piece, and, when he had it blazing, dropped it behind him and kept on with the show.

A large piece became a flaming torch, and he waved it before him and laughed to see the warriors cringe. A cloud of smoke was billowing about him—he leaped to safety through a rising wall of flame.

The rear slope of the barricade became a furnace; the wind behind him swept the smoke clouds down the passage. He heard, and sank back weakly on the ground as it came to him, the screaming riot where a mob of terrified warriors fought and struck to turn the horde that clamored behind them and pushed them on. The blast roared over the heaped fuel and poured downward from the crest. The noise of the retreat went silent in the distance.

Spent and exhausted, Jerry Foster lay panting upon the stone floor. The breath of cold and life came down the long shaft from the crater. Had Winslow gained the top? Was he equal to the climb? Jerry hardly felt the jerking of the rope about his shoulders, but he knew as, in frantic haste, it drew him scraping up the long side of the shaft.

The biting cold above revived him, and again a scene

of desolation was spread before his eyes. Winslow fumbled with the knots and released him from the rope.

"Come on!" he shouted, and extended a helping hand as they leaped and raced across the rocky floor.

Jerry again was vividly, strongly alive as the cold winds swept him. He leaped hugely through the whirling wisps of dried out vegetation—the sun had stripped the surface of every living thing. Again the rocky slopes rose naked in the rosy light of evening. The sun was hidden below a distant range of jagged hills. The long night was begun.

"You're going the wrong way," Jerry shouted. "We left it over there." He stopped to point where the sun had set. "See, that's where we fought the beasts—"

"Come on!" repeated Winslow. "Hurry! We mustn't lose out now. I flew the ship over this way while I was up here before."

A ridge of rock cut off the view where Winslow

pointed. "Bully for you!" Jerry shouted and turned to follow. They stopped as the slope ahead, from its multitude of honeycomb caverns, erupted men.

The priests were ahead, and behind them swarmed their men. Vindictive and revengeful, the wily enemy was fighting to the end. The two stopped in consternation.

"What's the use!" demanded Jerry. His voice was tired, utterly hopeless. "And the ship's right over there...."

"A million miles away," said Winslow slowly, "as far as we're concerned." The army was sweeping down the long slope: they had found their quarry. There were other figures, too, pouring from the throat of the volcano—white, naked figures that swarmed in growing numbers and rushed across upon them from the rear.

"Trapped," said Jerry Foster savagely, "and we almost made it." He rose wearily to his feet. "We'll take it standing."

The armored warriors were approaching; in leaping triumph they raced to be the first ones at the death. The shouts of the priests were ringing encouragement in their ears.

But the leaders from the rear were nearer. One deep breath Jerry drew as he turned to meet them. Then stared, astonished, as the figures swept past. They streamed by in confusion. They were armed with rocks, with clubs or copper metal—some even carried bars of gold above their heads. They came in a great swarm that swept past and beyond them. And they met, like an engulfing wave, the bounding figures of the men in copper. Smothered and lost were the warriors in the horde that poured increasingly on.

The wave, before Jerry's eyes, swept on over the crest, while he still stood in amazed unbelief at the battle that raged.

It was Marahna who brought understanding. He turned to see her kneel in sobbing, thankful abasement at his feet.

Marahna! Her people! She had saved them! There was time needed for the full force of the truth to banish the hopeless despair from his heart. Then he stooped to raise the crouching figure with arms that were suddenly strong.

The pale rose light of the departed sun above shone softly within a rocky valley of the moon. It tipped the tall crags with lavender hues, and it touched with soft gleaming reflections a blunted cylinder of aluminum alloy.

The valley was silent, save for the hushed whispers of wondering thousands who peopled the enclosing hills, and the rushing roar from the cylinder itself where the inventor was testing his machine.

There were figures in priestly robes—scores of them—and they were surrounded by a white throng that, silent and watchful, held them captive.

Beyond, in the open, where bare rock made a black rolling floor, there were two who stood alone. The golden figure of a girl, and beside her, Jerry Foster, in

wordless indecision.

Behind him was the ship. Its muffled thunder came softly to his unheeding ears. He looked at the girl steadily, thoughtfully.

Gone was all trace of her imperious dignity. The Princess Marahna was now all woman. And Jerry, looking into her dark eyes, read plainly the yearning and adoration in their depths. The Princess Marahna had forgotten her deference to the god in her love for the man. The tale was told in her flushed face, openly, unashamed.

And his gray eyes were thoughtful and tender as he gazed into hers. He was thinking, was Jerry Foster, of many things. And he was weighing them carefully. His hand clasped and unclasped at something safely hidden in his pocket. He had taken it from his pack; he had wanted something for Marahna, something she would treasure.

And now she was offering him herself. He could take her with him, take her to that far-off world that she

never dreamed existed. He could show her the things of that world, its wonders and beauties. He could train her in its ways. He would watch over her, love her... And she would be miserable and heartsick for the sight of this awful desolation. He knew it—he told himself it was the truth—and he hated himself for the telling.

The voice of Winslow aroused him. The inventor had come from his ship. "We had better be starting," he said.

The slim figure of the girl in her robe of pure gold trembled visibly. She knew, it was plain, the import of the words. She spoke rapidly, beseechingly, in her own tongue. The words were liquid music in the air. Then, realizing their impotence, she resorted to her poor vocabulary of their own strange sounds.

"No!" she said, and shook her head vehemently. "No—no!"

She motioned to wait, and she called loud and clear across the silence to her own people. There was a stir

about the priests. One in the robes and head-dress of the high priest was brought forward, led by two others of her men. They stopped a few steps from her and bowed low.

Again she called, and the leaders among the vast throng came, too, and made their obeisance before her.

She turned then to Jerry. And now it was Marahna, Princess of the Moon, who stood quiet and poised before him. The light, he saw, made soft wavelets of radiance in her hair, and her eyes were still glowing and tender. She stepped forward toward the priest.

The helmet of the sun god was upon his head. It marked him, Jerry knew, as the master of their world. True, they had bowed in submission to that other master, whose vile head lay horrible and harmless on the floor of the great hall—they had believed in the commands the priests had pretended to receive from him—but this emblem on the helmet marked the leader of the race, the master of this world, for these simple folk.

Marahna reached her slim hands and lifted the thing of gold. She turned, and held it above the startled eyes of Jerry Foster, and she placed it upon his head with all the dignity that became a queen. A word from her, and the men before him dropped in humbleness to the ground. The Princess Marahna was among them in honoring salutation to their king.

Jerry was beyond speech. Not so Winslow. "It looks to me," he said dryly, "as if you were being offered the kingdom of the earth—I mean the moon. Think it over, Jerry—think it over."

And Jerry Foster thought it over, deeply and soberly. He could rule this people, he and Marahna, rule in peace and quiet and comfort. He could bring them knowledge and wisdom of infinite help; he could make their new civilization a measure of advancement for a whole race. He could teach them, train them, instruct them. And he and Marahna—there would be children who would be princes born—could be happy—for a time. And then ... and then he would be old. Old and lonely for his kind, hungering and longing for his own people. As Marahna would be on earth, so would he

be here....

His decision was formed. And with it he knew he must not hurt the heart of Marahna. She loved him, Jerry Foster, the man. He must leave her as Jerry Foster, the god, child of the sun. He stood suddenly to his full height, and who shall say that for a moment the man did not approach the stature of divinity—for he was wholly kind.

He placed a hand upon the head of the kneeling girl before him. He held her in her submissive pose, then, turning to the waiting men, he spoke in measured tones.

"I thank you," he said, and the words came from a full heart, "but my place is not here. I leave with you one more worthy."

Before their wondering gaze he removed the glowing circlet from his head; he leaned to place it on the head of Marahna, humbled before him. With strong hands he raised her to her feet. His look, so tender yet reserved, was full of meaning. She followed his

every sign.

He waved once toward the sun, hidden behind the distant hills: he pointed again to Winslow and himself and to their shining ship: and again he marked the going of the sun. His meaning was plain—these children of the sun must return to their far-off home.

He turned now to Marahna. In his hand was the object he had taken from his pack. It was a treasured thing, this locket of platinum on its thin and lacy chain; it had been his mother's, and he thought of her now as he opened the clasp to show his own face framed within the oval. His mother—she had worn this. And she would have approved, he knew, of its disposal.

Gravely he faced Marahna. He showed her the picture within the case, then held it aloft where all might see. He closed it and taught her the pressure that released the spring. Then, with gentle dignity that made of the gesture a rite, he placed the chain about the neck of Princess Marahna—Queen, now, of the People of the Moon. And he knew that he gave into her keeping

their only relic of a being from the sun. It marked her beyond all future question with a symbol of mastery. And it made of him a god.

And even a queen may not aspire to such an one.

It was well that Winslow's hand was there to guide him as he walked with unseeing eyes toward the ship.

Time may lose at times all meaning and measure—moments become timeless. It seemed ages to Jerry Foster when Winslow spoke in casual tones. "I'm going straight up," he said, above the generator's roar. "Then we'll swing around above the other side. We'll follow the sun—make the full circle of the moon before we start."

But Jerry neither thought nor heard. His eyes were close to a window of thick glass. Below him was a shrinking, dwindling landscape, wind-swept and desolate.

There was a multitude of faces, turned worshipping toward the sky. On one, who stood apart in tiny

loneliness, his vision centered. He watched and strained his aching eyes until the figure was no more. Only the pale rose of a dying sun, and a torn, volcanic waste that tugged strangely at his heart.

"Yes," he answered mechanically, "yes, we'll go round with the sun ... a couple of sun gods."

He laughed strangely as he regarded his companion.

If Winslow wondered at the weariness in the voice he made no sign. He was busy with a rheostat that made thunderous roaring of the blast behind their ship: that swung them in a sweeping arc through velvet skies, away from the far side of the moon, to follow the path of the setting sun—homeward bound.

July 1930

#33 Beyond The Heavside Layer, By Sterner St. Paul Meek:

For eighty vertical Miles Carpenter and Bond blasted their way—only to be trapped by the extraordinary monsters of the heavside layer.

Aproximate word count: 8,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

McQuarrie, the City Editor, looked up as I entered his office.

"Bond," he asked, "do you know Jim Carpenter?"

"I know him slightly," I replied cautiously. "I have met him several times and I interviewed him some years ago when he improved the Hadley rocket motor. I can't claim a very extensive acquaintance with him."

"I thought you knew him well. It is a surprise to me to find that there is any prominent man who is not an especial friend of yours. At any rate you know him as well as anyone of the staff, so I'll give you the assignment."

"What's he up to now?" I asked.

"He's going to try to punch a hole in the heaviside layer."

"But that's impossible," I cried. "How can anyone...."

My voice died away in silence. True enough, the idea of trying to make a permanent hole in a field of magnetic force was absurd, but even as I spoke I remembered that Jim Carpenter had never agreed to the opinion almost unanimously held by our scientists as to the true nature of the heaviside layer.

"It may be impossible," replied McQuarrie dryly, "but you are not hired by this paper as a scientific consultant. For some reason, God alone knows why, the owner thinks that you are a reporter. Get down

there and try to prove he is right by digging up a few facts about Carpenter's attempt. Wire your stuff in and Peavey will write it up. On this one occasion, please try to conceal your erudition and send in your story in simple words of one syllable which uneducated men like Peavey and me can comprehend. That's all."

He turned again to his desk and I left the room. At one time I would have come from such an interview with my face burning, but McQuarrie's vitriol slid off me like water off a duck's back. He didn't really mean half of what he said, and he knew as well as I did that his crack about my holding my job with the Clarion as a matter of pull was grossly unjust. It is true that I knew Trimble, the owner of the Clarion, fairly well, but I got my job without any aid from him. McQuarrie himself hired me and I held my job because he hadn't fired me, despite the caustic remarks which he addressed to me. I had made the mistake when I first got on the paper of letting McQuarrie know that I was a graduate electrical engineer from Leland University, and he had held it against me from that day on. I

don't know whether he really held it seriously against me or not, but what I have written above is a fair sample of his usual manner toward me.

In point of fact I had greatly minimized the extent of my acquaintance with Jim Carpenter. I had been in Leland at the same time that he was and had known him quite well. When I graduated, which was two years after he did, I worked for about a year in his laboratory, and my knowledge of the improvement which had made the Hadley rocket motor a practicability came from first hand knowledge and not from an interview. That was several years before but I knew that he never forgot an acquaintance, let alone a friend, and while I had left him to take up other work our parting had been pleasant, and I looked forward with real pleasure to seeing him again.

Jim Carpenter, the stormy petrel of modern science! The eternal iconoclast: the perpetual opponent! He was probably as deeply versed in the theory of electricity and physical chemistry as any man alive, but it pleased him to pose as a "practical" man who knew next to nothing of theory and who despised the little he did know. His great delight was to experimentally smash the most beautifully constructed theories which were advanced and taught in the colleges and universities of the world, and when he couldn't smash them by experimental evidence, to attack them from the standpoint of philosophical reasoning and to twist around the data on which they were built and make it prove, or seem to prove, the exact opposite of what was generally accepted.

No one questioned his ability. When the ill-fated Hadley had first constructed the rocket motor which bears his name it was Jim Carpenter who made it practical. Hadley had tried to disintegrate lead in order to get his back thrust from the atomic energy which it contained and proved by apparently

unimpeachable mathematics that lead was the only substance which could be used. Jim Carpenter had snorted through the pages of the electrical journals and had turned out a modification of Hadley's invention which disintegrated aluminum. The main difference in performance was that, while Hadley's original motor would not develop enough power to lift itself from the ground, Carpenter's modification produced twenty times the horsepower per pound of weight of any previously known generator of power and changed the rocket ship from a wild dream to an everyday commonplace.

When Hadley later constructed his space flyer and proposed to visit the moon, it was Jim Carpenter who ridiculed the idea of the attempt being successful. He proposed the novel and weird idea that the path to space was not open, but that the earth and the atmosphere were enclosed in a hollow sphere of impenetrable substance through which Hadley's space flyer could not pass. How accurate were his prognostications was soon known to everyone. Hadley built and equipped his flyer and started off on what he

hoped would be an epoch making flight. It was one, but not in the way which he had hoped. His ship took off readily enough, being powered with four rocket motors working on Carpenter's principle, and rose to a height of about fifty miles, gaining velocity rapidly. At that point his velocity suddenly began to drop.

He was in constant radio communication with the earth and he reported his difficulty. Carpenter advised him to turn back while he could, but Hadley kept on. Slower and slower became his progress, and after he had penetrated ten miles into the substance which hindered him, his ship stuck fast. Instead of using his bow motors and trying to back out, he had moved them to the rear, and with the combined force of his four motors he had penetrated for another two miles. There he insanely tried to force his motors to drive him on until his fuel was exhausted.

He had lived for over a year in his space flyer, but all of his efforts did not serve to materially change his position. He had tried, of course, to go out through his air locks and explore space, but his strength, even although aided by powerful levers, could not open the

outer doors of the locks against the force which was holding them shut. Careful observations were continuously made of the position of his flyer and it was found that it was gradually returning toward the earth. Its motion was very slight, not enough to give any hope for the occupant. Starting from a motion so slow that it could hardly be detected, the velocity of return gradually accelerated; and three years after Hadley's death, the flyer was suddenly released from the force which held it, and it plunged to the earth, to be reduced by the force of its fall to a twisted, pitiful mass of unrecognizable junk.

The remains were examined, and the iron steel parts were found to be highly magnetized. This fact was seized upon by the scientists of the world and a theory was built up of a magnetic field of force surrounding the earth through which nothing of a magnetic nature could pass. This theory received almost universal acceptance, Jim Carpenter alone of the more prominent men of learning refusing to admit the validity of it. He gravely stated it as his belief that no magnetic field existed, but that the heaviside layer

was composed of some liquid of high viscosity whose density and consequent resistance to the passage of a body through it increased in the ratio of the square of the distance to which one penetrated into it.

There was a moment of stunned surprise when he announced his radical idea, and then a burst of Jovian laughter shook the scientific press. Carpenter was in his glory. For months he waged a bitter controversy in the scientific journals and when he failed to win converts by this method, he announced that he would prove it by blasting a way into space through the heaviside layer, a thing which would be patently impossible were it a field of force. He had lapsed into silence for two years and his curt note to the Associated Press to the effect that he was now ready to demonstrate his experiment was the first intimation the world had received of his progress.

[?] drew expense money from the cashier and boarded the Lark for Los Angeles. When I arrived I went to a hotel and at once called Carpenter on the telephone.

"Jim Carpenter speaking," came his voice presently.

"Good evening, Mr. Carpenter," I replied, "this is Bond of the San Francisco Clarion."

I would be ashamed to repeat the language which came over that telephone. I was informed that all reporters were pests and that I was a doubly obnoxious specimen and that were I within reach I would be promptly assaulted and that reporters would be received at nine the next morning and no earlier or later.

"Just a minute, Mr. Carpenter," I cried as he neared the end of his peroration and was, I fancied, about to slam up the receiver. "Don't you remember me? I was at Leland with you and used to work in your laboratory in the atomic disintegration section."

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Bond, Mr. Carpenter."

"Oh, First Mortgage! Certainly I remember you.

Mighty glad to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Carpenter. I would not have ventured to call you had I not known you. I didn't mean to impose and I'll be glad to see you in the morning at nine."

"Not by a long shot," he cried. "You'll come up right away. Where are you staying?"

"At the El Rey."

"Well, check out and come right up here. There's lots of room for you here at the plant and I'll be glad to have you. I want at least one intelligent report of this experiment and you should be able to write it. I'll look for you in an hour."

"I don't want to impose—" I began; but he interrupted.

"Nonsense, glad to have you. I needed someone like you badly and you have come just in the nick of time. I'll expect you in an hour."

he receiver clicked and I hastened to follow his instructions. A ringside seat was just what I was looking for. It took my taxi a little over an hour to get to the Carpenter laboratory and I chuckled when I thought of how McQuarrie's face would look when he saw my expense account. Presently we reached the edge of the grounds which surrounded the Carpenter laboratory and were stopped at the high gate I remembered so well.

"Are you sure you'll get in, buddy?" asked my driver.

"Certainly," I replied. "What made you ask?"

"I've brought three chaps out here to-day and none of them got in," he answered with a grin. "I'm glad you're so sure, but I'll just wait around until you are inside before I drive away."

I laughed and advanced to the gate. Tim, the old guard, was still there, and he remembered and welcomed me.

"Me ordhers wuz t' let yez roight in, sor," he said as

he greeted me. "Jist lave ye'er bag here and Oi'll have ut sint roight up."

I dropped my bag and trudged up the well remembered path to the laboratory. It had been enlarged somewhat since I saw it last and, late though the hour was, there was a bustle in the air and I could see a number of men working in the building. From an area in the rear, which was lighted by huge flood lights, came the staccato tattoo of a riveter. I walked up to the front of the laboratory and entered. I knew the way to Carpenter's office and I went directly there and knocked.

"Hello, First Mortgage!" cried Jim Carpenter as I entered in response to his call. "I'm glad to see you. Excuse the bruskeness of my first greeting to you over the telephone, but the press have been deviling me all day, every man jack of them trying to steal a march on the rest. I am going to open the whole shebang at nine to-morrow and give them all an equal chance to look things over before I turn the current on at noon. As soon as we have a little chat, I'll show you over the works."

After half an hour's chat he rose. "Come along, First Mortgage," he said, "we'll go out and look the place over and I'll explain everything. If my ideas work out, you'll have no chance to go over it to-morrow, so I want you to see it now."

I had no chance to ask him what he meant by this remark, for he walked rapidly from the laboratory and I perforce followed him. He led the way to the patch of lighted ground behind the building where the riveting machine was still beating out its monotonous cacaphony and paused by the first of a series of huge reflectors, which were arranged in a circle.

"Here is the start of the thing," he said. "There are two hundred and fifty of these reflectors arranged in a circle four hundred yards in diameter. Each of them is an opened parabola of such spread that their beams will cover an area ten yards in diameter at fifty miles above the earth. If my calculations are correct they should penetrate through the layer at an average speed of fifteen miles per hour per unit, and by two o'clock to-morrow afternoon, the road to space should be open."

"What is your power?" I asked.

"Nothing but a concentration of infra-red rays. The heaviside layer, as you doubtless know, is a liquid and, I think, an organic liquid. If I am right in that thought, the infra-red will cut through it like a knife through cheese."

"If it is a liquid, how will you prevent it from flowing back into the hole you have opened?" I asked.

"When the current is first turned on, each reflector will bear on the same point. Notice that they are moveable. They are arranged so that they move together. As soon as the first hole is bored through, they will move by clockwork, extending the opening until each points vertically upward and the hole is four hundred yards in diameter. I am positive that there will be no rapid flow even after the current is turned off, for I believe that the liquid is about as mobile as petroleum jelly. Should it close, however, it would take only a couple of hours to open it again to allow the space flyer to return."

"What space flyer?" I demanded quickly.

"The one we are going to be on, First Mortgage," he replied with a slight chuckle.

e?" I cried, aghast.

"Certainly. We. You and I. You didn't think I was going to send you alone, did you?"

"I didn't know that anyone was going."

"Of course. Someone has to go; otherwise, how could I prove my point? I might cut through a hundred holes and yet these stiff-necked old fossils, seeing nothing, would not believe. No, First Mortgage, when those arcs start working to-morrow, you and I will be in a Hadley space ship up at the bottom of the layer, and as soon as the road has been opened, two of the lamps will cut off to allow us through. Then the battery will hold the road open while we pass out into space and return."

"Suppose we meet with Hadley's fate?" I demanded.

"We won't. Even if I am wrong—which is very unlikely—we won't meet with any such fate. We have two stern motors and four bow motors. As soon as we meet with the slightest resistance to our forward progress we will stop and have twice the power plus gravity to send us earthwards. There is no danger connected with the trip."

"All the same—" I began.

"All the same, you're going," he replied. "Man alive, think of the chance to make a world scoop for your paper! No other press man has the slightest inkling of my plan and even if they had, there isn't another space flyer in the world that I know of. If you don't want to go, I'll give some one else the chance, but I prefer you, for you know something of my work."

I thought rapidly for a moment. The chance was a unique one and one that half the press men in San Francisco would have given their shirts to get. I had had my doubts of the accuracy of Jim Carpenter's reasoning while I was away from him, but there was no resisting the dynamic personality of the man when

in his presence.

"You win," I said with a laugh. "Your threat of offering some of my hated rivals a chance settled it."

"Good boy!" he exclaimed, pounding me on the back. "I knew you'd come. I had intended to take one of my assistants with me, but as soon as I knew you were here I decided that you were the man. There really ought to be a press representative along. Come with me and I'll show you our flyer."

The flyer proved to be of the same general type as had been used by Hadley. It was equipped with six rocket motors, four discharging to the bow and two to the stern. Any one of them, Carpenter said, was ample for motive power. Equilibrium was maintained by means of a heavy gyroscope which would prevent any turning of the axis of its rotation. The entire flyer shell could be revolved about the axis so that oblique motion with our bow and stern motors was readily possible. Direct lateral movement was provided for by valves which would divert a portion of the discharge of either a bow or stern motor out through side vents

in any direction. The motive power, of course, was furnished by the atomic disintegration of powdered aluminum. The whole interior, except for the portion of the walls, roof and floor, which was taken up by vitriolene windows, was heavily padded.

At nine the next morning the gates to the enclosure were thrown open and the representatives of the press admitted. Jim Carpenter mounted a platform and explained briefly what he proposed to do and then broke the crowd up into small groups and sent them over the works with guides. When all had been taken around they were reassembled and Carpenter announced to them his intention of going up in a space flyer and prove, by going through the heaviside layer, that he had actually destroyed a portion of it. There was an immediate clamor of applications to go with him. He laughingly announced that one reporter was all that he could stand on the ship and that he was taking one of his former associates with him. I could tell by the envious looks with which I was favored that any popularity I had ever had among my associates was gone forever. There was little time to

think of such things, however, for the hour for our departure was approaching, and the photographers were clamoring for pictures of us and the flyer.

We satisfied them at last, and I entered the flyer after Carpenter. We sealed the car up, started the air conditioner, and were ready for departure.

"Scared, Pete?" asked Carpenter, his hand on the starting lever.

I gulped a little as I looked at him. He was perfectly calm to a casual inspection, but I knew him well enough to interpret the small spots of red which appeared on his high cheekbones and the glitter in his eye. He may not have been as frightened as I was but he was laboring under an enormous nervous strain. The mere fact that he called me "Pete" instead of his usual "First Mortgage" showed that he was feeling pretty serious.

"Not exactly scared," I replied, "but rather uneasy, so to speak."

He laughed nervously.

"Cheer up, old man! If anything goes wrong, we won't know it. Sit down and get comfortable; this thing will start with a jerk."

He pulled the starting lever forward suddenly and I felt as though an intolerable weight were pressed against me, glueing me to my seat. The feeling lasted only for a moment, for he quickly eased up on the motor, and in a few moments I felt quite normal.

"How fast are we going?" I asked.

"Only two hundred miles an hour," he replied. "We will reach the layer in plenty of time at this rate and I don't want to jam into it. You can get up now."

I rose, moved over to the observation glass in the floor, and looked down. We were already five or ten miles above the earth and were ascending rapidly. I could still detect the great circle of reflectors with which our way was to be opened.

"How can you tell where these heat beams are when they are turned on?" I asked. "Infra-red rays are not visible, and we will soon be out of sight of the reflectors."

"I forgot to mention that I am having a small portion of visible red rays mixed with the infra-red so that we can spot them. I have a radio telephone here, working on my private wavelength, so that I can direct operations from here as well as from the ground—in fact, better. If you're cold, turn on the heater."

The friction of the flyer against the air had so far made up for the decreasing temperature of the air surrounding us, but a glance at the outside thermometer warned me that his suggestion was a wise one. I turned a valve which diverted a small portion of our exhaust through a heating coil in the flyer. It was hard to realize that I was actually in a rocket space ship, the second one to be flown and that, with the exception of the ill-fated Hadley, farther from the earth than any man had been before. There was no sensation of movement in that hermetically sealed flyer, and, after the first few moments, the

steady drone of the rocket motor failed to register on my senses. I was surprised to see that there was no trail of detritus behind us.

"You can see our trail at night," replied Carpenter when I asked him about it, "but in daylight, there is nothing to see. The slight luminosity of the gasses is hidden by the sun's rays. We may be able to see it when we get out in space beyond the layer, but I don't know. We have arrived at the bottom of the layer now, I believe. At any rate, we are losing velocity."

I moved over to the instrument board and looked. Our speed had dropped to one hundred and ten miles an hour and was steadily falling off. Carpenter pulled the control lever and reduced our power. Gradually the flyer came to a stop and hung poised in space. He shut off the power an instant and at once our indicator showed that we were falling, although very slowly. He promptly reapplied the power, and by careful adjustment brought us again to a dead stop.

"Ready to go," he remarked looking at his watch, "and just on time, too. Take a glass and watch the ground. I

am going to have the heat turned on."

I took the binoculars he indicated and turned them toward the ground while he gave a few crisp orders into his telephone. Presently from the ground beneath us burst out a circle of red dots from which long beams stabbed up into the heavens. The beams converged as they mounted until at a point slightly below us, and a half-mile away they became one solid beam of red. One peculiarity I noticed was that, while they were plainly visible near the ground, they faded out, and it was not until they were a few miles below us that they again became apparent. I followed their path upward into the heavens.

"Look here, Jim!" I cried as I did so. "Something's happening!"

He sprang to my side and glanced at the beam.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, pounding me on the back. "I was right! Look! And the fools called it a magnetic field!"

Upward the beam was boring its way, but it was almost concealed by a rain of fine particles of black which were falling around it.

"It's even more spectacular than I had hoped," he chortled. "I had expected to reduce the layer to such fluidity that we could penetrate it or even to vaporize it, but we are actually destroying it! That stuff is soot and is proof, if proof be needed, that the layer is an organic liquid."

He turned to his telephone and communicated the momentous news to the earth and then rejoined me at the window. For ten minutes we watched and a slight diminution of the black cloud became apparent.

"They're through the layer," exclaimed Carpenter. "Now watch, and you'll see something. I'm going to start spreading the beam."

He turned again to his telephone, and presently the beam began to widen and spread out. As it did so the dark cloud became more dense than it had been before. The earth below us was hidden and we could

see the red only as a dim murky glow through the falling soot. Carpenter inquired of the laboratory and found that we were completely invisible to the ground, half the heavens being hidden by the black pall. For an hour the beam worked its way toward us.

"The hole is about four hundred yards in diameter right now," said Carpenter as he turned from the telephone. "I have told them to stop the movement of the reflectors, and as soon as the air clears a little, we'll start through."

It took another hour for the soot to clear enough that we could plainly detect the ring of red light before us. Carpenter gave some orders to the ground, and a gap thirty yards wide opened in the wall before us. Toward this gap the flyer moved slowly under the side thrust of the diverted motor discharge. The temperature rose rapidly as we neared the wall of red light before us. Nearer we drew until the light was on both sides of us. Another few feet and the flyer shot forward with a jerk that threw me sprawling on the floor. Carpenter fell too, but he maintained his hold on the controls and tore at them desperately to check us.

I scrambled to my feet and watched. The red wall was alarmingly close. Nearer we drove and then came another jerk which threw me sprawling again. The wall retreated. In another moment we were standing still, with the red all around us at a distance of about two hundred yards.

"We had a narrow escape from being cremated," said Carpenter with a shaky laugh. "I knew that our speed would increase as soon as we got clear of the layer but it caught me by surprise just the same. I had no idea how great the holding effect of the stuff was. Well, First Mortgage, the road to space is open for us. May I invite you to be my guest on a little week-end jaunt to the Moon?"

"No thanks, Jim," I said with a wry smile. "I think a little trip to the edge of the layer will quite satisfy me."

"Quitter," he laughed. "Well, say good-bye to familiar things. Here we go!"

He turned to the controls of the flyer, and presently

we were moving again, this time directly away from the earth. There was no jerk at starting this time, merely a feeling as though the floor were pressing against my feet, a great deal like the feeling a person gets when they rise rapidly in an express elevator. The indicator showed that we were traveling only sixty miles an hour. For half an hour we continued monotonously on our way with nothing to divert us. Carpenter yawned.

"Now that it's all over, I feel let down and sleepy," he announced. "We are well beyond the point to which Hadley penetrated and so far we have met with no resistance. We are probably nearly at the outer edge of the layer. I think I'll shoot up a few miles more and then call it a day and go home. We are about eighty miles from the earth now."

I looked down, but could see nothing below us but the dense cloud of black soot resulting from the destruction of the heaviside layer. Like Carpenter, I felt sleepy, and I suppressed a yawn as I turned again to the window.

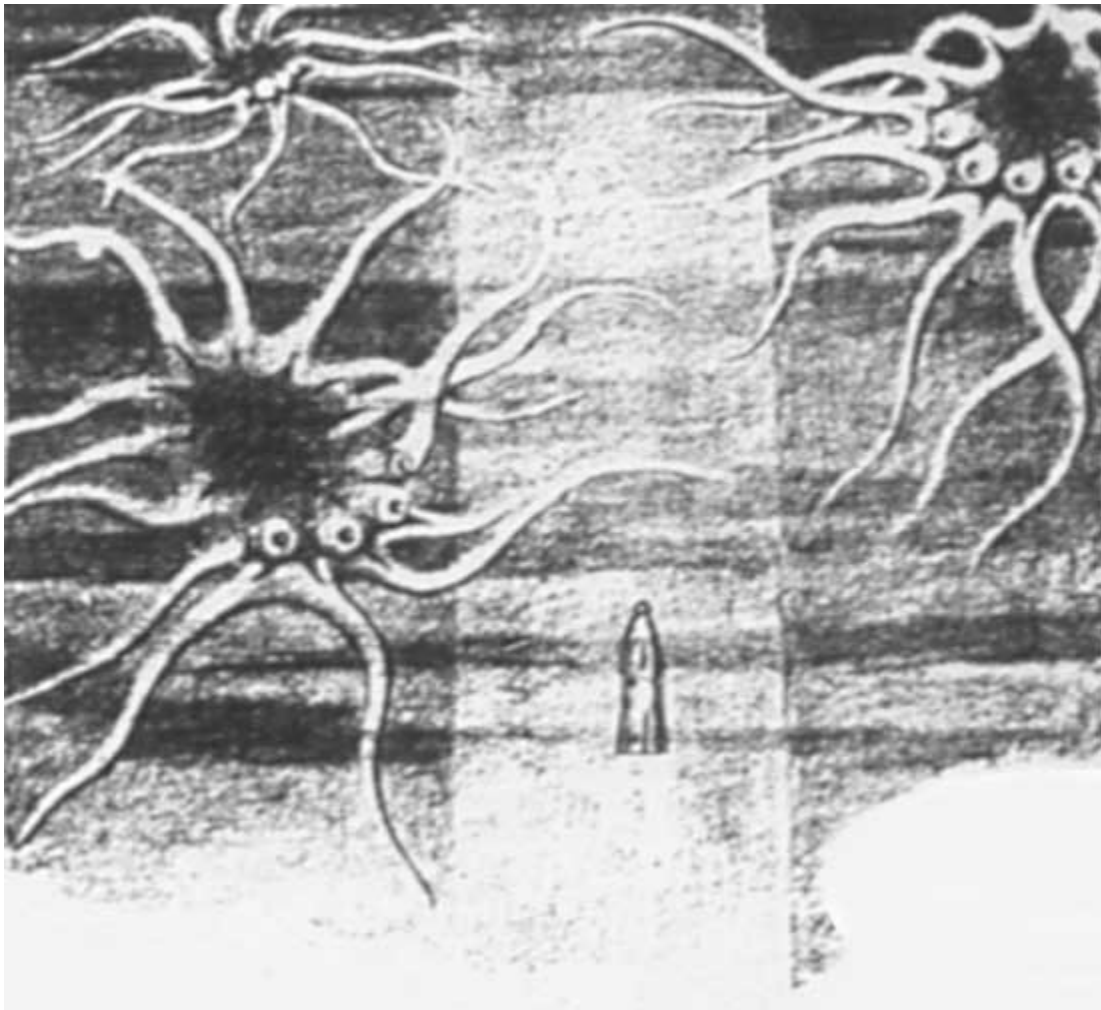
"Look here, Jim!" I cried suddenly. "What's that?"

He moved in a leisurely manner to my side and looked out. As he did so I felt his hand tighten on my shoulder with a desperate grip. Down the wall of red which surrounded us was coming an object of some kind. The thing was fully seventy-five yards long and half as wide at its main portion, while long irregular streams extended for a hundred yards on each side of it. There seemed to be dozens of them.

"What is it, Jim?" I asked in a voice which sounded high and unnatural to me.

"I don't know," he muttered, half to me and half to himself. "Good Lord, there's another of them!"

He pointed. Not far from the first of the things came another, even larger than the first. They were moving sluggishly along the red light, seeming to flow rather than to crawl. I had a horrible feeling that they were alive and malignant.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing narrow wedge shaped flyer moving through a lighter column in the heavisider layer, represented outside the colum by dark static, with massive, flat creautues with tentacles all around them, and fourgiant eyes in their front, two of them looking at the ship. Image description end.]

Carpenter stepped back to the controls of the flyer and stopped our movement; we hung in space,

watching them. The things were almost level with us, but their sluggish movement was downward toward the earth. In color, they were a brilliant crimson, deepening into purple near the center. Just as the first of them came opposite us it paused, and slowly a portion of the mass extended itself from the main bulk; and then, like doors opening, four huge eyes, each of them twenty feet in diameter, opened and stared at us.

"It's alive, Jim," I quavered. I hardly knew my own voice as I spoke.

Jim stepped back to the controls with a white face, and slowly we moved closer to the mass. As we approached I thought that I could detect a fleeting passage of expression in those huge eyes. Then they disappeared and only a huge crimson and purple blob lay before us. Jim moved the controls again and the flyer came to a stop.

Two long streamers moved out from the mass. Suddenly there was a jerk to the ship which threw us both to the floor. It started upward at express train

speed. Jim staggered to his feet, grasped the controls and started all four bow motors at full capacity, but even this enormous force had not the slightest effect in diminishing our speed.

"Well, the thing's got us, whatever it is," said Jim as he pulled his controls to neutral, shutting off all power. Now that the danger had assumed a tangible form, he appeared as cool and collected as ever, to my surprise, I found that I had recovered control of my muscle and of my voice. I became aware that the shoulder which Jim had gripped was aching badly, and I rubbed it absently.

"What is it, Jim?" I asked for the third time.

"I don't know," he replied. "It is some horrible inhabitant of space, something unknown to us on earth. From its appearance and actions, I think it must be a huge single-celled animal of the type of the earthly amoeba. If an amoeba is that large here, what must an elephant look like? However, I expect that we'll learn more about the matter later because it's taking us with it, wherever it's going."

uddenly the flyer became dark inside. I looked at the nearest window, but I could not even detect its outline. I reached for the light switch, but a sudden change in direction threw me against the wall. There was an instant of intense heat in the flyer.

"We have passed the heaviside layer," said Jim. "The brute has changed direction, and we felt that heat when he took us through the infra-red wall."

I reached again for the light switch, but before I could find it our motion ceased and an instant later the flyer was filled with glaring sunlight. We both turned to the window.

We lay on a glistening plain of bluish hue which stretched without a break as far as we could see. Not a thing broke the monotony of our vision. We turned to the opposite window. How can I describe the sight which met our horrified gaze? On the plain before us lay a huge purple monstrosity of gargantuan dimensions. The thing was a shapeless mass, only the four huge eyes standing out regarding us balefully. The mass was continually changing its outline and, as

we watched, a long streamer extended itself from the body toward us. Over and around the flyer the feeler went, while green and red colors played over first one and then another of the huge eyes before us. The feeler wrapped itself around the flyer and we were lifted into the air toward those horrible eyes. We had almost reached them when the thing dropped us. We fell to the plain with a crash. We staggered to our feet again and looked out. Our captor was battling for its life.

ts attacker was a smaller thing of a brilliant green hue, striped and mottled with blue and yellow. While our captor was almost formless, the newcomer had a very definite shape. It resembled a cross between a bird and a lizard, its shape resembling a bird, as did tiny rudimentary wings and a long beak, while the scaly covering and the fact that it had four legs instead of two bore out the idea that it might be a lizard. Its huge birdlike beak was armed with three rows of long sharp teeth with which it was tearing at our captor. The purple amoeba was holding its assailant with a dozen of its thrown out feelers which

were wrapped about the body and legs of the green horror. The whole battle was conducted in absolute silence.

"Now's our chance, Jim!" I cried. "Get away from here while that dragon has the amoeba busy!"

He jumped to the control levers of the flyer and pulled the starting switch well forward. The shock of the sudden start hurled me to the floor, but from where I fell I was able to watch the battle on the plain below us. It raged with uninterrupted fury and I felt certain of our escape when, with a shock which hurled both Jim and me to the ceiling, the flyer stopped. We fell back to the floor and I reflected that it was well for us that the interior of the flyer was so well padded. Had it not been, our bones would have been broken a dozen times by the shocks to which we had been subjected.

"What now?" I asked as I painfully struggled to my feet.

"Another of those purple amoebas," replied Jim from

the vantage point of a window. "He's looking us over as if he were trying to decide whether we are edible or not."

joined him at the window. The thing which had us was a replica of the monster we had left below us engaged in battle with the green dragon which had attacked it. The same indefinite and ever changing outline was evident, as well as the four huge eyes. The thing regarded us for a moment and slowly moved us up against its bulk until we touched it. Deeper and deeper into the mass of the body we penetrated until we were in a deep cavern with the light coming to us only from the entrance. I watched the entrance and horror possessed my soul.

"The hole's closing. Jim!" I gasped. "The thing is swallowing us!"

"I expected that," he replied grimly. "The amoeba has no mouth, you know. Nourishment is passed into the body through the skin, which closes behind it. We are a modern version of Jonah and the whale, First Mortgage."

"Well, Jonah got out," I ventured.

"We'll try to," he replied. "When that critter swallowed us, he got something that will prove pretty indigestible. Let's try to give him a stomach ache. I don't suppose that a machine-gun will affect him, but we'll try it."

"I didn't know that you had any guns on board."

"Oh yes, I've got two machine-guns. We'll turn one of them loose, but I don't expect much effect from it."

He moved over to one of the guns and threw off the cover which had hidden it from my gaze. He fed in a belt of ammunition and pulled his trigger. For half a minute he held it down, and two hundred and fifty caliber thirty bullets tore their way into space. There was no evidence of movement on the part of our host.

"Just as I thought," remarked Jim as he threw aside the empty belt and covered the gun again. "The thing has no nervous organization to speak of and probably never felt that. We'll have to rig up a disintegrating

ray for him."

"What?" I gasped.

"A disintegrating ray," he replied. "Oh yes, I know how to make the fabulous 'death ray' that you journalists are always raving about. I have never announced my discovery, for war is horrible enough without it, but I have generated it and used it in my work a number of times. Did it never occur to you that the rocket motor is built on a disintegrating ray principle?"

"Of course it is, Jim. I never thought of it in that light before, but it must be. How can you use it? The discharge from the motors is a harmless stream of energy particles."

"Instead of turning the ray into powdered aluminum and breaking it down, what is to prevent me from turning it against the body of our captor and blasting my way out?"

"I don't know."

"Well, nothing is. I'll have to modify one of the motors a little, but it's not a hard job. Get some wrenches from the tool box and we'll start."

An hour of hard work enabled us to disconnect one of the reserve bow motors and, after the modifications Jim had mentioned, turn the ray out through the port through which the products of disintegration were meant to go. When we had bolted it in place with an improvised coupling, Jim opened the vitriolene screen which held in our air and turned to his control board.

"Here goes," he said.

He pulled the lever to full power and with a roar which almost deafened us in the small flyer, the ray leaped out to do its deadly work. I watched through a port beside the motor. There was a flash of intense light for an instant and then the motor died away in silence. A path to freedom lay open before us. Jim started one of the stern motors and slowly we forced our way through the hole torn in the living mass. When we were almost at the surface, he threw in full power and we shot free from the amoeba and into the

open. Again we were stopped in midair and drawn back toward the huge bulk. The eyes looked at us and we were turned around. As the ray swung into a position to point directly toward one of the eyes, Jim pulled the controlling lever. With the flash of light which ensued, the eye and a portion of the surrounding tissue disappeared. The amoeba writhed and changed shape rapidly, while flashes of brilliant crimson played over the remaining eyes. Again the ray was brought into play and another of the eyes disappeared. This was evidently enough for our captor, for it suddenly released us and instantly we started to fall. Jim caught the control levers and turned on our power in time to halt us only a few feet above the plain toward which we were falling. We were close to the point whence we had started up and we could see that the battle below us was still raging.

The green dragon was partially engulfed by the amoeba, but it still relentlessly tore off huge chunks and devoured them. The amoeba was greatly reduced in bulk but it still fought gamely. Even as we approached the dragon was evidently satiated, for it

slowly withdrew from the purple bulk and back away. Long feelers shot out from the amoeba's bulk toward the dragon but they were bitten off before they could grasp their prey.

"Let's get away from here, Jim," I cried, but I spoke too late. Even as the words left my mouth the green dragon saw us and raised itself in the air, and with gaping jaws launched itself at us. It took Jim only a moment to shoot the flyer up into space, and the charge passed harmlessly beneath us. The dragon checked its headway and turned again toward us.

"Use the machine-gun, Pete!" cried Jim. "I've got to run the ship."

I threw the cover off the gun and fed in a fresh belt of ammunition. As the green monster dashed toward us I hastily aligned the gun and pulled the trigger. My aim was good and at least fifty of the bullets plowed through the approaching bulk before Jim dropped the ship and allowed it to pass above us. Again the dragon turned and charged, and again I met it with a hail of bullets. They had no apparent effect and Jim

dropped the ship again and let the huge bulk shoot by above us. Twice more the dragon rushed but the last rush was less violent than had been the first three.

"The bullets are affecting him, Pete!" cried Jim as he shot the flyer upward. "Give him another dose!"

I hastily fed in another belt, but it was not needed. The dragon rushed the fifth time, but before it reached us its velocity fell off and it passed harmlessly below us and fell on a long curve to the plain below. It fell near the purple amoeba which it had battled and a long feeler shot out and grasped it. Straight into the purple mass it was drawn, and vanished into the huge bulk.

Jim started one of the stern motors. In a few seconds we were far from the scene.

"Have you any idea of which direction to go?" he asked. I shook my head.

"Have you a radio beacon?" I asked.

He withered me with a glance.

"We're beyond the heaviside layer," he reminded me.

For a moment I was stunned.

"We can't be very far from the hole," he said consolingly as he fumbled with the controls. "But before we try to find it, we had better disconnect one of the stern motors and rig it as a disintegrating ray so that we will have one bearing in each direction. We may meet more denizens of space who like our looks, and we haven't much ammunition left."

We landed on the plain and in an hour had a second disintegrating ray ready for action. Thus armed, we rose from the blue plain and started at random on our way. For ten minutes we went forward. Then Jim stopped the flyer and turned back. We had gone only a short distance when I called to him to stop.

"What is it?" he demanded as he brought the flyer to a standstill.

"There's another creature ahead of us," I replied. "A red one."

"Red?" he asked excitedly as he joined me. About a mile ahead of us a huge mass hung in the air. It resembled the amoeba which had attacked us, except that the newcomer was red. As we watched, it moved toward us. As it did so its color changed to purple.

"Hurrah!" cried Jim. "Don't you remember, Pete, that the one which captured us and took us out of the hole was red while in the hole and then turned purple? That thing just came out of the hole!"

"Then why can't we see the red beam?" I demanded.

"Because there's no air or anything to reflect it," he replied. "We can't see it until we are right in it."

I devoutly hoped that he was right as he headed the ship toward the waiting monster. As we approached the amoeba came rapidly to meet us and a long feeler shot out. As it did so there was a flash of intense light ahead of us as Jim turned loose the ray, and the feeler

disappeared. Another and another met the same fate. Then Jim rotated the ship slightly and let out the full force of the ray toward the monster. A huge hole was torn in it, and as we approached with our ray blazing, the amoeba slowly retreated and our path was open before us. Again there was an instant of intense heat as we passed through the red wall, and we were again in the hole which Jim's lamps had blasted through the layer. Below us still lay the fog which had obscured the earth when we had started on our upward trip.

Down toward the distant earth we dropped. We had gone about thirty miles before we saw on the side of the hole one of the huge amoeba which were so thick above.

"We might stop and pick that fellow off," said Jim, "but, on the whole, I think we'll experiment with him."

He drove the ship nearer and turned it on its axis, holding it in position by one of the auxiliary discharges. A flash came from our forward ray and a portion of the amoeba disappeared. A long arm moved out toward us, but it moved slowly and sluggishly

instead of with the lightninglike swiftness which had characterized the movements of the others. Jimmy easily eluded it and dropped the ship a few yards. The creature pursued it, but it moved slowly. For a mile we kept our distance ahead of it, but we had to constantly decrease our speed to keep from leaving it behind. Soon we were almost at a standstill, and Jim reversed our direction and drew nearer. A feeler came slowly and feebly out a few feet toward us and then stopped. We dropped the ship a few feet but the amoeba did not follow. Jim glanced at the altimeter.

"Just as I thought," he exclaimed. "We are about forty-five miles above the earth and already the air is so dense that the thing cannot move lower. They are fashioned for existence in the regions of space and in even the most rarified air they are helpless. There is no chance of one ever reaching the surface of the earth without years of gradual acclimation, and even if it did, it would be practically immobile. In a few years the layer will flow enough to plug the hole I have made, but even so, I'll build a couple of space flyers equipped with disintegrating rays as soon as we

get down and station them alongside the hole to wipe out any of that space vermin which tries to come through. Let's go home. We've put in a good day's work."

Hundreds of the purple amoeba have been destroyed by the guarding ships during the past five years. The hole is filling in as Jim predicted, and in another ten years the earth will be as securely walled in as it ever was. But in the mean time, no one knows what unrevealed horrors space holds, and the world will never rest entirely easy until the slow process of time again heals the broken protective layer.

#34 The Attack From Space, By Sterner St. Paul Meek:

From a far world came monstrous invaders who were all the more terrifying because invisible.

Aproximate word count: 11,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

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"No one knows what unrevealed horrors space holds and the world will never rest entirely easy until the slow process of time again heals the protective layer."—From "Beyond the Heavside Layer."

Over a year has passed since I wrote those lines. When they were written the hole which Jim Carpenter had burned with his battery of infra-red lamps through the heavside layer, that hollow sphere of invisible semi-plastic organic matter which encloses

the world as a nutshell does a kernel, was gradually filling in as he had predicted it would: every one thought that in another ten years the world would be safely enclosed again in its protective layer as it had been since the dawn of time. There were some adventurous spirits who deplored this fact, as it would effectually bar interplanetary travel, for Hadley had proved with his life that no space flyer could force its way through the fifty miles of almost solid material which barred the road to space, but they were in the minority. Most of humanity felt that it would rather be protected against the denizens of space than to have a road open for them to travel to the moon if they felt inclined.

From a far world came monstrous invaders who were all the more terrifying because invisible.

To be sure, during the five years that the hole had been open, nothing more dangerous to the peace and well-being of the world had appeared from space than a few hundreds of the purple amoeba which we had found so numerous on the outer side of the layer, when we had traveled in a Hadley space ship up

through the hole into the outer realms of space, and one lone specimen of the green dragons which we had also encountered. The amoeba had been readily destroyed by the disintegrating rays of the guarding space-ships which were stationed inside the layer at the edge of the hole and the lone dragon had fallen a ready victim to the machine-gun bullets which had been poured into it. At first the press had damned Jim Carpenter for opening the road for these horrors, but once their harmlessness had been clearly established, the row had died down and the appearance of an amoeba did not merit over a squib on the inside pages of the daily papers.

While the hole in the heaviside layer was no longer news for the daily press, a bitter controversy still waged in the scientific journals as to the reason why no observer on earth, even when using the most powerful telescopes, could see the amoeba before they entered the hole, and then only when their telescopes were set up directly under the hole. When a telescope of even small power was mounted in the grounds back of Carpenter's laboratory, the amoeba

could be detected as soon as they entered the hole, or when they passed above it through space; but, aside from that point of vantage, they were entirely invisible.

Carpenter's theory of the absorptive powers of the material of which the heaviside layer was composed was laughed to scorn by most scientists, who pointed out the fact that the sun, moon and stars could be readily seen through it. Carpenter replied that the rays of colored or visible light could only pass through the layer when superimposed upon a carrier wave of ultra-violet or invisible light. He stated dogmatically that the amoeba and the other denizens of space absorbed all the ultra-violet light which fell on them and reflected only the visible rays which could not pass through the heaviside layer because of the lack of a synchronized carrier wave of shorter wavelength.

Despetier replied at great length and showed by apparently unimpeachable mathematics that Carpenter was entirely wrong and that his statements showed an absolute lack of knowledge of the most

elementary and fundamental laws of light transmission. Carpenter replied briefly that he could prove by mathematics that two was equal to one and he challenged Despetier or anyone else to satisfactorily explain the observed facts in any other way. While they vainly tried to do so, Carpenter lapsed into silence in his Los Angeles laboratory and delved ever deeper into the problems of science. Such was the situation when the attack came from space.

My first knowledge of the attack came when McQuarrie, the city editor of the San Francisco *Clarion*, sent for me. When I entered his office he tossed a Los Angeles dispatch on the desk before me and with a growl ordered me to read it. It told of the unexplained disappearance of an eleven year old boy the night before. It looked like a common kidnapping.

"Well?" I asked as I handed him back the dispatch.

With another growl he tossed down a second telegram. I read it with astonishment, for it told of a second disappearance which had happened about an hour after the first. The similarity of the two cases

was at once apparent.

"Coincidence or connection?" I asked as I returned it.

"Find out!" he replied. "If I knew which it was I wouldn't be wasting the paper's money by sending you to Los Angeles. I don't doubt that I am wasting it anyway, but as long as I am forced to keep you on as a reporter, I might as well try to make you earn the money the owner wastes on paying you a salary, even although I know it to be a hopeless task. Go on down there and see what you can find out, if anything."

I jotted down in my notebook the names and addresses of the missing children and turned to leave. A boy entered and handed McQuarrie a yellow slip. He glanced at it and called me back.

"Wait a minute, Bond," he said as he handed me the dispatch. "I doubt but you'd better fly down to Los Angeles. Another case has just been reported."

I hastily copied down the dispatch he handed me, which was almost a duplicate of the first two with the

exception of the time and the name. Three unexplained disappearances in one day was enough to warrant speed; I drew some expense money and was on my way south in a chartered plane within an hour.

On my arrival I went to the Associated Press office and found a message waiting for me, directing me to call McQuarrie on the telephone at once.

"Hello, Bond," came his voice over the wire, "have you just arrived? Well, forget all about that disappearance case. Prince is on his way to Los Angeles to cover it. You hadn't been gone an hour before a wire came in from Jim Carpenter. He says, 'Send Bond to me at once by fastest conveyance. Chance for a scoop on the biggest story of the century.' I don't know what it's about, but Jim Carpenter is always front page news. Get in touch with him at once and stay with him until you have the story. Don't risk trying to telegraph it when you get it—telephone. Get moving!"

I lost no time in getting Carpenter on the wire.

"Hello, First Mortgage," he greeted me. "You made

good time getting down here. Where are you?"

"At the A. P. Office."

"Grab a taxi and come out to the laboratory. Bring your grip with you: you may have to stay over night."

"I'll be right out, Jim. What's the story?"

His voice suddenly grew grave.

"It's the biggest thing you ever handled," he replied.

"The fate of the whole world may hang on it. I don't want to talk over the phone; come on out and I'll give you the whole thing."

An hour later I shook hands with Tim, the guard at the gate of the Carpenter laboratory, and passed through the grounds to enter Jim's private office. He greeted me warmly and for a few minutes we chatted of old times when I worked with him as an assistant in his atomic disintegration laboratory and of the stirring events we had passed through together when we had ventured outside the heaviside layer in his

space ship.

"Those were stirring times," he said, "but I have an idea, First Mortgage, that they were merely a Sunday school picnic compared to what we are about to tackle."

"I guessed that you had something pretty big up your sleeve from your message." I replied. "What's up now? Are we going to make a trip to the moon and interview the inhabitants?"

"We may interview them without going that far," he said. "Have you seen a morning paper?"

"No."

"Look at this."

He handed me a copy of the *Gazette*. Streamer headlines told of the three disappearances which I had come to Los Angeles to cover, but they had grown to five during the time I had been flying down. I looked at Jim in surprise.

"We got word of that in San Francisco," I told him, "and I came down here to cover the story. When I got here, McQuarrie telephoned me your message and told me to come and see you instead. Has your message anything to do with this?"

"It has everything to do with it, First Mortgage; in fact, it *is* it. Have you any preconceived ideas on the disappearance epidemic?"

"None at all."

"All the better—you'll be able to approach the matter with an unbiased viewpoint. Don't read that hooey put out by an inspired reporter who blames the laxness of the city government; I'll give you the facts without embellishment. Nothing beyond the bare fact of the disappearance is known about the first case. Robert Prosser, aged eleven, was sent to the grocery store by his mother about six-thirty last night and failed to return. That's all we know about it, except that it happened in Eagle Rock. The second case we have a little more data on. William Hill, aged twelve, was playing in Glendale last night with some companions.

They were playing 'hide and go seek' and William hid. He could not be found by the boy who was searching and has not been found since. His companions became frightened and reported it about eight o'clock. They saw nothing, but mark this! Four of them agree that they heard a sound in the air *like a motor humming*."

"That proves nothing."

"Taken alone it does not, but in view of the third case, it is quite significant. The third case happened about nine-thirty last night. This time the victim was a girl, aged ten. She was returning home from a moving picture with some companions and she disappeared. This time the other children saw her go. They say she was suddenly taken straight up into the air and then disappeared from sight. They, also claim to have heard a sound like a big electric fan in the air at the time, although they could see nothing."

"Had they heard the details of the second disappearance?"

"They had not. I can see what you are thinking; that they were unconsciously influenced by the account given of the other case."

"Consciously or unconsciously."

"I doubt it, for the fourth case was almost a duplicate of the third. The fourth and fifth cases happened this morning. In the fourth case the child, for it was a nine year old girl this time, was lifted into the air in broad daylight and disappeared. This disappearance was witnessed, not only by children, but also by two adults, and their testimony agrees completely with that of the children. The fifth case is similar to the first: a ten year old boy disappeared without trace. The whole city is in a reign of terror."

The telephone at Carpenter's elbow rang and he answered it. A short conversation took place and he turned to me with a grim face as he hung up the receiver.

"Another case has just been reported to police headquarters from Beverly Hills," he said. "Again the

child was seen to be lifted into the air by some invisible means and disappeared. The sound of a motor was plainly heard by five witnesses, who all agree that it was just, above their heads, but that nothing could be seen."

"Was it in broad daylight?"

"Less than an hour ago."

"But, Jim, that's impossible!"

"Why is it impossible?"

"It would imply the invisibility of a tangible substance; of a solid."

"What of it?"

"Why, there isn't any such substance. Nothing of the sort exists."

Carpenter pointed to one of the windows of his laboratory.

"Does that window frame contain glass or not?" he asked.

I strained my eyes. Certainly nothing was visible.

"Yes," I said at a venture.

He rose and thrust his hand through the space where the glass should have been.

"Has this frame glass in it?" he asked, pointing to another.

"No."

He struck the glass with his knuckle.

"I'll give up," I replied. "I am used to thinking of glass as being transparent but not invisible; yet I can see that under certain light conditions it may be invisible. Granted that such is the case, do you believe that living organisms can be invisible?"

"Under the right conditions, yes. Has any observer

been able to see any of the purple amoeba which we know are so numerous on the outer side of the heaviside layer?"

"Not until they have entered the hole through the layer."

"And yet those amoeba are both solid and opaque, as you know. Why is it not possible that men, or intelligences of some sort, are in the air about us and yet are invisible to our eyes!"

"If they are, why haven't we received evidence of it years ago?"

"Because there has only been a hole through the heaviside layer for six years. Before that time they could not penetrate it any more than poor Hadley could with his space ship. They have not entered the hole earlier because it is a very small one, at present only some two hundred and fifty yards in diameter in a sphere of over eight thousand miles diameter. The invaders have just found the entrance."

"The invaders? Do you think that the world has been invaded?"

"I do. How else can you explain the very fact which you have just quoted, that no evidence of the presence on these invisible entities has previously been recorded?"

"Where did they come from?"

"They may have come from any where in the solar system, or even from outside it but I fancy, that they are from Mars or Venus."

"Why so?"

"Because they are the two planets nearest to the earth and are the ones where conditions are the most like they are on the earth. Venus, for example, has an atmosphere and a gravity about .83 of earthly gravity, and life of a sort similar to that of the earth might well live there. Further, it seems more probable that the invaders have come from one of the nearby planets than from the realms of space beyond the

solar system."

"What about the moon?"

"We can dismiss that because of the lack of an atmosphere."

"It sounds logical, Jim, but the idea of living organisms of sufficient size to lift a child into the air who are invisible seems a little absurd."

"I never said they were invisible. I don't think they are."

"But they must be, else why weren't they seen?"

"Use your head, First Mortgage. Those purple amoeba we encountered were quite visible to us, yet they are invisible to observers on the earth."

"Yes, but that is because the heaviside layer is between them and the earth. As soon as they come below it they can be seen."

"Exactly. Why is it not possible that the Venetians, or Martians, or whoever our invaders are, have encased themselves and their space flyer in a layer of some substance similar to the heaviside layer, a substance which is permeable to light rays only when a large proportion of ultra-violet rays accompany the visible rays? If they did this and then constructed the walls of their ship of some substance which absorbed all the ultra-violet rays which fell on it; not only would the ship itself be invisible, but also everything contained in it—and yet they could see the outside world easily. That such *is* the case is proved by the disappearance of those children in mid-air. They were taken into a space ship behind an ultra-violet absorbing wall and so became invisible."

"If the walls absorbed all the ultra-violet and were impermeable to light without ultra-violet, the ship would appear as a black opaque substance and could be seen."

"That would be true except for one thing which you are forgetting. The heaviside layer, as I have repeatedly proved, is a splendid conductor of ultra-

violet. The rays falling on it are probably bent along the line of the covering layer so that they open up and bend around the ship in the same manner as flowing water will open up and flow around a stone and then come together again. The light must flow around the solid ship and then join again in such a manner that the eye can detect no interruption."

"Jim, all that sounds reasonable, but have you any proof of it?"

"No, First Mortgage, I haven't—yet; but if the Lord is good to us we'll have definite proof this afternoon and be in a position to successfully combat this new menace to the world."

"Do you expect me to go on another one of your crack-brained expeditions into the unknown with you?"

"Certainly I do, but this time we won't go out of the known. I have our old space flyer which we took beyond the heaviside layer six years ago ready for action and we're going to look for the invaders this

afternoon."

"How will we see them if they are invisible?"

"They are invisible to ordinary light but not to ultra-violet light. While most of the ultra-violet is deflected and flows around the ship or else is absorbed, I have an idea that, if we bathe it in a sufficient concentration of ultra-violet, some would be reflected. We are going to look for the reflected portion."

"Ultra-violet light is invisible."

"It is to the eye, but it can be detected. You know that radium is activated and glows under ultra-violet?"

"Yes."

"Mounted on our flyer are six ultra-violet searchlights. By the side of each one is a wide angle telescopic concentrator which will focus any reflected ultra-violet onto a radium coated screen and thus make it visible to us. In effect the apparatus is a camera obscura with all lens made of rock crystal or fused

quartz, both of which allow free passage to ultra-violet."

"What will we do if we find them?"

"Mounted beneath the telescope is a one-pounder gun with radite shells. If we locate them, we will use our best efforts to shoot them down."

"Suppose they are armed too?"

"In that case I hope that you shoot faster and straighter than they do. If you don't—well, old man, it'll just be too damned bad."

"I don't know that the *Clarion* hires me to go out and shoot at invisible invaders from another planet, but if I don't go with you, I expect you'd just about call up the *Echo* or the *Gazette* and ask them for a gunner."

"Just about."

"In that case, I may as well be sacrificed as anyone else. When do we start?"

"You old faker!" cried Jim, pounding me on the back. "You wouldn't miss the trip for anything. If you're ready we'll start right now. Everything is ready."

"Including the sacrifice," I replied, rising. "All right, Jim, let's go and get it over with. If we live, I'll have to get back in time to telephone the story to McQuarrie for the first edition."

I followed Jim out of the laboratory and to a large open space behind the main building where the infra-red generators with which he had pierced the hole through the heaviside layer had been located. The reflectors were still in place, but the bank of generators had been removed. A gang of men were hard at work erecting a huge parabolic reflector in the center of the circle, about the periphery of which the infra-red reflectors were placed. In an open space near the center stood a Hadley space ship, toward which Jim led the way.

I wondered at the activity and meant to ask what it portended, but in the excitement of boarding the flyer forgot it. I followed Jim in; he closed the door and

started the air conditioner.

"Here, First Mortgage," he said as he turned from the control board and faced me, "here are the fluoroscopic screens. They are arranged in a bank, so that you can keep an eye on all of them readily.

Beneath each telescope is an automatic one-pounder gun with its mount geared to the telescope and the light, so that the gun bears continually on the point in space represented by the center of the fluoroscopic screen which belongs to that light. If we locate anything, turn your beam until the object is in the exact center of the screen where these two cross-hairs are. When you have it lined up, push this button and the gun will fire."

"What about reloading?"

"The guns are self-loading. Each one has twenty shells in its magazine and will fire one shot each time the button is pushed until it is empty. If you empty one magazine, I can turn the ship so that another gun will bear. This gives you a total of one hundred and twenty shots quickly available; there are sixty extra rounds,

which we can break out and load into the magazines in a few seconds. Do you understand everything?"

"I guess so. Everything seems clear enough."

"All right; sit down and we'll start."

I took my seat, and Jim pulled the starting lever. I was glued to the seat and the heavy springs in the cushion were compressed almost to their limit by the sudden acceleration. As soon as we were well clear of the ground Jim reduced his power, and in a few moments we were floating motionless in the air, a thousand feet up. He left the control board and came to my side.

"Start your ultra lights," he said as he joined me. "We may be able to spot something from here."

I started the lights and we stared at the screens before us. Nothing appeared on any of them except the one pointing directly down, and only an image of the ground, appeared on it. Under Jim's tutelage I swung the beams in wide circles, covering the space around us, but nothing appeared.

"Those beams won't project over five miles in this atmosphere," he said, "and the ship we are looking for may be so small that we would have trouble locating it at any great distance. I am going to move over near the scene of the last disappearance. Keep your lights swinging and sing out if you see anything on the screens."

I could feel the ship start to move slowly under the force of a side discharge from the rocket motor, and I swung the beams of the six lights around, trying to cover the entire area about us. Nothing appeared on the screens for an hour, and my head began to ache from the strain of unremitting close observation of the glowing screens. A buzz sounding over the hum of the rocket motor attracted my attention; Jim pulled his levers to neutral with the exception of the one which maintained our elevation and stepped to an instrument on the wall of the flyer.

"Hello," he called. "What? Where did it happen? All right, thanks, we'll move over that way at once."

He turned from the radio telephone and spoke.

"Another disappearance has just been reported," he said. "It happened on the outskirts of Pasadena. Keep your eyes open: I'm going to head in that direction."

A few minutes later we were floating over Pasadena. Jim stopped the flyer and joined me at the screens. We swung our beams in wide circles to cover the entire area around us, but no image on the screens rewarded us.

"Doggone it, they must have left here in a hurry," grumbled Jim.

Even as he spoke the flyer gave a lurch which nearly threw me off my seat and which sent Jim sprawling on the floor. With a white face he leaped to the control board and pulled the lever controlling our one working stern motor to full power. For a moment the ship moved upward and then came to a dead stop, although the motor still roared at full speed.

"Can't you see anything, Pete?" cried Jim as he threw our second stern motor into gear.

Again the ship moved upward for a few feet and then stopped. I swung the searchlights frantically in all directions, but five of the screens remained blank and the sixth showed only the ground below us.

"Not a thing," I replied.

"Something ought to show," he muttered, and suddenly shut off both motors. The flyer gave a sickening lurch toward the ground, but we fell only a hundred yards before our motion stopped. We hung suspended in the air with no motors working. Jim joined me at the screens and we swung the lights rapidly without success.

"Look, Pete!" Jim cried hoarsely.

My gaze followed his pointing finger and I saw the door of our flyer springing out as though some force from the outside were trying to wrench it open. The pull ceased for an instant, then came again; the sturdy latches burst and the door was torn from its hinges. Jim swung one of the searchlights until the beam was at right angles to the hull of the flyer and

pressed the gun button. A crash filled the confined space of the flyer as a one-pounder radite shell tore out into space.

"They're there but still invisible," he exclaimed as he shifted the direction of the gun and fired again. "I am shooting by guess-work, but I might score a hit."

He changed the direction of the gun again, but before he could press the button he was lifted into the air and drawn rapidly toward the open door.

"Shoot, Pete!" he shouted. "Shoot and keep on shooting—it's your only chance!"

I turned to the knobs controlling the guns and lights, but, before I could make a move, something hard and cold grasped me about the middle and I was lifted into the air and drawn toward the open door after Jim. I tore at the thing holding me with my hands, but it was a smooth round thing like a two-inch thick wire, and I could get no grip on it to loosen it. Out through the door I went and was drawn through the air a few feet behind Jim. He moved ahead of me for

fifteen or twenty feet and then vanished in mid-air. I dared not struggle in mid-air and I was drawn through a door into a large space flyer which became visible as I entered it. The flexible wire or rod which had held me uncoiled and I was free on the floor beside Jim Carpenter. This much was clear and understandable, but when I looked at the crew of that space ship, I was sure that I had lost my mind or was seeing visions. I had naturally expected men, or at least something in semi-human form, but instead of anything of the sort, before me stood a dozen gigantic beetles!

I rubbed my eyes and looked again. There was no mistaking the fact that we had been captured by a race of gigantic beetles flying an invisible space ship. When I had time later to examine them critically, I could see marked differences between our captors and the beetles we were accustomed to see on the earth besides the mere matter of size. To begin with, their bodies were relatively much smaller, the length of shell of the largest specimen not being over four feet, while the head of the same insect, exclusive of

the horns or pinchers, was a good eighteen inches in length. The pinchers, which by all beetle proportions should have been a couple of feet long at the least, did not extend over the head a distance greater than eight inches, although they were sturdy and powerful.

Instead of traveling with their shells horizontal as do earthly beetles, these insects stood erect on their two lower pairs of legs, which were of different lengths so that all four feet touched the ground when the shell was vertical. The two upper pairs of legs were used as arms, the topmost pair being quite short and splitting out at the end into four flexible claws about five inches long, which they used as fingers. These upper arms, which sprouted from a point near the top of the head, were peculiar in that they apparently had no joints like the other three pairs but were flexible like an elephant's trunk. The second pair of arms were armed with long, vicious-looking hooks. The backplates concealed only very rudimentary wings, not large enough to enable the insects to fly, although Jim told me later that they could fly on their own planet, where the lessened gravity made such

extensive wing supports as would be needed on earth unnecessary.

The backplates were a brilliant green in color, with six-inch stripes of chrome yellow running lengthwise and crimson spots three inches in diameter arranged in rows between the stripes. Their huge-faceted eyes sparkled like crystal when the light fell on them, and from time to time waves of various colors passed over them, evidently reflecting the insect's emotions. Although they gave the impression of great muscular power, their movements were slow and sluggish, and they seemed to have difficulty in getting around.

(Editor's note 1:

Mr. Bond has made a laughable error in his description. Like all of the coleoptera, the Mercurians were hexapoda (six legged). What Mr. Bond continually refers to in his narrative as "upper arms" were really the antenna of the insects which split at the end into four flexible appendages resembling fingers. His mistake is a natural one, for the Mercurians used their antenna as extra arms.—James

S. Carpenter. End Editor's note.]

As my horrified gaze took in these monstrosities I turned with a shudder to Jim Carpenter.

"Am I crazy, Jim," I asked, "or do you see these things too?"

"I see them all right, Pete," he replied. "It isn't as surprising as it seems at first glance. You expected to find human beings; so did I, but what reason had we for doing so? It is highly improbable, when you come to consider the matter, that evolution should take the same course elsewhere as it did on earth. Why not beetles, or fish, or horned toads, for that matter?"

"No reason, I guess," I answered; "I just hadn't expected anything of the sort. What do you suppose they mean to do with us?"

"I haven't any idea, old man. We'll just have to wait and see. I'll try to talk to them, although I don't expect much luck at it."

He turned to the nearest beetle and slowly and clearly spoke a few words. The insect gave no signs of

comprehension, although it watched the movement of Jim's lips carefully. It is my opinion, and Jim agrees with me, that the insects were both deaf and dumb, for during the entire time we were associated with them, we never heard them give forth a sound under any circumstances, nor saw them react to any sound that we made. Either they had some telepathic means of communication or else they made and heard sounds beyond the range of the human ear, for it was evident from their actions that they frequently communicated with one another.

When Jim failed in his first attempt to communicate he looked around for another method. He noticed my notebook, which had fallen on the floor when I was set down; he picked it up and drew a pencil from his pocket. The insects watched his movements carefully, and when he had made a sketch in the book, the nearest one took it from him and examined it carefully and then passed it to another one, who also examined it. The sketch which Jim had drawn showed the outline of the Hadley space flyer from which he had been taken. When the beetles had examined the

sketch, one of them stepped to an instrument board in the center of the ship and made an adjustment. Then he pointed with one of his lower arms.

We looked in the direction in which he pointed; to our astonishment, the walls of the flyer seemed to dissolve, or at least to become perfectly transparent. The floor of the space ship was composed of some silvery metal, and from it had risen walls of the same material, but now the effect was as though we were suspended in mid-air, with nothing either around us or under us. I gasped and grabbed at the instrument board for support. Then I felt foolish as I realized that there was no change in the feel of the floor for all its transparency and that we were not falling.

A short distance away we could see our flyer suspended in the air, held up by two long flexible rods or wires similar to those which had lifted us from our ship into our prison. I saw a dozen more of these rods coiled up, hanging in the air, evidently, but really on the floor near the edge of the flyer, ready for use. Jim suddenly grasped me by the arm.

"Look behind you in a moment," he said, "but don't start!"

He took the notebook in his hand and started to draw a sketch. I looked behind as he had told me to.

Hanging in the air in a position which told me that they must have been in a different compartment of the flyer, were five children. They were white as marble, and lay perfectly motionless.

"Are they dead, Jim?" I asked in a low voice without looking at him.

"I don't know," he replied, "but we'll find out a little later. I am relieved to find them here, and I doubt if they are harmed."

The sketch which he was making was one of the solar system, and, when he had finished, he marked the earth with a cross and handed the notebook to one of the beetles. The insect took it and showed it to his companions; so far as I was able to judge expressions, they were amazed to find that we had knowledge of the heavenly bodies. The beetle took Jim's pencil in

one of its hands and, after examining it carefully, made a cross on the circle which Jim had drawn to represent the planet Mercury.

"They come from Mercury," exclaimed Jim in surprise as he showed me the sketch. "That accounts for a good many things; why they are so lethargic, for one thing. Mercury is much smaller than the earth and the gravity is much less. According to Mercurian standards, they must weigh a ton each. It is quite a tribute to their muscular development that they can move and support their weight against our gravity. They can understand a drawing all right, so we have a means of communicating with them, although a pretty slow one and dependent entirely on my limited skill as a cartoonist. I wonder if we are free to move about?"

"The only way to find out is to try," I replied and stood erect. The beetles offered no objection and Jim stood up beside me. We walked, or rather edged, our way toward the side of the ship. The insects watched us when we started to move and then evidently decided that we were harmless. They turned from us to the working of the ship. One of them manipulated some

dials on the instrument board. One of the rods which held our flyer released its grip, came in toward the Mercurian ship and coiled itself up on the floor, or the place where the floor should have been. The insect touched another dial. Jim threw caution to the winds, raced across the floor and grasped the beetle by the arm.

The insect looked at him questioningly; Jim produced the notebook and drew a sketch representing our flyer falling. On the level he had used to represent the ground he made another sketch of it lying in ruins. The beetle nodded comprehendingly and turned to another dial; the ship sank slowly toward the ground.

We sank until we hung only a few feet from the ground when our flyer was gently lowered down. When it rested on the ground, the wire which had held it uncoiled, came aboard and coiled itself up beside the others. As the Mercurian ship rose I noticed idly that the door which had been torn from our ship and dropped lay within a few yards of the ship itself. The Mercurian ship rose to an elevation of a hundred feet, drifting gently over the city.

As we rose I determined to try the effect of my personality on the beetles. I approached the one who seemed to be the leader and, putting on the most woeful expression I could muster, I looked at the floor. He did not understand me and I pretended that I was falling and grasped at him. This time he nodded and stepped to the instrument board. In a moment the floor became visible. I thanked him as best I could in pantomime and approached the walls. They were so transparent that I felt an involuntary shrinking as I approached them. I edged my way cautiously forward until my outstretched hand encountered a solid substance. I looked out.

At the slow speed we were traveling the drone of our motors was hardly audible to us, and I felt sure that it could not be heard on the ground. Once their curiosity was satisfied, our captors paid little or no attention to me and left me free to come and go as I wished. I made my way cautiously toward the children, but ran into a solid wall. Remembering Jim's words, I made my way back toward him without displaying any interest.

Jim could probably have wandered around as I did had he wished, but he chose to occupy his time differently. With his notebook and pencil he carried on an extensive conversation, if that term can be applied to a crudely executed set of drawings, with the leader of the beetles. I was not especially familiar with the methods of control of space ships and I could make nothing of the maze of dials and switches on the instrument board.

For half an hour we drifted slowly along. Presently one of the beetles approached, seized my arm and turned me about. With one of his arms he pointed ahead. A mile away I could see another space flyer similar to the one we were on.

"Here comes another one, Jim." I called.

"Yes, I saw it some time ago. I don't know where the third one is."

"Are there three of them?"

"Yes. Three of them came here yesterday and are

exploring the country round about here. They are scouts sent out from the fleet of our brother planet to see if the road was clear and what the world was like. They spotted the hole through the layer with their telescope and sent their fleet out to pay us a visit. He tells me that the scouts have reported favorably and that the whole fleet, several thousand ships, as near as I can make out, are expected here this evening."

"Have you solved the secret of their invisibility?"

"Partly. It is as I expected. The walls of the ship are double, the inner one of metal and the outer one of vitrolene or some similar perfectly transparent substance. The space between the walls is filled with some substance which will bend both visible and ultra-violet rays along a path around the ship and then lets them go in their original direction. The reason why we can see through the walls and see the protective coating of that ship coming is that they are generating some sort of a ray here which acts as a carrier for the visible light rays. I don't know what sort of a ray it is, but when I get a good look at their generators, I may be able to tell. Are you beginning to

itch and burn?"

"Yes, I believe that I am, although I hadn't noticed it until you spoke."

"I have been noticing it for some time. From its effects on the skin, I am inclined to believe it to be a ray of very short wave-length, possibly something like our X-ray, or even shorter."

"Have you found out what they intend to do with us?"

"I don't think they have decided yet. Possibly they are going to take us up to the leader of their fleet and let him decide. The cuss that is in command of this ship seems surprised to death to find out that I can comprehend the principles of his ship. He seems to think that I am a sort of a rara avis, a freak of nature. He intimated that he would recommend that we be used for vivisection."

"Good Lord!"

"It's not much more worse than the fate they design

for the rest of their captives, at that."

"What is that?"

"It's a long story that I'll have to tell you later. I want to watch this meeting."

The other ship had approached to within a few yards and floated stationary, while some sort of communication was exchanged between the two. I could not fathom the method used, but the commander of our craft clamped what looked like a pair of headphones against his body and plugged the end of a wire leading from them into his instrument board. From time to time various colored lights glowed on the board before him. After a time he uncoupled his device from the board, and one of the long rods shot out from our ship to the other. It returned in a moment clamped around the body of a young girl. As she came on board, she was lowered onto the deck beside the other children. Like them, she was stiff and motionless. I gave an exclamation and sprang forward.

"Pete!"

Jim's voice recalled me to myself, and I watched the child laid with the others with as disinterested an expression as I could muster. I had never made a mistake in following Jim Carpenter's lead and I knew that somewhere in his head a plan was maturing which might offer us some chance of escape.

Our ship moved ahead down a long slant, gradually dropping nearer to the ground. I watched the maneuver with interest while Jim, with his friend the beetle commander, went over the ship. The insect was evidently amused at Jim and was determined to find out the limits of his intelligence, for he pointed out various controls and motors of the ship and made elaborate sketches which Jim seemed to comprehend fairly well.

One of the beetles approached the control board and motioned me back. I stepped away from the board; evidently a port in the side of the vessel opened, for I felt a breath of air and could hear the hum of the city. I walked to the side and glanced down, and found that

we were floating about twenty feet off the ground over a street on the edge of the city. On the street a short distance ahead of us two children, evidently returning from school, to judge by the books under their arms, were walking unsuspectingly along. A turn of the dial sped up our motors, and as the hum rang out in a louder key the children looked upward. Two of the long flexible wires shot out and wrapped themselves about the children; screaming, they were lifted into the space flyer. The port through which they came in shut with a clang and the ship rose rapidly into the air. The children were released from the wires which coiled themselves up on deck and the beetle who had operated them stepped forward and grasped the nearer of the children, a boy of about eleven, by the arm. He raised the boy, who was paralyzed with terror, up toward his head and gazed steadily into his eyes. Slowly the boy ceased struggling and became white and rigid. The beetle laid him on the deck and turned to the girl. Involuntarily I gave a shout and sprang forward, but Jim grasped me by the arm.

"Keep quiet, you darned fool!" he cried. "We can do nothing now. Wait for a chance!"

"We can't stand here and see murder done!" I protested.

"It's not murder. Pete, those children aren't being hurt. They are being hypnotized so that they can be transported to Mercury."

"Why are they taking them to Mercury?" I demanded.

"As nearly as I can make out, there is a race of men up there who are subject to these beetles. This ship is radium propelled, and the men and women are the slaves who work in the radium mines. Of course the workers soon become sexless, but others are kept for breeding purposes to keep the race alive. Through generations of in-breeding, the stock is about played out and are getting too weak to be of much value.

"The Mercurians have been studying the whole universe to find a race which will serve their purpose and they have chosen us to be the victims. When their

fleet gets here, they plan to capture thousands of selected children and carry them to Mercury in order to infuse their blood into the decadent race of slaves they have. Those who are not suitable for breeding when they grow up will die as slaves in the radium mines."

"Horrible!" I gasped. "Why are they taking children, Jim? Wouldn't adults suit their purpose better?"

"They are afraid to take adults. On Mercury an earthman would have muscles of unheard of power and adults would constantly strive to rise against their masters. By getting children, they hope to raise them to know nothing else than a life of slavery and get the advantage of their strength without risk. It is a clever scheme."

"And are we to stand here and let them do it?"

"Not on your life, but we had better hold easy for a while. If I can get a few minutes more with that brute I'll know enough about running this ship that we can afford to do away with them. You have a pistol,

haven't you?"

"No."

"The devil! I thought you had. I have an automatic, but it only carries eight shells. There are eleven of these insects and unless we can get the jump on them, they'll do us. I saw what looks like a knife lying near the instrument board; get over near it and get ready to grab it as soon as you hear my pistol. These things are deaf and if I work it right I may be able to do several of them in before they know what's happening. When you attack, don't try to ram them in the back; their backplates are an inch thick and will be proof against a knife thrust. Aim at their eyes; if you can blind them, they'll be helpless. Do you understand?"

"I'll do my best, Jim," I replied. "Since you have told me their plans I am itching to get at them."

I edged over toward the knife, but as I did so I saw a better weapon. On the floor lay a bar of silvery metal about thirty inches long and an inch in diameter. I

picked it up and toyed with it idly, meanwhile edging around to get behind the insect which I had marked for my first attentions. Jim was talking again by means of the notebook with his beetle friend. They walked around the ship, examining everything in it.

"Are you ready, Pete?" came Jim's voice at last.

"All set," I replied, getting a firmer grasp on my bar and edging toward one of the insects.

"Well, don't start until I fire. You notice the bug I am talking to? Don't kill him unless you have to. This ship is a little too complicated for me to fathom, so I want this fellow taken prisoner. We'll use him as our engineer when we take control."

"I understand."

"All right, get ready."

I kept my eye on Jim. He had drawn the beetle with whom he was talking to a position where they were behind the rest. Jim pointed at something behind the

insect's back and the beetle turned. As it did so, Jim whipped out his pistol and, taking careful aim, fired at one of the insects.

As the sound of the shot rang out I raised my bar and leaped forward. I brought it down with crushing force on the head of the nearest beetle. My victim fell forward, and I heard Jim's pistol bark again; but I had no time to watch him. As the beetle I struck fell the others turned and I had two of them coming at me with outstretched arms, ready to grasp me. I swung my bar, and the arm of one of them fell limp; but the other seized me with both its hands, and I felt the cruel hooks of its lower arms against the small of my back.

One of my arms was still free; I swung my bar again, and it struck my captor on the back of the head. It was stunned by the blow and fell. I seized the knife from the floor, and threw myself down beside it and struck at its eyes, trying to roll it over so as to protect me from the other who was trying to grasp me.

I felt hands clutch me from behind; I was wrenched

loose from the body of my victim and lifted into the air. I was turned about and stared hard into the implacable crystalline eyes of one of the insects. For a moment my senses reeled and then, without volition, I dropped my bar. I remembered the children and realized that I was being hypnotized. I fought against the feeling, but my senses reeled and I almost went limp, when the sound of a pistol shot, almost in my ear, roused me. The spell of the beetle was momentarily broken. I thrust the knife which I still grasped at the eyes before me. My blow went home, but the insect raised me and bent me toward him until my head lay on top of his and the huge horns which adorned his head began to close. Another pistol shot sounded, and I was suddenly dropped.

I grasped my bar as I fell and leaped up. The flyer was a shambles. Dead insects lay on all sides while Jim, smoking pistol in hand, was staring as though fascinated into the eyes of one of the surviving beetles. I ran forward and brought my bar down on the insect's head, but as I did so I was grasped from behind.

"Jim, help!" I cried as I was swung into the air. The insect whirled me around and then threw me to the floor. I had an impression of falling; then everything dissolved in a flash of light. I was unconscious only for a moment, and I came to to find Jim Carpenter standing over me, menacing my assailant with his gun.

"Thanks, Jim," I said faintly.

"If you're conscious again, get up and get your bar," he replied. "My pistol is empty and I don't know how long I can run a bluff on this fellow."

I scrambled to my feet and grasped the bar. Jim stepped behind me and reloaded his pistol.

"All right," he said when he had finished. "I'll take charge of this fellow. Go around and see if the rest are dead. If they aren't when you find them, see that they are when you leave them. We're taking no prisoners."

I went the rounds of the prostrate insects. None of them were beyond moving except two whose heads

had been crushed by my bar, but I obeyed Jim's orders. When I rejoined him with my bloody bar, the only beetle left alive was the commander, whom Jim was covering with his pistol.

"Take the gun," he said when I reported my actions, "and give me the bar."

We exchanged weapons and Jim turned to the captive.

"Now, old fellow," he said grimly, "either you run this ship as I want you to, or you're a dead Indian. Savvy?"

He took his pencil and notebook from his pocket and drew a sketch of our Hadley space ship. On the other end of the sheet he drew a picture of the Mercurian ship, and then drew a line connecting the two. The insect looked at the sketch but made no movement.

"All right, if that's the way you feel about it," said Jim. He raised the bar and brought it down with crushing force on one of the insect's lower arms. The arm fell as though paralyzed and a blue light played across the beetle's eyes. Jim extended the sketch again and

raised the bar threateningly. The beetle moved over to the control board, Jim following closely, and set the ship in motion. Ten minutes later it rested on the ground beside the ship in which we had first taken the air.

Following Jim's pictured orders the beetle opened the door of the Mercurian ship and followed Jim into the Hadley. As we emerged from the Mercurian ship I looked back. It had vanished completely.

"The children, Jim!" I gasped.

"I haven't forgotten them," he replied, "but they are all right for the present. If we turned them loose now, we'd have ninety reporters around us in ten minutes. I want to get our generators modified first."

He pointed toward the spot where the Mercurian ship had stood and then toward our generators. The beetle hesitated, but Jim swung his bar against the insect's side in a vicious blow. Again came the play of blue light over the eyes; the beetle bent over our generators and set to work. Jim handed me the bar

and bent over to help. They were both mechanics of a high order and they worked well together; in an hour the beetle started the generators and swung one of the searchlights toward his old ship. It leaped into view on the radium coated screen.

"Good business!" ejaculated Jim. "We'll repair this door; then we'll be ready to release the children and start out."

We followed the beetle into the Mercurian ship, which it seemed to be able to see. It opened a door leading into another compartment of the flyer, and before us lay the bodies of eight children. The beetle lifted the first one, a little girl, up until his many-faceted eyes looked full into the closed ones of the child. There was a flicker of an eyelash, a trace of returning color, and then a scream of terror from the child. The beetle set the girl down and Jim bent over her.

"It's all right now, little lady," he said, clumsily smoothing her hair.

"You're safe now. Run along to your mother. First

Mortgage, take charge of her and take her outside. It isn't well for children to see these things."

The child clung to my hand: I led her out of the ship, which promptly vanished as we left it. One by one, seven other children joined us, the last one, a miss of not over eight, in Jim's arms. The beetle followed behind him.

"Do any of you know where you are?" asked Jim as he came out.

"I do, sir," said one of the boys. "I live close to here."

"All right, take these youngsters to your house and tell your mother to telephone their parents to come and get them. If anyone asks you what happened, tell them to see Jim Carpenter to-morrow. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, run along then. Now, First Mortgage, let's go hunting."

We wired our captive up so securely that I felt that there was no possible chance of his escape; then, with Jim at the controls and me at the guns, we fared forth in search of the invaders. Back and forth over the city we flew without sighting another spaceship in the air. Jim gave an exclamation of impatience and swung on a wider circle, which took us out over the water. I kept the searchlights working. Presently, far ahead over the water, a dark spot came into view. I called to Jim and we approached it at top speed.

"Don't shoot until we are within four hundred yards," cautioned Jim.

I held my fire until we were within the specified distance. The newcomer was another of the Mercurian space-ships; with a feeling of joy I swung my beam until the cross-hairs of the screen rested full on the invader.

"All ready!" I sung out.

"If you are ready, Gridley, you may fire!" replied Jim. I pressed the gun button. The crash of the gun was

followed by another report from outside as the radite shell burst against the Mercurian flyer. The deadly explosive did its work, and the shattered remains of the wreck fell, to be engulfed in the sea below.

"That's one!" cried Jim. "I'm afraid we won't have time to hunt up the other right now. This bug told me that the other Mercurians are due here to-day, and I think we had better form ourselves into a reception committee and go up to the hole to meet them."

He sent the ship at high speed over the city until we hovered over the laboratory. We stopped for a moment, and Jim stepped to the radio telephone.

"Hello, Williams," he said, "how are things going? That's fine. In an hour, you say? Well, speed it up as much as you can; we may call for it soon."

He turned both stern motors to full power, and we shot up like a rocket toward the hole in the protective layer through which the invaders had entered. In ten minutes we were at the altitude of the guard ships and Jim asked if anything had been seen. The report

was negative; Jim left them below the layer and sent our flyer up through the hole into space. We reached the outer surface in another ten minutes and we were none too soon. Hardly had we debouched from the hole than ahead of us we saw another Mercurian flyer. It was a lone one, and Jim bent over the captive and held a hastily made sketch before him. The sketch showed three Mercurian flyers, one on the ground, one wrecked and the third one in the air. He touched the drawing of the one in the air and pointed toward our port hole and looked questioningly at the beetle. The insect inspected the flyer in space and nodded.

"Good!" cried Jim. "That's the third of the trio who came ahead as scouts. Get your gun ready, First Mortgage: we're going to pick him off."

Our ship approached the doomed Mercurian. Again I waited until we were within four hundred yards; then I pressed the button which hurled it, a crumpled wreck, onto the outer surface of the heaviside layer.

"Two!" cried Jim as we backed away.

"Here come plenty more," I cried as I swung the searchlight. Jim left his controls, glanced at the screen and whistled softly. Dropping toward us from space were hundreds of the Mercurian ships.

"We got here just in time," he said. "Break out your extra ammunition while I take to the hole. We can't hope to do that bunch alone, so we'll fight a rearguard action."

Since our bow gun would be the only one in action, I hastily moved the spare boxes of ammunition nearer to it while Jim maneuvered the Hadley over the hole. As the Mercurian fleet came nearer he started a slow retreat toward the earth. The Mercurians overtook us rapidly; Jim locked his controls at slow speed down and hurried to the bow gun.

"Start shooting as soon as you can," he said. "I'll keep the magazine filled."

I swung the gun until the cross-hairs of the screen rested full on the leading ship and pressed the button. My aim was true, and the shattered fragments of the

ship fell toward me. The balance of the fleet slowed down for an instant; I covered another one and pressed my button. The ship at which I had aimed was in motion and I missed it, but I had the satisfaction of seeing another one fall in fragments. Jim was loading the magazine as fast as I fired. I covered another ship and fired again. A third one of our enemies fell in ruins. The rest paused and drew off.

"They're retreating, Jim!" I cried.

"Cease firing until they come on again," he replied as he took the shells from the magazines of the other guns and piled them near the bow gun.

I held my fire for a few minutes. The Mercurians retreated a short distance and then came on again with a rush. Twenty times my gun went off as fast as I could align it and press the trigger, and eighteen of the enemy ships were in ruins. Again the Mercurians retreated. I held my fire. We were falling more rapidly now and far below we could see the black spots which were the guard ships. I told Jim that they were in sight; he stepped to the radio telephone and ordered

them to keep well away from the hole.

Again the Mercurian ships came on with a rush, this time with beams of orange light stabbing a way before them. When I told Jim of this he jumped to the controls and shot our ship down at breakneck speed.

"I don't know what sort of fighting apparatus they have, but I don't care to face it," he said to me. "Fire if they get close; but I hope to get out of the hole before they are in range."

Fast as we fell, the Mercurians were coming faster, and they were not over eight hundred yards from us when he reached the level of the guard ships. Jim checked our speed; I managed to pick off three more of the invaders before we moved away from the hole. Jim stopped the side motion and jumped to the radio telephone.

"Hello, Williams!" he shouted into the instrument.

"Are you ready down there? Thank God! Full power at once, please!

"Watch what happens," he said to me, as he turned from the instrument.

Some fifty of the Mercurian flyers had reached our level and had started to move toward us before anything happened. Then from below came a beam of intolerable light. Upward it struck, and the Mercurian ships on which it impinged disappeared in a flash of light.

"A disintegrating ray," explained Jim. "I suspected that it might be needed and I started Williams to rigging it up early this morning. I hated to use it because it may easily undo the work that six years have done in healing the break in the layer, but it was necessary. That ends the invasion, except for those ten or twelve ships ahead of us. How is your marksmanship? Can you pick off ten in ten shots?"

"Watch me," I said grimly as the ship started to move.

Pride goeth ever before a fall: it took me sixteen shots to demolish the eleven ships which had escaped destruction from the ray. As the last one fell in ruins,

Jim ordered the ray shut off. We fell toward the ground.

"What are we going to do with our prisoner?" I asked.

Jim looked at the beetle meditatively.

"He would make a fine museum piece if he were stuffed," he said, "but on the whole, I think we'll let him go. He is an intelligent creature and will probably be happier on Mercury than anywhere else. What do you say that we put him on his ship and turn him loose?"

"To lead another invasion?" I asked.

"I think not. He has seen what has happened to this one and is more likely to warn them to keep away. In any event, if we equip the guard ships with a ray that will show the Mercurian ships up and keep the disintegrating ray ready for action, we needn't fear another invasion. Let's let him go."

"It suits me all right, Jim, but I hold out for one thing.

I will never dare to face McQuarrie again if I fail to get a picture of him. I insist on taking his photograph before we turn him loose."

"All right, go ahead," laughed Jim. "He ought to be able to stand that, if you'll spare him an interview."

An hour later we watched the Mercurian flyer disappear into space.

"I hope I've seen the last of those bugs," I said as the flyer faded from view.

"I don't know," said Jim thoughtfully. "If I have interpreted correctly the drawings that creature made, there is a race of manlike bipeds on Mercury who are slaves to those beetles and who live and die in the horrible atmosphere of a radium mine. Some of these days I may lead an expedition to our sister planet and look into that matter."

#35 Earth, The Marauder, By Arthur Josephus Burks:

Out of her orbit sped the teeming Earth—a marauding planet bent on starry conquest.

Aproximate word count: 43,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

2023 Editor's note:

I have added different symbols to differentiate between the secret hand code, [in brackets], and telepathic communication, in ::double colons::, to help show the differences between different communication types since it's important to the plot.

In some areas it's not clear whether the characters are speaking aloud, telepathically, or with the secret

hand code, so any parts left unclear are left in normal “quotation marks”. There may also be sections where it’s obvious but I forgot to mark them.

Foreword

Despite the fact that for centuries the Secret of Life had been the possession of children of men, the Earth was dying. She was dying because the warmth of the sun was fading; because, with the obliteration of the oceans in order to find new land upon which men might live, her seasons had become stormy, unbearably cold and dreary: and the very fact of her knowledge of the Secret of Life, in which men numbered their ages by centuries instead of by years, was her undoing.

For when men did not die, they multiplied beyond all counting, beyond all possibility of securing permanent abiding places. One man, in the days when the earth was young, and man lived at best to the age of three score years and ten, could have, given time and opportunity, populated a nation. Now, when men lived for centuries, eternally youthful, their living descendants ran into incalculable numbers.

The earth—strange paradox—was dying because it had learned the Secret of Life. Twenty centuries

before, the last war of aggression had been fought, in order that an over-populated nation might find room in which to live. Now all the earth was one nation, speaking one tongue—and there were no more lands to conquer.

Chapter 1: Sarka

In his laboratory atop the highest peak in the venerable Himalayas, lived Sarka, conceded by the world to be its greatest scientist, despite his youth. His grandfather, who had watched the passing of eighteen centuries, had discovered the Secret of Life and thoughtlessly, in the light of later developments, broadcast his discovery to the world. The genius of this man, who was also called Sarka, had been passed on to his son, Sarka the Second, and by him in even greater degree to Sarka the Third ... called merely Sarka for the purposes of this history.

Had Sarka lived in the days before the discovery of the Secret of Life, people of that day would have judged him a young man of twenty. His real age was four centuries.

Behind him as he sat moodily staring at the gigantic Revolving Beryl stood a woman of most striking appearance. Her name was Jaska, and according to ideas of the Days Before the Discovery, she seemed a trifle younger than Sarka. Her hand, unadorned by

jewelry of any kind, rested on Sarka's shoulder as he studied the Revolving Beryl, while her eyes, whose lashes, matching her raven hair, were like the wings of tiny blackbirds, noted afresh the wonder of this man.

"What is to be done?" she asked him at last, and her voice was like music there in the room where science performed its miracles for Sarka.

Wearily Sarka turned to face her, and she was struck anew, as she had been down the years since she had known this man, every time their glances met, at the mighty curve of his brow, which rendered insignificant his mouth, his delicate nose of the twitching nostrils, the well-deep eyes of him.

"Something must be done," he said gloomily, "and that soon! For, unless the children of men are provided with some manner of territorial expansion, they will destroy one another, only the strongest will survive, and we shall return to the days when the waters covered the earth, and monstrous creatures bellowed from the primeval slime!"

"You are working on something?" she asked softly.

For a moment he did not answer. While she waited, Jaska peered into the depths of the Revolving Beryl, which represented the earth. It was fifty feet in diameter, and in its curved surface and entrancing depths was mirrored, in this latest development of televue, all the earth and the doings of its people. But Jaska scarcely saw the fleeting images, the men locked in conflict for the right to live, the screaming, terror-stricken women. This was now a century-old story, and the civilization of Earth had almost reached the breaking point.

No, she scarcely saw the things in the Beryl, for she had read the hint of a vast, awesome secret in the eyes of Sarka—and wondered if he dared even tell her.

"If the people knew," he whispered, "they would do one of two things! They would tear me limb from limb, and hurl the parts of me outward into space forever—or they would demand that I move before I am ready—and cause a catastrophe which could

never be rectified; and this grand old Earth of ours would be dead, indeed!"

[And this secret of yours?] Jaska now spoke in the sign language which only these two knew, for there were billions of other Revolving Beryls in the world, and words could be heard by universal radio by any who cared to listen. And always, they knew, the legions of enemies of Sarka kept their ears open for words of Sarka which could be twisted around to his undoing.

[I should not tell even you,] he answered, his fingers working swiftly in their secret, silent language, which all the world could see, but which only these two understood. [For if my enemies knew that you possessed the information, there is nothing they would stop at to make you tell.]

"But I would not tell, Sarka," she said softly. "You know that!"

He patted her hands, and the ghost of a smile touched his lips.

"No," he said, "you would not tell. Some day soon—and it must be soon if the children of men are not to destroy themselves, I will tell you! It is a secret that lies heavily on my heart. If I should make a mistake.... Chaos! Catastrophe! Eternal, perpetual dark, the children of men reduced to nothingness!"

A little gasp from Jaska, for it was plain that this thing Sarka hinted at was far and away beyond anything he had hitherto done—and Sarka had already performed miracles beyond any that had ever been done by his predecessors.

"When my grandfather," went on Sarka moodily, "perfected, in this self-same laboratory, the machinery by which the waters of the oceans could be disintegrated, our enemies called him mad, and fought their way up these mountain slopes to destroy him! With the pack at his doors, he did as he had told them he would do. Though they hurried swiftly into the great valleys to colonize them—where oceans had been—they were like ravening beasts, and gave my grandfather no thanks. Our people have always fought against progress, have always been

disparaging of its advocates! When the first Sarka discovered the Secret they would have destroyed him, though he made them immortal...."

"If only the Secret," interrupted Jaska, "could be returned to him who discovered it! That would solve our problem, for men then would die and be buried, leaving their places for others."

Again that weary smile on the face of Sarka.

"Take back the Secret which is known to-day to every son and daughter of woman? Impossible! More nearly impossible than the attainment of my most ambitious dream!"

[And that dream?] spoke Jaska with speeding fingers.

"I have wondered about you," said Sarka softly, while those eyes of his bored deeply into hers. "We have been the best of friends, the best of comrades; but there are times when it comes to me that I do not know you entirely! And I have many enemies!"

"You mean," gasped the woman, for the moment forgetting the secret sign manual, "you think it possible that I—I—might be one of your enemies, in secret?"

"Jaska, I do not know; but in this matter in my mind I trust no one. I am afraid even that people will read my very thoughts, though I have learned to so concentrate upon them that not the slightest hint of them shall go forth telepathically to my enemies! I do not mind death for myself; but our people must be saved! It is hideous to think that we have been given the Secret of Life, only to perish in the end because of it! I am sorry, Jaska, but I can tell no one!"

But Jaska, one of the most beautiful and intelligent of Earth's beautiful and intelligent women, seemed not to be listening to Sarka at all, and when he had finished, she shrugged her shoulders slightly and prepared to leave.

He followed her to the nearest Exit Dome, built solidly into the side of his laboratory, and watched her as she slipped swiftly into the white, skin-tight clothing—

marked on breast and back with the Red Lily of the House of Cleric. His eyes still were deeply moody.

He helped her don the gleaming metal helmet in whose skull-pan was set the Anti-Gravitational Ovoid—invented by Sarka the Second, used now of necessity by every human creature—and strode with her to the Outer Exit, a door of ponderous metal sufficiently strong to prevent the inner warmth of the laboratory getting out, or the biting cold of the heights to enter, and studied her still as she buckled about her hips her own personal Sarka-Belt, which automatically encased her, through contact with her tight clothing, with the warmth and balanced pressure of the laboratory, which would remain constant as long as she wore it.

With a nod and a brief smile, she stepped to the metal door and vanished through it. Sarka turned gloomily back to his laboratory. Looking into the depths of the Revolving Beryl and adjusting the enlarging device which brought back, life size, the infinitesimal individuals mirrored in the Beryl, he watched her go—a trim white figure which flashed across the void,

from mountain-top to her valley home, like a very white projectile from another world. Very white, and very precious, but....

When she was home, and had waved to him that she had arrived safely, he forgot her for a time, and allowed his eyes to study the inner workings of this vast, crowded world whose on-rushing fate was so filling his brain with doubt, with fear—and something of horror!

Chapter 2: The People of the Hives

Moodily Sarka stared into the depths of the Beryl, which represented the Earth, and in which he could see everything that earthlings did, after visually enlarging them, through use of a microscope that could be adjusted, with relation to the Beryl, to bring out in detail any section of the world he wished to study. His face was utterly sad. The people at last truly possessed the Earth—all of it that was, even with the aid of every miracle known to science, habitable.

The surface of the Earth was one vast building, like a hive, and to each human being was allotted by law a certain abiding place. But men no longer died, unless they desired to do so, and then only when the Spokesmen of the Gens saw fit to grant permission; and there soon would be no place for the newborn to live. Even now that point had practically been reached throughout the world, and in the greater portion it *had* been reached, and passed, and men knew that while men did not die, they could be killed!

The vast building, towering above what had once been the surface of the earth, to heights undreamed of before the discovery, was irregular on its top, to fit the contour of the earth, and its roof, constructed of materials raped from the earth's core, was so designed as to catch and concentrate the yearly more feeble rays of the sun, so that its life-giving warmth might continue to be the boon of living people.

It had been found as Earth cooled that life was possible to a depth of eight miles below the one-time surface, so that the one huge building extended below the surface to this great depth, and was divided and re-divided to make homes for men, their wives, and their progeny. But even so, space was limited. Neighboring families outgrew their surroundings, overflowed into the habitations of their neighbors—and every family was at constant war against its neighbors.

Men did not die, but they could be slain, and there was scarcely a home, above or below, in all the vast building, which had not planned and executed murder, times and times—or which had not left its

own blood in the dwelling places of neighbors.

No law could cope with this intolerable situation, for men, down the ages, had changed in their essential characteristics but little—and recognized one law only in their extremity, that of self-preservation.

So there was murder rampant, and mothers who wept for children, husbands, fathers or mothers, who would never return to their homes.

"My grandfather," whispered Sarka, his eyes peering deeply into a certain area beyond that assigned by law to the House of Cleric, where men of two neighboring families were locked in mortal, silent conflict, "should not have frustrated the mad scheme of Dalis! It was slaughter, wholesale and terrible, but it would have cleansed the souls of the survivors!"

Mentally Sarka was looking back now to that red day when Dalis, the closest scientific rival of Sarka the First, had come to Sarka the First with his proposal which at the time had seemed so hideous. Sarka remembered that interval in all its details, for he had

heard it many times.

"Sarka," Dalis had said in his high-pitched voice, staring at Sarka the First out of red-rimmed, fiery eyes, "unless something is done the world will rush on to self-destruction! Men will slay one another! Fathers will kill their sons, and sons their fathers, if something is not done! For always there is marrying and giving in marriage, and each family is reaching out in all directions, seeking merely space in which to live. Formerly there were wars which automatically took thought of the overplus of men; but to-day the world is at peace, as men regard the term—and every man's hand is against his neighbor! There will be no more wars, when there should be! There is but one alternative!"

"And that?" Sarka the First had queried suspiciously.

"The segregation of the fittest! The destruction, swiftly, painlessly, of all the others! And when the survivors have again re-populated the earth to overflowing—a repetition of the same corrective! Men will die, yes, by millions; but those who are left will be

a stronger, sturdier race, and by this process of elimination, century by century, men will evolve and become super-men!"

"And this plan of yours?"

For a moment Dalis had paused, breathing heavily, as though almost afraid to continue. Then, while Sarka the First had listened in frozen terror, Dalis had explained his ghastly scheme.

"If it were not for the mountains and the valleys," said Dalis, "and the world were perfectly round and smooth of surface, that surface would be covered by water to the depth of one mile! Is that not correct! The Earth, rotating on its axis, travels about the sun at the rate of something like nineteen miles per second, so perfectly balanced that the oceans remain almost quiescent in their beds! But, Sarka, mark me well! If we could, together, devise a way to halt this rotation for as much as a few seconds, what would happen?"

"What would happen?" repeated Sarka the First,

dropping his own voice to a husky, frightened whisper. "Why, the oceans would be hurled out of their beds, and a wall of water a mile high or more—it is all guesswork!—would rush eastward around the world, bearing everything before it! It would uproot and destroy buildings, sweep the rocky covering of the earth free of soil; and humanity, caught on the earth below the highest level of the world's greatest tidal wave, would be engulfed!"

"Exactly!" Dalis had said with a grin. "Exactly! Only—the people we wish to survive could be warned, and these could either be aloft when the tidal wave swept the face of the earth, or could be safely out of reach of the waters on the sides of the highest mountains!"

Sarka the First, wanly smiling, catching his breath at last, now that he realized the utter impossibility of this mad scheme, had been minded to humor the fancies of a man whom he had believed not quite sane.

"Why not," he began, "take away from men the Secret of Life, so that they will die, as formerly, when the

world was young?"

"When all the world knows the Secret, when even children learn it before they are capable of walking?" demanded Dalis sarcastically. "You could only remove knowledge of the Secret from the brains of men by removing those brains themselves! Your thought is more terrible even than mine, because it leads to this inescapable conclusion!"

"But supposing for a moment your mad scheme were possible, who should say whom, of all the earth's people, should be saved, whom sacrificed?"

"What better test could be given than that which I am proposing?" Dalis had snarled. "Those worthy of being saved would save themselves! Those who would perish would not be worth saving! As natural, as inescapable as the law of the survival of the fittest, which has been an axiom of life since men first crawled out of the slime and asked each other questions as they caught their first glimpses of the stars and pondered the reasons for them!"

"But where, then, was there any point in my giving to people the Secret of Life?"

"Had you paused to think," snapped Dalis, "you would never have done so! Your lust for power, and for fame, destroyed your foresight!"

"And is it not, Dalis," replied Sarka the First, softly, "for this, really, that you have come to me? To berate me? To throw at my head mad schemes impossible of accomplishment? I have always known you for an enemy, Dalis, because you are envious of what I have accomplished, what you sense that I will accomplish as time passes!"

"I do not love you, Sarka!" retorted Dalis frankly. "I despise you! Hate you! But I need the aid of that keen brain of yours! You see, hate you though I may, I do you honor still. I have something up here," tapping the dome of his brow, only less lofty than that of Sarka, "which you lack. You have something I have not, never can attain! But together we are complements, each of the other, and to the two of us this scheme is possible!"

"I am very busy, Dalis," Sarka the First had replied coldly. "I must ask you to leave me! What you propose is impossible, unthinkable!"

"So," retorted Dalis, "you think me mad? You think me incapable of perfecting this plan about whose details you have not even yet been informed! You would show me the door as though you were a king and I a slave—when kings and slaves vanished from the earth millenniums ago! Then listen to me, Sarka! I know how to do this thing about which I have told you. I can halt, for a brief moment only, the whirl of the earth about its axis. And by so doing I can flood the earth with the waters of the oceans! If you will not listen to me, I shall do it myself! You shall have two days in which to give me an answer, for I admit that I need you, who would balance me, make sure I made no fatal mistakes! But if you do not, I will act ... along the lines I have hinted!"

Apparently as unconcerned as though he had not just listened to a scheme for almost total depopulation of the world, the destruction of millions upon millions of lives, Sarka the First had dismissed Dalis—who had

straightway used all his offices to arouse the world of science against the first Sarka.

But, when the two days of grace given by Dalis had passed, there were no oceans—for Sarka the First had been planning for a century against the time when the earth must of necessity be over-populated, and had worked and slaved in his laboratory against the contingency which had developed.

He had smiled, though there was a trace of fear on his face after Dalis had left, for *his* scheme had been worked out—not to destroy, but to save!

And from this same laboratory in which Sarka now sat and pondered on the next step in man's expansion, Sarka the First had, in fear and trembling at first, but with his confidence growing by leaps and bounds, worked his own miracle. Untold millions and billions of rays, whose any portion of which, coming in contact with water, immediately separated its hydrogen and oxygen, thus disintegrating its molecules, were hurled forth from their store-houses beneath the laboratory, across the faces of the mighty

oceans of Earth....

And when men saw the miracle, they rushed into the mighty valleys where the oceans had been, and began to build new homes!

That had been centuries ago—scores of centuries.

Now all the earth, all the livable part of the earth, above its surface—and below it to the depths of miles—was filled with people, like bees in a monster hive, like ants of antiquity in their warren hills. And there was no place now that they could go.

So they fought among themselves for the right to live.

"But my grandfather was right!" Sarka almost screamed it, speaking aloud in the silence of his laboratory. "My grandfather was right! Dalis was wrong! Science should be the science of Life, not of Death! Yet whither shall we go! Where now shall we find places for our people who are daily being born in myriads, to live, and love and flourish?"

But there was no answer. Only the humming of the perpetually revolving Beryl, which showed to the sad eyes of Sarka that the people of his beloved earth were rushing onward to Chaos, unless....

"If only I could be sure about Jaska!" he moaned. "If only my courage were as great as that of which I stand in need! For if I fail, even Dalis, had he succeeded with that scheme of his in grandfather's time, would be less a monster, less a criminal!"

Chapter 3: *The Spokesmen of the Gens*

For a long moment Sarka looked broodingly out across the world beyond the metalized glass which formed the curving dome of his laboratory roof. There was little that could be seen, for always the mighty, cold winds, ruffed with flurries of snow and particles of ice, swept over this artificial roof of the world. Here and there huge portions of the area within the range of his normal vision were swept clear and clean of snow and ice—and looked bluely, bitterly cold and hostile.

Without the Sarka-Belts, people who ventured forth from their hives would instantly freeze to the consistency of marble in those winds and storms. For the people of Earth had built their monster habitation toward the stars until they reached up into the altitude of perpetual cold.

Only under that gleaming roof was there warmth. Many of the men, and women, and children who had lost in the now century-old fight for survival had merely been tossed out of the hives. A painless, swift

death—but each death, in a world so highly specialized that each grown person fitted into his niche naturally and easily, was a distinct loss, not much, perhaps, but enough for the loss to be felt.

Sarka, closing his eyes for a moment as though to shut out a horror which in his mind he could visualize, turned back to the Revolving Beryl, in which he kept in constant touch with all parts of the world at will.

"It *must* be done!" he muttered. "I must take action. It means the loss of thousands, perhaps millions of lives, in such a war as the mind of man has not hitherto conceived; but for a Cause greater than any which has ever hitherto been an excuse for armed conflict. But I must discuss it with the Spokesmen of the Gens!"

On the table before Sarka was a row of vari-colored lights, whose source was beneath the floor of the laboratory, out of the heart of the master-mountain, part of the intricate machinery of this laboratory which had been almost twenty centuries in the perfecting. In the dwelling place of each of the

Spokesmen was a single light, colored like one of the lights on Sarka's table. To speak with any one of the Spokesmen Sarka had but to dim the properly colored light by covering it with the palm of his hand. The light in the home of the thus signalled Spokesman was dimmed, and the Spokesman would know that Sarka desired to converse with him.

Sarka noted the blue light, and shuddered. For if he covered it with his palm it would summon Dalis, a great scientist, but an erratic one, as Sarka the First had so clearly shown.

Sarka turned again to the Beryl. The area of which Dalis was Spokesman was, roughly speaking, that part of what had once been the Pacific Ocean, north of a line drawn east and west through the southernmost of the Hawaiian Islands, northward to the Pole. The home of Dalis was in the heart of what had once been an island historians claimed had been called Oahu, now a mountain peak still retaining a hint of the pre-Discovery name: Ohi.

The total number of the Spokesmen, the oldest of

earth's inhabitants, was twelve, and the remainder of the Earth not under the tutelary rule of Dalis was divided up among the other eleven Spokesmen. Cleric, for example, father of Jaska, was Spokesman of that area which men had once called Asia, the vast valleys of the once Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean; while the youngest of the Spokesmen, in a manner serving his apprenticeship, was tutelary head of the vast plateau once called Africa. The name of this man was Gerd.

“He, at least,” thought Sarka, thinking of each Spokesman in turn and cataloguing each in his mind, “will be with me. I wonder about the others, and especially Dalis. He has always hated us!”

Then, with the air of a man who has made up his mind and crosses his particular Rubicon in a single step, Sarka rose to his feet and passed along the row of vari-colored lights, covering each one with his hand in rapid succession.

Then he sat down again, almost holding his breath, and waited. As he stared at the row of lights his eyes

lingered longest on two which were almost golden in color—and his face was very gentle, almost reverent. For those two lights were signals to Sarka the First and Sarka the Second, his grandfather and his father!

It was Dalis, the irascible, the fiery tempered, the erratic, who first made answer.

"Yes! What is it now?"

Sarka smiled a trifle grimly as he spoke a single word.

"Wait!"

The voice of Dalis, which Sarka had good cause to remember, had sounded as loudly in the laboratory as though Dalis had been present there in person, for men had learned to communicate by voice almost without the aid of radio and its appurtenances though the principle upon which the first crude beginnings of radio were fashioned still applied. Each man's dwelling place was both a "sender" and a "receiver," and men could talk and be talked to no matter where they lived—individuals telepathically summoned at

desire of anyone wishing verbal contact.

"Gerd is here!" came the voice of that Spokesman.

To him also Sarka spoke one word.

"Wait!"

"I am here, Sarka!" came a musical voice. "And Jaska is with me, listening!"

That would be Cleric, loyal friend, master scientist, but always shy of contact with people, though swift to anger and self-forgetfulness when he knew himself right and was opposed. Sarka darted a look back at the Revolving Beryl, adjusted swiftly the Beryl-microscope, and smiled into the faces of Jaska and Cleric, who looked enough alike that they might have been brother and sister, though Cleric had been born ten centuries before his daughter Jaska. They smiled back at him.

He shifted the Beryl-microscope and stared for a second at Dalis, there in the Beryl, and marked the

antagonism Dalis was at no pains to hide.

One by one the Spokesmen reported.

Klaser, from the Americas; Durce from the valleys of the vanished Atlantic; Boler from that part of the Artic Circle not included in the wedge which the Gens of Dalis thrust northward to the Pole: Vardee; Prull; Yuta; Aal; Vance and Hime. Each from his appointed area, each from the official headquarters of his Gens, the name given to those people who acknowledged the tutelage of a Spokesman. Each Spokesman, therefore, was the mouthpiece of millions of men, women and children. And over the Spokesmen, and not themselves Spokesmen, were three scientists: The Sarkas, First, Second and Third.

When all twelve of the Spokesmen had reported and been bidden by Sarka to wait, a smile touched the face of Sarka for an instant as two other voices, so nearly alike they might have been the voice of a single person, reported themselves.

"I am here, son! What is it?"

Oddly enough, Sarka's father and grandfather reported with exactly the same words. Sarka smiled at a whimsical thought of his own. It had been some time since the three scientist Sarkas had been together, and despite the vast differences in their ages they might have been triplets!

The reports were in and the Spokesmen were waiting; but for almost a minute Sarka waited still. Then he spoke swiftly those words for which there could be no recall:

"Gentlemen, the time is come when we must go to war!"

For a long moment after he had spoken there was no answer. Then it came, in the jeering laughter of the antagonistic Dalis.

"War? Against whom? The Sarkas are always dreaming!"

"And Dalis," continued Sarka, "shall be one of the leaders of Earthlings in this war which I am about to

propose! You doubtless recall a proposal you once made to Sarka the First? Your proposal to halt for a few moments the headlong whirl of the earth about its axis, thus to flood—"

"Stop!" interrupted Dalis. "Stop! Immediately!"

And Sarka stopped. He had forgotten, in the excitement of his urge to explain his plans, that the millions of people who gave official allegiance to Dalis had never been informed of the hideous proposal he had made, back there centuries ago, as a corrective for a world rapidly approaching over-population. Had his people known, never again would the voice of Dalis be heard in life. The Spokesmen knew, and the Sarkas; but no others. Sarka understood the protest of Dalis; honored it.

"Dalis," he went on, more softly, "after I have explained what I wish to do, you will come to me here, prepared to explain to me exactly how you planned doing what you proposed to my grandfather—for your knowledge will be necessary to me...."

"Isn't it enough that your grandfather stole from me, and amplified, an idea that would have made me forever famous, without his grandson also stealing the fruit of my brains?"

"Your brains," said Sarka sharply, "belong to your people. What I plan is for their betterment. But it means war, war which may last a century, two centuries, in which lives of countless thousands may be lost."

Sarka's last words were almost drowned out by the humming sound that came out of the Revolving Beryl, that perfected device which was the ultimate in the evolution of television and vibration-transference. Sarka's heart sank, for he knew the meaning of that sound. So did the Spokesmen.

"You see?" came the rasping voice of Dalis. "You hear? Look into your Beryl! See the clenched fists of the earth's myriads being shaken at you! Listen to the protests of the millions who hear your every word! See what Earthlings think of the prospect of war!"

For a moment Sarka spoke directly to the people.

"Be silent and listen! It will be war, yes; but not such a skulking, hideous war as ye wage among yourselves for a place to live! You, fathers, are guilty of slaying your sons! You, sons, of slaying your fathers! Merely by thrusting them forth from the hives, into the Outer Cold! This war I propose shall be a war that shall match your manhood, if ye indeed be men! Listen to me, and I will find for you new lands to conquer, new homes for your holding, if ye can take them!"

"But where," interrupted the sarcastic voice of Dalis, "are these new lands of which you speak? Inside the Earth? Already our hives reach into the Earth a distance of eight miles. Where else, then?"

"For shame, Dalis!" snapped Sarka, "and you a scientist! Every bit of habitable land on this globe is some man's dwelling place! Spokesmen of the Gens of Earth, look out your windows! Look out and upward—and read Dalis' answer in the stars!"

For a full minute there was silence throughout the

earth, and Sarka saw that the Spokesmen were doing his bidding. He himself looked out, out through the swirling storm which tore at the crest of the Himalayas, a dark and forbidding Outside, in the starred dome of which rode the pale orb moon!

"It is obvious, son," came the voice of Sarka the First, "what you mean. But how accomplish it?"

"Fifteen centuries ago, my father's father," cried Sarka, "Dalis told you that he possessed the power to halt for a moment the headlong whirl of the world on its axis about the sun! He could do it then—and no man, whatever he may think of Dalis as a man, has ever known him to lie! If, fifteen centuries ago, he could bring the whirling world to pause, why can we not, now...."

And, even though he had thought of this for years upon end, had spoken over and over to himself the words he was now using, rehearsing his proposed argument to the Spokesmen of the Gens, Sarka found himself for a moment almost afraid to continue and speak them.

"I understand, Sarka!" came the excited voice of Gerd, youngest of the Spokesmen. "And I follow wherever you think it best to lead! You mean ... you mean...."

"Exactly!" Sarka managed at last. "If the Earth can be stayed on its axis, it can be diverted from its orbit entirely! I know, for I have found the manner of its doing, though I need the genius of Dalis to check my work and my calculations! We have no new land on this Earth to conquer; but the Universe is filled with countless other worlds! What say ye, Spokesmen of the Gens? What say ye, Gens of Earth?"

But for the time of a thousand heartbeats neither the Spokesmen or the Gens made answer to Sarka, and all the world fell utterly silent, absorbing this unbelievable thing of which Sarka had hinted.

Over the metalized roof of the world the snows and storms, the winds and the wraiths of the long dead moaned and screamed as with an icy voice of abysmal warning.

And for the time of those thousand heartbeats, the world was pausing to listen.

When realization came, the answer would come from the Spokesmen and from the Gens; and here in the Sarka laboratory, his Rubicon crossed at last, sat Sarka, staring through the Beryl-microscope into the depths of the Revolving Beryl. His face was dead white, his eyes narrowed.

The first voice which came startled him.

"It is mad, Sarka! Mad! Mad! But I am with you, always!"

It was the voice of Jaska, daughter of Cleric!

Chapter 4: *The Earthlings Make Ready*

"I too, am with you!" came the voice of Gerd.

"Spoken like a child!" snapped Dalis. "For you are as much a child as this third of the dreaming Sarkas! The scheme is mad, madder even than Jaska intimates! The scheme I once proposed, in which I was cheated by the grandfather of this madman, was times and times more feasible and practicable!"

"Suppose," came the soft voice of Sarka the First, interrupting Dalis, "that you put the matter up to your Gens, O wise and noble Dalis, and see which scheme they would endorse if given the choice in the matter—and were your scheme still possible!"

This quickly silenced the vituperation of Dalis, but in no wise prevented his continuance as a rather loud antagonist of the plan.

"How," he demanded, "can you return the Earth to its orbit, even granting you are able to take this initial step? How keep life on the Earth during its flight on

this rainbow-chasing voyage you propose?"

"All these things have been taken into consideration, O Dalis!" retorted Sarka. "All of my scheme is practicable, as I think you will agree when I have told you its details. What think you of the plan, Klaser? And you, Durce? Boler? Vardee? Prull? Yuta? Aal? Vance? Hime?"

When the Spokesmen had answered, some of them hesitantly, for the people all this time had remained silent—and none of the Spokesmen could be sure how his own Gens would feel in the matter—it developed that seven of the Spokesmen were for the scheme, if it should prove to be possible.

"If this is the voice of the majority of the Gens," snapped Dalis, "given thus by their Spokesmen, then I vote with the majority! I shall call upon you immediately, Sarka, for a conference!"

"I am glad," said Sarka softly, "that the majority of the Spokesmen are with me. Especially am I glad that Dalis and Cleric vote with me. For the others I have

only this to say: I have thought this matter over for almost a century, and I know that the time has come when we must act, to save ourselves from self-destruction. Had you not decided with me, I should have acted alone!"

"Yes?" snapped Dalis. "How?"

"I have, here in my laboratory," replied Sarka, "the power whereby to accomplish the scheme of which I have told you! Had all the Gens defied me, I would have nevertheless sent the Earth outward on its voyage, bringing it within reach of the denizens, first of the Moon, second of Mars—and you people of little courage would have been compelled to fight to save yourselves!"

"You would have forced us into war?" came the quavering voice of Prull, the first Spokesman aside from Dalis to take active part in the discussion. "Then why, if you had the means in the beginning to enforce your will upon us, confer with us at all?"

Sarka thrilled with satisfaction, for this question gave

him the excuse he sought. He had been wondering and scheming how to compel the Spokesmen of the Gens to obey his will.

"I wanted your opinions," he said shortly. "But I also wish you to know that I have the power to go on, whether you wish it or not—*and you must obey me!*"

How would the twelve Gens take this ultimatum of Sarka? For breathless moments after he had spoken he waited, and the Spokesmen with him. Then came the voice of Cleric, addressing his people, yet leaving the contacts open so that Sarka and the other Spokesmen might hear.

"What say you, O Gens of Cleric?" he cried, his voice an exultant, clarioning paeon of rejoicing. "Do we follow this man who promises us life again? Do we follow this man who promises us that once again we shall dwell in plenty, without the blood of relatives and neighbors on our hands? Answer this man, O Gens—for I say unto you that wheresoever he leads I would follow him!"

Silence for a heartbeat. Then a murmuring like the sound of the waves of the long-vanished seas sounded in the laboratory, wherein all things were seen, all sounds were heard. A monster voice, loud and savage, from the Gens of Cleric.

"We follow Cleric wherever he leads!" Finally the words became intelligible. "It matters not to us whom Cleric follows, so long as we may follow Cleric!"

"Well spoken, O Gens of Cleric!" snapped Sarka when the murmuring died down to a whisper, then faded out entirely. "Deck yourselves in the white garments of Cleric! Emblazon upon your backs and breast the Red Lily of his House! Prepare for war! These are your orders; the details I leave to Cleric!"

There came the voice Dalis.

"Give your orders to my Gens direct, O Sarka!" rasped Dalis. "For I leave this very moment to come to you!"

"Thank you," said Sarka, a great wave of exaltation sweeping over him. He had expected Dalis to be the

last and most difficult to manage. Then to the Gens of Dalis, as the blue light on the table in the laboratory showed Sarka that Dalis was already winging toward him: "Deck yourselves in the green garments of Dalis! Wear as your insignia the yellow star of his House, and prepare for war! Make new and modern Ray Directors! Refurbish your rotting machines of destruction! Make ready, and make haste! For the Gens of Dalis will be the first of all the Gens to move in attack against the Dwellers Outside! When the time comes I shall tell you where you shall dwell—if you win the land I shall show you!"

The humming of myriad voices inside the laboratory was now almost continuous, but ever the words of Sarka went out to the Spokesmen and to the Gens, though, save in the case of Cleric and of Dalis, he did not speak to the Gens direct, because he did not wish in one iota to usurp the authority of the Spokesmen themselves.

But when less than an hour had passed, he realized that the first step had been successfully taken, and that from now on the success or failure of the scheme

rested in his own hands. Perspiration bedewed his forehead, and for a second he prayed.

"God of our fathers! Grant that we be not mistaken! Grant that we be right in what we plan! Grant that success attend our arms! Grant that this scheme of mine lead us not to catastrophe—for if this should develop, only I am guilty, and only I should be punished!"

"Amen!"

As one voice, the Spokesmen of the Gens spoke the word, and Sarka heard it. He had forgotten for the moment that the Spokesmen still could hear him.

"That is all," he said huskily. "Prepare your Gens, each of you, for such battle as even our histories never have recorded! For we go against foemen whose strength we do not know, whose manner of life we do not know, and we must not fail! Make haste with your preparations! Your time is short! And Spokesmen, counsel your Gens that they put aside at once all personal differences, all family quarrels, all quarrels

with their neighbors! That each adult individual, each unmarried woman, and such married woman as have all their children grown, and who no longer need them, prepare to go forth to battle! From this laboratory, within a brief space, Dalis and the Sarkas will give you further word!"

Then he dimmed the lights, and severed contact with the Spokesmen of the Gens. Only two lights he did not dim, at the moment, and to two men he spoke softly.

"My father and my father's father! Come to me at once! For there shall be need of the combined genius of the Sarkas if my scheme is to succeed!"

From both Sarkas, as though they had rehearsed the words against this need of them, came answer:

"Aye, son, we come!"

From that moment on until Dalis and the Sarkas were ready to take the most momentous step ever taken in the history of the world, the humming within the laboratory did not cease. For the people, the millions

and billions of people of the hives, were busy, eagerly and feverishly busy, preparing new armament, new engines of destruction, against the time when there should be need of them. And for perhaps the first time in centuries, the people were happy.

For not even the passage of a thousand centuries, or a thousand thousand centuries, could flush from the warm hearts of men the love of conflict!

Sarka smiled wanly, his face very pale. He had spoken, his people were busy with preparations, and now there could be no turning back. The world, when he spoke the word, would rush outward to glorious conflict—or to destruction!

A buzzer sounded near the Exit Dome. Sarka raced to give the "Enter" Signal—and Dalis, he of the hawk-eyes, the sharp nose and sharper tongue, entered the presence of the man who, in a twinkling, had made himself master of the world.

"Well," he said harshly, "I am here! What do you wish of me?"

"We Sarkas," said Sarka easily, "wish to assure ourselves that you will do nothing to obstruct our plans! Dalis, of the Gens of Dalis, you are prisoner of the Sarkas until you have passed your word!"

"That I will never do!" said Dalis calmly. "I have passed my word to go forward with you; but I meant, and you knew I meant, to go forward only as far as to me seemed right and reasonable!"

Chapter 5: *The Betrayal of Dalis*

And until the arrival of the other two Sarkas, Dalis said nothing. His face flushed an angry red as Sarka the First received the "Enter" Signal and stepped into the laboratory which had once been his—which he had delivered into the capable hands of Sarka the Second, in order to find new channels for his genius, as a worker for the betterment of the world's people. This he had found in organization, so that the people worked and labored, despite their personal quarrels, in closer harmony than they ever had before. But now Sarka the Third had called, and the two Sarkas responded. Dalis snarled at his ancient enemy, who looked to be the image of Sarka the Third and not one whit older, though one had preceded the other into the world by many centuries.

"Still the pleasant, congenial Dalis, I see!" smiled Sarka the First.

For the moment it seemed that Dalis would die there of his seething anger; but he answered no word for all of a minute. Then:

"This mad grandson of yours has made me a prisoner, until such time as I concur in all his plans!"

"If he says you are a prisoner, that you are!" snapped the elder Sarka angrily. "Son, what is this thing you plan?"

"For almost a century," replied Sarka, "I have been planning this. I knew, when father told me that Dalis had sworn he was able to halt for a moment the headlong flight of the Earth in its orbit, that Dalis did not lie or bluff! In your day, even, that was possible, and I continued with the knotty problem until I deduced the manner of its doing. I, too, can halt the Earth's rotation, or throw it out of its orbit! I took your idea, Dalis, *independently* of you, knowing you would never reveal your secret to a Sarka, and amplified it until I can not only halt the Earth in its orbit, but throw it out of its orbit entirely!"

For a moment Sarka studied the angry face of Dalis, and his own was very thoughtful.

"Dalis," he said at last, "I wish you were not our

enemy! For you are a genius, and the world has need of all the knowledge of such genius as it possesses. Why do you oppose us?"

"Because," snarled Dalis, "I guessed something of your plan that I do not like! I do not like the Sarkas, never have; but neither have the Sarkas any love for me! When you spoke to us all, I knew that somehow you had discovered the secret! You spoke, when you delivered your ultimatum, of attacking the Moon, and after it Mars! You also granted to my Gens what would have seemed a great honor—to anyone who did not fathom the tricky scheming of the Sarkas!—that of being the first into the fray! If we are to be first, and the Moon is to be the first attacked, then you plan to relieve the world forever of me, your arch-enemy, by exiling me and all my Gens upon the Moon! A dead world, covered with ashes, whose people dwell in dank caverns, like gnomes of the underworld...."

"Stay!" snapped Sarka. "But I granted you a greater honor even than that, Dalis! I planned on your Gens, led by you, making a successful conquest of the Moon—because only such a genius as Dalis could force

from this dead world a living for his Gens! Because you are the wisest of the Spokesmen, I planned for you the greatest task! Because I need you ... I do not slay you!"

"I thank you," bowing low, with the deepest sarcasm, "but you honor me too much! And tell me, pray, if it is not true that you plan for the Sarkas their choice of the best and newest worlds of the Universe?"

Sarka did not answer for a second, while his sensitive nostrils quivered with fury. The Sarkas had not noticed, but Jaska, daughter of Cleric, had admitted herself through the Exit Dome, in a way known only to Sarka and to herself, as she had entered many times before so as not to disturb Sarka at his labors. She now stood silently there, divesting herself of her Belt and outer clothing, beneath which was the golden toga worn by all the women of the earth. Dalis, however, had seen her, and his eyes narrowed craftily as he awaited the answer of Sarka.

"Dalis," said Sarka softly, "it is not for you to question me, but to obey me! I have not undertaken this step

without mastering all its details, and I refuse to allow you to swerve me in a single one of them from my plan."

Dalis straightened, standing stiffly at savage attention, and met the angry eyes of Sarka without flinching. There was no fear in Dalis, as all the world knew. But he was a schemer, and selfish.

"After all," he said, "I have known Sarkas to make promises they could not keep! How do I know, how does the world know, that you can do what you say you can do?"

"If," said Sarka, "I close all contact of this laboratory with the world outside, so that none may hear what I say save we four, and I then whisper here the secret you never told, Dalis, when my father's father refused to help you—will you then believe?"

The face of Dalis went suddenly white, but he nodded, his eyes burning redly. Jaska moved closer to the men, who stood near the table of the vari-colored lights.

"You needed my father's father," said Sarka softly, "because the secret of your scheme rested here in this laboratory, which is the highest point in the world! You pretended to need him in your scheme; but you did not need my father's father, though you *did* need his laboratory, and some of the facts of science that *he* discovered. So you came to him with your scheme, discovered that he believed, though he denied it, your scheme was possible—because he refused to aid you in it! Then, as an excuse to re-enter this laboratory, you told him you would return within two days! Now, shall I tell you your secret?"

The lips of Dalis were moving soundlessly. His right hand started to rise, as though he would make it signal the negative he was unable for a moment to speak. But even as he stood there, swaying slightly on his feet, Sarka dashed to the lights on the table, disconnecting them one by one; to the Revolving Beryl, which then ceased to revolve for the first time in centuries—whirled when he had finished, and stepped to the very center of the room.

"Now," he whispered, "your secret, Dalis!"

Still the hand upraised, still Dalis tried to speak, and could not.

Sarka spoke, in a hoarse, almost terrified whisper, four words:

"The Beryl! The Ovoids!"

Gasps of surprise from the other two Sarkas, whose eyes for a second flashed to the huge Beryl, which now was still, silent—and blind. Dawning comprehension was evident in their faces.

"The success of the Revolving Beryl," whispered Sarka, "which sees all that transpires in this world, depends on one fact: that its revolving is proportionately timed to infinite exactness with the revolution of the Earth about its axis! This Beryl is the Master Beryl of the Earth, which was why Dalis needed this Beryl, and could use no other!"

"Suppose that for a period of two days, uniformly progressive, this Beryl were forced to revolve in sharp jerks at an increasing rate of speed! With all

connections in place, and all the world's Beryls attuned to the speed of this one—what would happen? What would happen if a single Gens were marshalled in warlike array atop the area of the Gens, and kept up a steady, rhythmic march for a period of hours?"

"In a few hours," whispered Sarka the First, "the roof of the Gens area would begin to vibrate, to vibrate throughout all the area, and even into all surrounding Gens areas—and in time the roof would collapse!"

"Exactly!" said Sarka, breathing heavily. "This Beryl, when attuned to all other Beryls in the world, would have this vibratory effect, not only on a certain area of the world—but upon the entire world!—Force the speed of the Beryls to the uttermost limit, and you sway the world to your will! As a marching horde would sway the roof of a vast section of the world if the horde's commander willed!

"But that is not enough! The world would tremble, but nothing more! The Earth's store of Ovidum, which is Anti-Gravitational, and used in minute quantities in our Anti-Gravitational Ovoids, is evenly distributed

throughout the world. By vibration of the Beryls I can control it, scatter it or gather it all together wherever I will! By shifting through vibration this Anti-Gravitational material, I can disrupt, make uneven, or nullify the pull of gravity on the Earth!"

"That would do it," said Dalis, finding his voice at last; "but how would you control the course the Earth would take, thus thrown out of its orbit?"

"That, my dear Dalis, is for the moment my secret!"

"But is it?" Dalis suddenly shouted.

Before the three Sarkas could recover from their surprise at the man's sudden vehemence, he made a swift, terrifying move. He leaped away from them to stand beside Jaska, daughter of Cleric.

"Sarka," he shrieked, "I know you love this woman! Note this little tube I hold against her side. With it I can cause her to vanish for all time, merely by a slight pressure of the fingers! And that will I do, unless you immediately open all contacts with the world and

remain silent while I tell the people of Earth how you would betray them!"

The three Sarkas were petrified with amazement and horror, for they recognized the slender tube in the hand of Dalis as a Ray Director, the world's greatest engine of destruction, and knew that it would do exactly as Dalis had said it would.

Automatically, because they were brave men, they had stepped a trifle closer to Jaska and Dalis. Perspiration poured from their cheeks as they stared at this rebel. But their fears were for Jaska, who now spoke for the first time.

"Let him do as he wills," she said smilingly, "since for the good of the world I do not fear to die! Refuse him, Sarka, and know that I go into Death's Darkness loving you always, and knowing that you will succeed in the end, in spite of the opposition of men like Dalis!"

A man of unexpected actions, this Dalis, for while the attentions of the Sarkas were on the little tableau he

had staged, his eyes had darted to the Beryl, to the control which Sarka had touched to still its revolving. Now he sprang away from Jaska, was free of her and the Sarkas before any could move to intercept him.

He dashed to the Beryl. Instantly it swept into motion, while Dalis whirled to face the Sarkas, and from his lips came a burst of triumphant laughter. One hand was on the Beryl Control, the other still held the Ray Director.

"Fools!" he cried. "Fools! Duped like children! And now it is Dalis who is master of the world! Move closer to me, and I will turn my Ray Director upon this Beryl, which you have so kindly informed me is master of all the Beryls and of all Ovidum deposits! Be glad that I do not turn it upon you; but for you I have a kinder, more honorable fate! I now am master, and will direct the destiny of the world! But I will never leave it, because I suspect that it is the most pleasant of all the worlds! I will, however, choose for the Sarkas a world that shall be the dreariest in all the Universe!"

The Sarkas whirled as soft laughter came from Jaska, daughter of Cleric. Strange, lilting laughter. They turned in time to see her vanish through the Exit Dome; but for a long moment her jeering laughter seemed to sound in the laboratory she had left-and, to judge by her laughter, had betrayed! For Dalis, arch-traitor, echoed her laughter!

Chapter 6: *The Beryls in Tune*

"Remember," said Dalis, as the Beryl began to revolve and its humming mounted moment by moment to normal, "that you must concur in whatever I say to the people of the Earth—for if you do not, I swear that I will destroy this Master Beryl! Then what happens to your scheme, Sarka the Third? You see, there is no change in the plans, save one: I am the master, not you!"

Dalis was not a madman, for the world conceded him place in its list of geniuses next below the three Sarkas, which was high honor indeed; but Dalis possessed in abundance that most universal of all human emotions—jealousy. For centuries he had been nursing it, watching the Sarkas always in the niches just above him, yet never being able to attain to their eminence. Now....

He had outwitted them. It might be for a moment only, but while his mastery lasted he would drink deeply of personal satisfaction. Now, however, there was no gloating in his face, for he realized, as Sarka

had realized, the infinite gravity of the whole situation. If a mistake were made, the world would plunge to destruction—or go cooling forever in a headlong race through space.

"I keep the Ray Director hidden," he whispered, while the murmuring of the Master Beryl mounted as it gained speed again, "but know you, Sarkas, that its muzzle points at the Master Beryl, always!"

Now the forms of Earth were appearing on the Beryl. Men in countless hordes were maneuvering in myriads, legions and armies, across the face of the globe. There was no marching, but an effortless, swift as light almost, aerial maneuvering. For each human being possessed the tight-fitting metalized cloth, with the gleaming helmet in whose skull-pan was the Anti-Gravitational Ovoid, which was the "outside" garment of earthlings. With the Ovoid sitting exactly against the skull, man had but to will himself in any direction, at any livable height, and the action took place. In the same way, one man, to whom others in an organization gave allegiance by appointment, could will all his underlings into whatever formation he

desired.

As beautiful and effortless at the flight of those birds which had vanished from the earth centuries before.

"Remember, Dalis," said Sarka, "that while the speed of the Earth in its orbit is between eighteen and nineteen miles per second, once thrown out of its orbit, and forced to follow a straight or nearly straight line, the speed may be many times that-or much less!"

"The simplest facts of science," snarled Dalis, "were known to me a thousand years before you were born! Now I shall tell the Spokesmen of the Gens, and be sure that you second what I say!"

He paused. Then, raising his voice impressively, he spoke.

"O Spokesmen of the Gens, O Gens of Earth, hark ye to the words of Dalis and of Sarka! The time has come to try the experiment of which Sarka told you, and which I, Dalis, of the Gens of Dalis, have found good, and hereby certify! See that all your Beryls are

mathematically tuned to catch every sound, every vibration, every picture, from this Beryl of Sarka, henceforth to be known as the Master Beryl!

"No matter what happens, no matter what changes take place in the temperature of your homes, no matter what storms may come, touch not your Beryls until instructed from this laboratory! Tune your Beryls, then leave them, and hasten faster with your preparations for war! Each Spokesman of a Gens will at once instruct the members of his Gens that all partitions between families shall immediately be removed, outward from a common center in each case, until one hundred families occupy a single dwelling place. Materials from destroyed partitions shall be carefully hoarded, and the newer and bigger areas shall become maneuvering places for the hundred families which will occupy each given area!

"Facing a crisis as we are, no thought can be given to privacy, and neighborly quarrels must be forgotten! This move is necessary because no single dwelling place is large enough to be used as a place of maneuver—and from now on until the command is

given, maneuvers must not be held Outside! For hark ye, O Spokesmen, O Gens of Earth, we are about to start upon our voyage into outer space! Spokesmen, call in your maneuvering myriads! You have five minutes!"

In five minutes not a flying man could be seen in all the cold, stormy outside. Dalis spoke again.

"Tune your Beryls and remove partitions, taking care that in reducing partitions you so estimate your stresses and strains that the roof of the world be not endangered by weight that is unsupported, or improperly supported!

"Food Conservers, redouble your production and rush your transportation of Food Capsules!

"Mothers of men, take over the labors of your sons and your husbands! Sisters and sweethearts of men, join the myriads in maneuvers, for you, too, may require knowledge of fighting!"

In spite of himself, an ejaculation of admiration

escaped the lips of Sarka. Hearing it, Dalis turned to him, and a flush of pleasure tinged his cheeks as Sarka shaped one word with his lips:

"Excellent!"

Then, after a pause, Sarka spoke directly to the Gens of Earth.

"Take heed of the words of Dalis, for they are also the words of the Sarkas!"

Then an expression of surprise flashed across the face of Sarka as Dalis' fingers began to move in a swift sort of pantomime—for the sign manual he used was the secret manual of Jaska and Sarka! His heart cold within him at this new proof of her betrayal, Sarka nevertheless noted the words which dropped silently off the fingers of this enemy of the Sarkas.

"You are wise to resist no further! Together we can do much, and if you give your word not to oppose me, we can work together; but I will be the master!"

"But, if we grant you the mastery, will you heed our advice if it is good?"

"I will, but I alone will be the judge of its worth!"

"Then we work together henceforth. Let us begin! In the time required to move from here to the Moon, our people will have ample opportunity to perfect themselves in maneuvers! Are you ready, O my father, and father's father?"

"Ready!" they said together.

But for a moment Dalis hesitated. "Your word!" he snapped, looking at each Sarka in turn, and each in his turn nodded. They had given their word, but not their love, to Dalis. Dalis bowed low to Sarka the Youngest, who darted to the onyx base in which revolved the Master Beryl, and pressed a small lever of metalized jade, set in a slot on the southern side of the base of onyx. The humming sound within the Beryl became perceptibly louder, and as the minutes passed, and Sarka stood, arms folded, watching the Revolving Beryl, it continued to increase.

Here was the crisis, and as they watched its sure, certain approach, they forgot their enmities, Dalis and the Sarkas, and watched the whirling Beryl. Minute by minute its humming increased. The figures still were plain to be seen within the Beryl, but were becoming blurred of outline. Partitions had been removed all over the earth, increasing the size of rooms a hundredfold, reducing their number a hundredfold. The Gens of Earth, by hundred-families, were maneuvering under the Heads of Hundreds. The depths of the Master Beryl, therefore, was a maze of flying men, with their extremities slightly blurred, and becoming more so as the Master Beryl increased its speed.

Here now was shown the value of the organization fostered by Sarka the First—for in all the world there was no single Beryl out of tune with the Master Beryl; and as the Master Beryl increased the speed of its revolving, so increased at the same time the speed of all the other Beryls. Minute by minute the humming of the Master, and with it the others, increased in volume.

"Father!" spoke Sarka. "To the Observatory, behind the Beryl, please, to watch the stars, and from them to note the direction we take when the combined vibrations of the Beryls have affected the quiescence of Earth's deposits of Ovidum and, through its shifting, disturbed the flight of the Earth in its orbit!"

With a brief nod Sarka's father hurried around the Master Beryl to the tiny Observatory beyond, from which, through the Micro-Telescopes, those who knew could read the secrets of the planets, the stars—the Universe. Sarka watched him go, wondering if Dalis might not forbid him. But Dalis merely watched him go and said nothing.

Now that the time of Change was upon the world, Dalis realized his responsibility. It was little wonder that he began to be for the first time a little bit afraid.

"Note, Dalis!" snapped Sarka, and Dalis started nervously as his name was spoken. "Feel the trembling of the laboratory, just as the same trembling affects all the other buildings in the world in which Beryls are located. As the minutes pass the

trembling will go deeper and deeper, and by tomorrow the first tremors will be reaching into the Earth to several miles below the last habitable Inner Level! And then....

"Then," repeated Sarka tersely, "my father will know by his study of the stars in which new direction we are traveling! For within twenty-four hours the Earth will have started on its voyage of conquest!"

"Is there no way, Sarka," queried Dalis, "by which we can control the direction of our flight!"

"There *is* a way, O wise and gallant Dalis! But since you do not know it, who now is master?"

Dalis' face became as pale as chalk, and Sarka smiled a little as he watched him. Then, wondering what new resolve stirred the depths of this master egotist of the earth, he watched emotions flash to and fro across the face of Dalis, watched the color return to his cheeks. The cold of death gripped at his heart when Dalis spoke.

"I do not fear death, O wise and gallant Sarka!" he mocked. "For I have lived fully and well, and for many, many centuries! You know that I do not fear to slay people of the Earth, for did I not propose to your father's father that a flood would be beneficial to unfit earthlings? Hear, then! Keep your secret, and I shall allow the Earth to go outward into space, out of control, in whatever direction it will. If any other worlds happen to lie in our pathway...."

Dalis shrugged indifferently, turning his back on Sarka, to peer again into the depths of the Master Beryl, whose voice had risen to a vaster murmur, whose pictures were becoming moment by moment more blurred as time fled irrevocably into eternity.

Sarka the First took advantage of his opportunity, and leaped at the back of Dalis, hands extended to fasten them in the throat of his ancient enemy. Dalis whirled, with a burst of laughter, and the muzzle of his Ray Director covered the person of the First Sarka. In a flash the spot where Sarka the First had been was vacant, and there was no single sign to show that he had ever stood there!

Silence then in the laboratory, save for the mounting
murmur of the Master Beryl!

Chapter 7: *Outer Space*

"He only proved a belief I have entertained for centuries!" snarled Dalis. "That all the male Sarkas are fools—and the females for bearing them!"

Sarka said nothing, but within his breast a deep hatred was forming for Dalis. He had disliked him before, and had been amused by him; but in the busy life of Sarka there had been no time for hatred of anyone. Busy people had no time for hatreds.

"You should be torn to pieces for that, Dalis!" was all he said. "We needed my father's father in our efforts! But the loss to the world of one super-genius cannot be balanced by slaying another—so you are safe!"

"What he could do, I can do!" snapped Dalis.

Sarka turned away from him, seating himself beside the table of the vari-colored lights, and his heart was heavy as lead in his breast. He blamed Jaska for much of this, and his heart was burdened, despite her treachery, by the fact that he loved her, always would

love her. Love was the one possession which made centuries of life desirable to men of the Earth. For men could spend centuries in seeking a true mate, knowing that there were other centuries still in which to enjoy her. Woman was man's greatest boon, his excuse for living, as was man excuse for woman. Through the centuries, when humankind remained forever young, the joy in each other of those truly mated grew as their knowledge grew....

And now Jaska had failed Sarka, when for half a century they had loved each other! Why had she done it? He had given her no reason to do so. Had there been some other reason? Why had she laughed, and left them, after the betrayal of the Master Beryl into the hands of Dalis?

"Before God," whispered Sarka, "I believe that you, Jaska, were playing a game to dupe Dalis, as he played a game to dupe us!"

Down in his heart he was not sure. But somehow, just to whisper to himself his faith in Jaska, gave it back to him in some measure, and by so much lightened the

weight upon his heart. For now his responsibilities were greater than they had ever been before, and he had need of all his faculties.

"She'll come back, or somehow communicate with me, and explain everything," he told himself. But he refused to ponder on how Dalis the betrayer had gained possession of the secret sign manual he had believed known only to Jaska and himself. That, too, might be explained satisfactorily, for Dalis was cunning.

From the side of the laboratory opposite the Revolving Beryl came a soft tinkling sound, like the striking of a musical bell. Sarka rose wearily, strode to the wall, where a narrow aperture opened, in which rested Food Capsules sufficient for one meal for three men. He smiled wryly. They knew then, the Food Conservers deep in the earth as they were, that Sarka the First was no more—and sent food for three men! All the world knew, perhaps, yet no single person had raised voice in protest—or if any had, the mounting murmur of the Beryls had drowned it out.

"Sarka!" spoke Dalis suddenly. "At what time do you estimate that the flight of the Earth in its orbit will be materially affected?"

"It is being affected this moment, Dalis, shifting the Ovidum store!" said Sarka shortly. "Within twelve hours we will be in readiness to start our journey!"

Remaining absolutely motionless within the domed laboratory, it was now possible to feel the ever so slight motion, not only of the laboratory, but of the mountain crest upon which it rested. Not so much a to-and-fro motion as a round-about motion.

Just as the slightest sound flies outward through space endlessly, and the slightest vibration moves outward until the end of time and of space, Sarka knew that the vibration set up by the Beryl, slight though it was, was already being felt at the Poles of the Earth. Not enough to be noticed there, but existant, just the same.

"In twelve hours the world will be fighting against this combined vibration and Anti-Gravitational Force we

are starting, and second by second accelerating," Sarka explained to Dalis: "fighting to remain on its pathway about the Sun! But we will win against it, and with each new vibration, each succeeding one being more strongly felt, we will force the Earth that much more against the *pull* which holds it in its orbit!"

The laboratory was trembling. The mountain beneath it was trembling. Both in accordance with scientific design. There was no element of chance in it, for the mountain moved, and the laboratory on its crest moved, as science willed. It was now difficult for Sarka to remain still where he sat, for the trembling was exciting his heart action, and causing the blood to rush to his cheeks, making him feverish. He rose to his feet and began pacing the floor.

He strode to the jade lever, moved it ahead a fraction of a fraction of an inch, and perceptibly the murmuring of the Beryl increased, as did the trembling of the laboratory and of the mountain.

Twelve hours later exactly, Sarka shouted a single

word to Dalis.

"Now!"

The laboratory was swinging about in a sort of circle in a way that made one dizzy if one remained still for the merest second. Sarka, glancing out into the Outside, across which blew the storms of the heights, and noting that no cracks appeared in the surface of the world's vast roof, knew that this swaying motion had been transmitted evenly to all the Earth, and that, so far at least, his calculations had been correct.

But Dalis was in a cold sweat of fear, and deathly sick. The motion of the laboratory, like the inside of a whirling top, made him ill, though Sarka could tell that he fought against it with all his great will.

Sarka strode to him, looked him in the eyes for a moment. Dalis looked back, glaring defiance.

"Are you afraid, Dalis?" he shouted, to be heard above the screaming of the Master Beryl.

"I am not afraid," croaked Dalis. "Has the time arrived?"

Sarka paused, as though for dramatic effect, and raised his right hand high, while his left hand dropped to the metalized jade lever. There still was room in the slot in the onyx base for the lever to move forward ever so little.

"We have reached the exact place," cried Sarka, "where the Earth can, by pressure upon this lever, be continued on in its orbit—or forced out of it—out into space! Which shall it be, Dalis? If I move the lever forward we start our voyage, and may not be able to return!"

For a moment the nostrils of Dalis quivered as though with fear. His face was white with his illness; but out of his eyes peered the fanatic self-confidence of the man.

"Push it forward, O Sarka!" he managed.

Sarka, smiling slightly, pushed the lever to its

uttermost limit, still with his right arm upraised. For full five minutes he stood thus, and then....

"Now!" he shouted, bringing down his arm. "We have begun our journey into space! Come, let us look Outside, and await the first reports from my father!"

The two men, forgetting again for a moment the fact of their enmity, strode to the southern wall of the laboratory and looked out across the roof of the world.

"You will note, Dalis," said Sarka conversationally, "that in a matter of hours, the roaring of the Etheric winds will possess everything! We will have passed into the infinite reaches of Outer Space, where, if I may make so bold as to say so, it were better if Dalis, self-named master of the world, knew whither he was going!"

Chapter 8: *Moon Minions Prepare*

"It is time," said Sarka softly, "that we who have urged the world to forget its quarrels should forget our own. What difference who is master, so long as success attend our efforts?"

"Then tell me your secret of control of our flight!" snapped Dalis.

Before Sarka could answer, however, Sarka the Second entered the laboratory area before the Master Beryl. He looked a question at his son, and Sarka knew that his father was asking what had become of Sarka the First. He shrugged his shoulders, and nodded his head toward Dalis. Sarka the Second gave no more sign of perturbation than had his son, but deep within his eyes were signal fires of fury which centuries of penance on the part of Dalis would not erase. But now, with Sarka the First gone, Dalis must live.

"We are headed," said Sarka's father softly, "in the general direction of the Moon! If we could travel

toward it in a straight line, we would reach it, if we kept our pace of about eighteen miles per second, in approximately four hours! But since we are out of control, I fear we will pass it too far away for our fighters to fly across the intervening space! Or we may be drawn against it, in planetary collision, which of course means annihilation. We are traveling noticeably faster than while in the earth's orbit. I am able to see something of the preparation of Moon-men to receive us!"

Dalis turned to Sarka, and the perspiration bedewed his forehead. In order to make this mad mission successful, he must know Sarka's secret of control. Had he been in Sarka's place, *he* would have kept his secret, no matter what happened, and he believed in his heart that Sarka would do the same. It never occurred to him that Sarka, no matter who the master, would divulge his secret in order to save humanity from destruction.

"We have approximately four hours, Dalis!" Sarka prompted the betrayer. "I need at least an hour for my experiments! Do you, knowing as you do that I have

planned all this out, know exactly what course our voyage should take, still insist on holding the reins yourself?"

"I agree, for this time, to listen to your advice, as I promised you!"

"Then let me suggest that you do some of the work which I had planned should be done by my father's father! It is time that the world's Induction Conduits be placed in operation, in order that our people be supplied with equable temperature from the Earth's Core, as our temperature changes due to our position with relation to the sun! Stand back and give me the controls!"

For a moment Dalis stared at the two Sarkas. Would they seize power the moment he moved away from the Beryl Control? In their places he knew he would have done it. In their places he knew he would never have submerged self in the good of the people. But, somewhat diffidently, he moved away. Sarka the Second returned to the Observatory, behind the Beryl, while Sarka stopped before the table where the lights

were.

After a moment of thought-conversation with Sarka the Second in the Observatory, he dimmed the light which connected his laboratory with the headquarters of Klaser, in the Americas.

"Klaser," he barked, "for the period of one second cut the speed of every Beryl within your Gens to half its present speed!"

"I obey, O Sarka!" came the voice of Klaser.

::Have we changed direction?: Sarka mentally questioned his father.

::Slightly, but we are curving away, instead of toward the Moon! Try again!::

Sarka dimmed the light of Cleric, who instantly made answer.

"I am here, Sarka!"

"Stop the Beryls of your Gens for two seconds, but be prepared to speed them up immediately afterward, if ordered, to the speed at which they are now revolving! Klaser, hold the speed of your Beryls as they are!"

"I obey, O Sarka!" came the musical tones of Cleric.

"I hear, O Sarka!" replied Klaser.

::Now, my father,:: queried Sarka again, telepathically,
::what direction do we travel?::

::We are heading in a direction which will cause us to pass the Moon at a distance of approximately fifty thousand miles!::

"From which point our fighters can reach the Moon in exactly two hours, after they have passed through our atmosphere!" cried Sarka exultantly, aloud.

::True, son!:: replied Sarka the Second, mentally. ::I suggest you hold our course steady as it is!::

The motion of the earth now was as that of a steadily falling body, and the shifting of the Ovidum store caused by vibrations set up by the Beryls had set the Earth on its course toward the Moon. Sarka now gave instructions to Klaser and to Cleric to return the speed of the Beryls to that which they had attained at the moment the journey of the Earth had begun—thus bringing them once more into harmony with the Master Beryl, and rendering the Ovidum static.

Dalis re-entered the laboratory from the Wall Tube, near the Dome Exit, by which he had passed down to the lowest Inner Level, and stared suspiciously at the two Sarkas. He found them half-smiling their satisfaction.

"We pass the Moon within fifty thousand miles!" exulted Sarka. "A flight of two hours for the Gens which attacks the Moon! Do you refuse, O Dalis, to send your Gens against the Moon?"

"Why not send the Gens of Gerd!" demanded Dalis. "He is the youngest of the Spokesmen, and what better test is there for him than this?"

"It is because he is so young that we do not wish to send him," replied Sarka coldly. "The colonization of the Moon by Earthlings requires the guiding genius of a Spokesman who has the experience of a Dalis—or a Sarka, else you would now be dead!"

"Then let it be a Sarka!" barked Dalis.

"Who, then, will control the further flight of the Earth?"

"You! Let your father lead my Gens against the Moon!"

"What will your Gens say, O Dalis? That their revered Spokesman feared to lead them in person?"

"Enough of this squabbling," snapped Sarka the Second. "Do you not realize that within a matter of hours, some Gens must be sent into battle? Come with me to the Observatory, where you will be given something beside squabbling with which to occupy your minds!"

Leaving the earth on its lonely flight through space, the three men hurried to the Observatory, where they seated themselves before the eye-pieces of the Micro-Telescopes, whose outer circles had been aimed at the Moon.

For a moment the three stared breathlessly at the surface of this dead sister of the Earth. They noted her valleys, her craters which seemed bottomless, and saw that even as they watched, valleys and craters became sharper of outline, proving that they were approaching the Moon at a tremendous speed. It seemed, too, as though they were heading toward sure collision, though Sarka the Second had said that they would pass the Moon at a distance of fifty thousand miles.

"You will note activity at the very rims of the craters!" said the Elder Sarka easily. "The craters are man-made, not volcanic, as some scientists believe, and are shaped to converge the rays of the sun, as our roof is created for the same purpose. But note the activity at the rims of the craters!"

Closer the men peered, studying the rims as instructed by Sarka the Second. All about them—and as they watched, activity became apparent on the inner slopes of the craters—winged creatures seemed to be flying. They looked like tiny oblate spheroids, and they were in swift action, darting to and fro like bees which have been disturbed in their hives.

"Those spheres are of metal," said Sarka the Second, "and they are the fighting Aircars of the Moon-men!"

Neither Dalis nor Sarka denied this statement, for they knew it to be fact. It became apparent that the movement of the Aircars was not a movement of chance, but as skillfully ordered as any maneuvers which had, during the last few hours, been executed by any of the Gens of Earth. That they were of metal became apparent when, through the Micro-Telescopes, the watchers caught the glint of the sun on the surfaces of the cars.

Sarka did a swift mental calculation, and announced the result.

"Those Aircars average something like four hundred feet in length, and are doubtless filled with fighting Moon-men!"

"That's right," said Dalis, who also had been calculating this very thing, "but our Ray Directors will disintegrate the Aircars as easily as my Ray Director disintegrated Sarka the First!"

"The remaining Sarkas received this statement in silence, for Dalis' choice of a comparison had been an unhappy one, to say the least.

"I am wondering," said Sarka, "if you, my father, and you Dalis, have noted the peculiar appendages of the Aircars?"

"I saw them some minutes ago," said his father moodily, "and I am almost afraid to guess their use! If they are what I fear they are, then the Moon-men have been expecting this attack of ours for years and years, and have been preparing for it! If they have known, and have been preparing, then we are facing a race of super-Beings indeed—for we have known

but little of their activities!"

"What, then," said Dalis, "do you think is the purpose of those appendages?"

"Those appendages, cilia, flagella, call them whatever you wish, are man-made tentacles, created for the purpose of seizing, crushing and destroying—then discarding...."

For a full two minutes the three men sat there, and horrible doubts flooded their brains. For the conclusion was obvious. The Gens of Earth would go into action flying, not as organizations, inside an Aircar, but as individuals, in swarms, myriads, legions and hordes. In order to do the utmost damage with their Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators, they must approach within a reasonable distance—and the picture of those mighty tentacles, hurled like leashed lightning bolts into the midst of the attackers, folding in individuals by scores and hundreds, crushing them and dropping them contemptuously, was horrible in the extreme to contemplate!

It was difficult to estimate the possible speed of the Aircars of the Moon-men, at least at this distance. Besides, perhaps not a single one of them was traveling at top speed, because of the fact of their crowded traffic.

This thought passed through the minds of the three men.

"But we'll know," said Sarka dully, "when they get into action. For if I am not mistaken, those Aircars are being mustered on the rims of those craters to await orders, not to resist our attack, but to launch their own attack before we are ready! Dalis, are you going to allow your Gens to go into action against these Outsiders, without the inspiration of your personal leadership?"

The nostrils of Dalis were quivering with the intensity of his emotion. His vast egotism told him that he, Dalis, could successfully combat these Aircars of the Moon-men, and he wished with all his heart to issue the orders to his Gens. But, vain as he was, he did not even wish to have the appearance of acceding to the

original plan of Sarka! Sarka had planned for Dalis to attack the dwellers of the Moon, and Dalis had refused. Now, when this challenge of the Aircars was a direct challenge to his genius as a potential warlord of earth and he wished to accept the challenge, he was torn two ways.

Should he go ahead under the common leadership of the Sarkas? Or should he still refuse battle—and perhaps see some lesser Spokesman go forth to win glory and imperishable renown to himself?

A thought message, a command almost, impinged on the brains of the three.

"I wish to speak with you aloud!:: The message was from Jaska!

The three men rose and darted into the room of the Master Beryl. They had no sooner entered than the clear voice of Jaska sounded in the laboratory.

"Sarka, I am no traitor! I am Jaska, who loves you! I am in the headquarters of Dalis at Ohi, and the Gens

of Dalis has indicated its allegiance to me, having been informed by me that it is the wish of Dalis, whose presence is needed at the place of the Master Beryl! Command us, O Sarka, for we are ready to attack!"

There the voice ended, while the two Sarkas turned again to face Dalis.

Sarka now was glad that Dalis knew the secret sign manual, and his fingers worked swiftly as he spoke to the rebel.

[Will you, then, Dalis, allow your Gens to be led to glory by a woman? A woman, moreover, who has duped you?]

"The woman is a fool!" said Dalis. "She will lead the Gens to destruction!"

"Who, then, will be blamed if she does? Your Gens believe she is their new Spokesman at your wish! If they are told otherwise, they will think that Dalis himself is afraid to lead them!"

"We shall see," said Dalis, "if I could win honor by leading my Gens in a successful attack against the Moon-men, how much greater will be my glory if Jaska attacks, is repulsed—and I go in to turn defeat into victory!"

Thus spake the colossal selfishness of Dalis, who took no thought of the possible, nay, certain, loss of countless lives because of his obstinancy.

"I suggest," he said, "that you instruct your beloved Jaska to make ready; for if I am not mistaken, when we return to the Observatory we will discover that the Aircars of the Moon-men have left their craters and are racing outward from the Moon to meet us! Or perhaps you would lead my Gens, to safeguard Jaska!"

Chapter 9: *The Attack of the Yellow Stars*

"Why should I safeguard Jaska?" asked Sarka quietly. "She is a true daughter of Cleric! If Cleric does not fear for her to be Spokesman of a Gens, why should I? He is her father. If she wins, the more glory will be hers! If she loses, she will at least have tried!"

"Meaning," snarled Dalis, "that I have refused even to try!"

Sarka shrugged expressively, and the three stepped once more into the Observatory, took their places before the Micro-Telescopes. For a moment they could not see the outline of the Moon, for during their brief sojourn in the laboratory the Moon seemed to have disintegrated, flying into countless spheroidal pieces.

"You see?" said Dalis. "The Moon-men do not wait for us! They attack!"

It was all too true that the Aircars which had been mustered at the rims of the Moon's craters had been hurled outward into space, outward toward the on-

rushing Earth, and the myriad numbers of them for a time shut out all view of the surface of the Moon.

"God!" spoke Sarka, and it was like a prayer. His cheeks were pale as death, for in a moment he would speak the word which would send the Gens of Dalis, under the leadership of Jaska, out against these formidable Aircars of the Moon-men, and the appearance of the on-rushing cars was terrifying. That their flying radius, outward, was a great one, was manifest by the fact that the Earth would not for another hour reach its closest estimated point with the Moon.

Sarka, exchanging glances with his father, rose and stepped again into the laboratory. Even as he entered the room of the Master Beryl, Jaska's broken signal came through.

"I am ready, Sarka!" came her soft voice, vibrant with confidence. "The Gens is ready, and the Gens believes in me!"

For a moment Sarka hesitated before taking the

plunge. Then he spoke the fatal words.

"Go, Jaska, and my love goes with you!"

As the Earth approached closer to the Moon, the revolving of the Beryls had been decreased, so that the motion of the Master Beryl was almost normal—normal being that speed with which it revolved when it was necessary to use it for visual contact with the people of the Earth.

Out of the area of the Gens of Dalis darted the green specks which were the flying people of Dalis! Sarka, staring in among them, focussing the Beryl-microscope, sought for some way of identifying Jaska, who led them. A thrill coursed through him when he made her out, unmistakably—dressed still in the tight white clothing of her own Gens, with the Red Lily of the house of Cleric on her breast and on her back! The daughter of Cleric was leading the Gens of Dalis into combat under her own colors and her father's insignia!

Sarka raced back to the Observatory, seated himself

again to watch the attack, which must of necessity be joined within a matter almost of minutes. Those myriads of Aircars flying outward from the Moon, had seemed invincible; but up until now he had never seen an entire Gens mustered at one time. His whole being thrilled with the awesome grandeur of the spectacle; it seemed that not an able-bodied individual of the Gens of Dalis had failed to answer the muster of the Gens.

Millions upon millions of people, taking off the icy roof of that part of the Earth lying between Ohi and the North Pole, from the heart of what had once been part of the Pacific Ocean.

So many of them were there that when they were free of the Earth, flashing outward at two thousand miles an hour, it was impossible to see the Moon or those formidable Aircars—and still, out of the heart of the area of the Gens of Dalis, came other myriads, each flight waiting only for the preceding flight to clear!

The green, tight fitting clothing of the Gens of Dalis, each individual wearing the yellow star of the

Spokesman of the Gens! A marvelous, awe-inspiring sight!

And this was but a single area, and the earth was divided into twelve such areas, some smaller, none larger, which showed Sarka for the first time a hint of the mighty man-power, and fighting woman-power which he controlled. However, once free of the Earth, conduct of the fight would be in the hands of the Spokesman—Jaska, acting for Dalis.

Sarka turned to Dalis, his eyes flashing.

"Does it not thrill you, O Dalis?" he demanded. "Do you not wish now that you had gone out with your people as their leader?"

"They follow Jaska like sheep," he stated with a snort. "But wait! My Gens seem invincible, because it bulks between us and the Aircars of the Moon-Dwellers! Wait, see how the battle goes! The Gens may yet have need of Dalis!"

Sarka studied those outgoing hosts, which were

dwindling away to mere specks with vast speed, for through the cordons and cordons of them he could now see the Aircars more plainly. It was still possible, when one looked through the Micro-Telescopes, to see the slim figure of Jaska leading the attack. She was in the vanguard of the Gens of Dalis leading her people onward as though she had been born to command—utterly fearless.

"And I was small enough," whispered Sarka, "to doubt you! I even told you that I doubted you! Forgive me, Jaska! Forgive me!"

And still, as Level after Level gave up its myriads, the Gens of Dalis shot forth from the Gens area, and winged away, following the lead of Jaska. Millions of people, armed with Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators. How tiny the individuals seemed, against the mighty bulk of those Aircars of the Moon!

But Sarka did not fear, save for the safety of Jaska, as he was realizing anew that he had scarcely skimmed the surface of the man-might of the Earth.

Now, seen through the myriads of the Dalis Gens, he could see again the on-rushing Aircars, and his heart misgave him for a moment as he could tell, by estimation, that at least a hundred families were outlined against each individual car, which moment by moment grew larger.

Those tentacles were now much in evidence, rising and falling under and around the racing Aircars like serpents, or dragging ropes; but seeming like living things in the sentient manner of their moving—eager to come in contact with the first of the earthlings, and to wrap those tentacles about them, crush them, hurl them into space.

Sarka went back into the laboratory only long enough to attune the Beryls of the Earth to a point where the Earth would remain almost stationary, comparatively speaking, taking a curving course about the surface of the Moon, as it had for countless millions of years coursed about the Sun.

Then, back to the Observatory, to see how went the battle. Through the Micro-Telescopes the first

meeting was plain to be seen. The Gens of Dalis rushed headlong to meet the Aircars and many of them rushed headlong to their destruction.

Sarka noted a group of perhaps a hundred people break forth from the vanguard of the attackers, and mount to a safe height above the Aircars against which the Gens were hurling themselves. A sigh of relief escaped him, and he wished there were some way in which he could learn the individual identities of the ninety and nine who had taken Jaska forcibly out of danger! For her white clothing, and her Red Lily of Cleric were plainly visible and recognizable! The men of the Gens of Dalis might permit the leadership of a woman, but they would not permit her to be needlessly endangered.

Sarka turned to Dalis, and noted that the face of the master egotist was pale and drawn, his nostrils quivering with emotion, as he watched his Gens go into battle, and a feeling of satisfaction coursed through Sarka like a little white flame. Dalis was proud of his Gens, and now was wishing that he, and not Jaska, were leading them onward.

"I would wager something," whispered Sarka to himself, "that Dalis will not be able to stand it! That before battle has been joined for ten minutes, he will have gone out to take over the leadership of the Gens! Jaska must have guessed that, too! Wise, clever Jaska!"

With a fearless massing of forces, the people of the yellow stars joined battle with the Aircars! The manner of men who flew the Aircars was still unknown to the people of Earth.

But in a trice they would know.

In a matter of minutes Earth would realize the horror of what faced the Gens of Dalis, whom Jaska led!

For with the sending out of their Aircars the Moon-men had given but the merest hint of their ponderous, devastating might!

Chapter 10: *Tentacles of Terror*

Dalis had always been a stormy petrel, but as he sat before his Micro-Telescope, watching his Gens go into battle against the Moon-men, not even Sarka the Second guessed the depth of infamy of which Dalis was capable.

Dalis had given a hint, but Sarka had, in his sudden realization of the fact that Jaska really loved him, and was no traitor, forgotten that hint. How had Dalis learned the secret sign-manual of Jaska and Sarka? Therein lay the hint.

Dalis, in common with all other Earth's scientists, possessed the ability to think deeply, yet to so mask his thoughts that no one else could grasp them telepathically—and it was well for the peace of mind of the Sarkas that they could not read the black thought of the man, or look into the future, even so far as a dozen years.

The Gens of the yellow stars moved into contact with the Aircars of the Moon. Earth and Moon were

gripped in the horror of war, the war between worlds, where no quarter might be asked or given, because fought between alien peoples who did not so much as comprehend each other's languages, or even their signals.

The people of the Gens swarmed about the Aircars like myriad swarms of angry bees, but it was only to Dalis that this simile came, for only Dalis, of these three, had ever seen a swarm of bees.

Sweeping in closely, the Gens brought forth from their resting places in their Sarka-Belts their Ray Directors and their Atom-Disintegrators, and turned the blighting rays of them against the gleaming, ice-colored sides of the aerial monsters.

But even as the Gens brought their instruments of destruction into play, the mighty tentacles of the first hundred Aircars had got into action. Down they whirled to catch at the flying bodies of the pigmylike individuals of the Gens, and hundreds of Earthlings were caught in those tentacles in the first moment of conflict.

Sarka studied the reaction of the people, thus captured. He could see the expressions of unutterable agony on their faces, could see their cheeks turn black with—what? There was no way of knowing; but all sorts of guesses were possible. Those tentacles, from their action upon the human beings which they encompassed, might be charged with electricity. For the people they captured turned black, then shriveled slowly—and were released by the tentacles....

They fell sluggishly away, through the great space which yet separated the Earth and the Moon. But the people who fell, fell aimlessly, going neither toward the Earth or the Moon, like black feathers in a vagrant breeze.

"Great God, do you see father?" cried Sarka. "The—whatever it is—that turns our people into cinders and drops them, has no effect on the Anti-Gravitational Ovoids in the skull-pans of the helmets, and without mental direction, the Ovoids neither rise nor fall but wander aimlessly!

"See? As the fight continues, those who still live, as

they dart here and there through the battle area, will be confronted continually by the blackened faces and shriveled figures of their departed friends, relatives and neighbors, and will see at first hand what will happen to themselves if they are caught by the tentacles!"

From the lips of Dalis came one single burst of laughter, filled with bitterness. No other word came from his lips, no other sign. He merely sat and stared, and masked his hell-black thoughts so that neither of the Sarkas might read them. But in the fertile mind of Dalis a plan was being born—a plan that, he knew, had always been growing back in his mental depths, somewhere, down the centuries, since first he had become an enemy of the Sarkas. The Sarkas ruled the Earth, and....

But he would spring his surprise when he believed the time right, for Dalis possessed a faculty which neither of the Sarkas possessed—an example of it being his incomprehensible knowledge of the secret code of moving fingers used by Sarka and Jaska.

The Gens of Dalis drew back in consternation at this wholesale taking off of the first line of attack. Out of that first line, comprising perhaps a thousand families, scarcely a hundred had escaped the groping of those mighty tentacles of the Aircars—and the black, shriveled things which had been men floated all about the Aircars which had destroyed them, warnings to those who followed them into the fray. Those who had somehow escaped the wrath of the tentacles in the first engagement fled back into the heart of the next line of sky-skirmishers, fear and horror in their faces.

Here, answering to the will of Jaska, a mile or so above the heart of the conflict, they reformed with their people, and prepared again to attack. But how to attack these formidable Aircars successfully?

That was the question. Ray Directors had been turned against them, but something was decidedly wrong. The first car to feel the blast of even one of those Ray Directors should have vanished, become as nothing, as had the body of Sarka the First before the Ray Director of Dalis.

But apparently nothing had happened. Why?

Grimly Dalis and the two remaining Sarkas pondered the problem, wondering at the same time what Jaska would now do, how reform her Gens, how send it again to an attack that seemed hopeless.

"There they go again!" whispered Sarka.

The first two myriads of the Gens of Dalis had now crowded together until they formed a veritable cloud which masked, for a moment, the Aircars of the Moon. Then, as one person, answering to the will of Jaska, they swept in to the attack again.

But as they approached the Aircars, they divided four ways—up, down, to right and to left, and smashed into the Aircars from four directions at once. Jaska, knowing that countless lives must be lost to destroy these monsters of the Moon, was trying to down them by mass attack, hoping that, while the inner groups gave their lives, those who followed after them would get in close enough to use their Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators.

"She is wasting lives to no avail!" cried Dalis. "There is a way to beat these people!"

"It is really your responsibility, O Dalis!" snapped Sarka. "Why do you not go out and lead your Gens? If you know, why remain here and watch the destruction of all the people of your Gens?"

"You know why our Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators do not work, or work but poorly? Because our fighters are within the gravitational pull of the Moon, instead of the Earth, and machines which work perfectly on Earth are thrown out of balance when under the influence of the Moon!"

"Then," cried Sarka, "we must sweep in close enough to our people...."

Without waiting to say another word, for thousands of men were dying each breath-space, Sarka raced into the laboratory and gave the signal to race up the speed of the Beryls, to attune them with the increasing speed of the Master Beryl, whose jade lever now was set at the halfway mark in the onyx

slot.

When he returned to the Observatory, Dalis was gone, and Sarka the Second sat alone.

"I knew he would go," said Sarka, "for he cannot endure to see someone else take credit for winning this first victory—if it is even possible to win it! I knew that, vain though he is, Dalis is yet a man!"

"I am not so sure of that, son!" replied the Elder Sarka. "For I have known him longer than you have! There's something else in that brain of his which takes no thought of the death of people of his Gens—or for the betterment of the other people of the Earth! I wonder...."

But even as he spoke, Dalis was away, flying free and fast toward the scene of battle. In a few minutes his will would be felt by his Gens, and Jaska could return again. Sarka sought for her. She was still safe, high above the battle. Thousands and thousands of those shriveled things now floated in the space about the cars, above them, below them, everywhere. But the

Gens of Dalis had at last caused some trouble to the Aircars of the Moon.

A hundred of them, like stricken birds, were falling downward toward the Moon, great holes torn in their sides. But as they fell, their tentacles, which whipped here and there like snakes in their death-throes, carried with them their full capacity in people of the Gens of Dalis!

With the partial destruction of the Aircars which were falling, the force that actuated the death-dealing of those tentacles seemed to have gone out of them. For the people now held in the grip of the mighty tentacles were still alive! Their squirmings could be plainly seen, and their cries could have been heard, had it not been that the noise of battle drowned out all other sounds.

A hundred Aircars falling, and the men and fighting women of the Gens of Dalis, with new courage in them now they realized that the Aircars were not entirely invincible, renewed the attack with savage vigor.

Taking no thought of the death which must surely come to them, they circled and pressed the Aircars; and when the tentacles caught at some of them, others climbed to the very body of the Aircars, over the shriveling bodies of the dying, and turned their Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators against the gray sides of the monsters.

Even before Dalis had reached the vanguard of his Gens another hundred Aircars were falling, each with its tentacles wrapped tightly about such of the earthlings as they could grasp. Falling ... falling ... still living, plunging down.

Now Dalis had reached the scene of the fray, and was assuming command.

As he did so a single white-robed figure, life-size when seen through the Micro-Telescopes, darted out of the fray and headed at top speed for the dwelling place of Sarka. Jaska, relieved, was returning home!

But though Jaska flew at top speed, she did not seem to grow larger, or draw nearer to the Earth!

Out of the ruck of the defenders of the Moon, a single Aircar, whose gleaming gray side was marked with queer crimson splashes, broke free to pursue Jaska!

She fled at top speed, yet the Aircar was gaining, proof that the Moon had developed speed greater than Earth had attained.

"But why," queried Sarka, "does she draw no nearer?"

"Great God!" ejaculated Sarka the Second, after a brief examination of certain chartographs beside his Micro-Telescope. "We are moving away from the Moon! Something is forcing us away! The people of the Moon have something whose nature we do not know, capable of forcing them away from us—while they pull our people toward them! You see? If they pulled us toward them, we could overthrow them, for we outnumber them perhaps thousands to one; but if they force themselves away faster than the Gens of Dalis, if defeated, can follow us, they can destroy, or capture, the Gens at their leisure!"

Suddenly, out of the Earth, past the all-seeing eyes of

the Micro-Telescopes, swept a new myriad. Men in white, wearing the Red Lily of the House of Cleric! Cleric was sending out men to rescue Jaska from the Aircar which pursued her! But would Jaska or these who went forth to fetch her ever be able again to attain landing place upon the Earth!

It looked doubtful.

Even as Sarka asked himself this question fresh Aircars shot from the rims of Moon craters, rushing outward to add their weight in the battle against the Gens of Dalis. The Gens of Dalis was doomed!

In the mind of Sarka the Second there still loomed a hellish doubt that would not down.

The men of Cleric were surrounding Jaska now, protecting her with their lives against the tentacles of that lone Aircar splashed with crimson—and all were flying a losing race with the Earth, which was still being forced outward from the Moon!

Chapter 11: *Escape—and Dalis' Laughter*

But Sarka was not to be so easily beaten. There still remained an infinite number of possible changes of speed by manipulation of ovidum by vibration set up by the Beryls, without which this flight from the beginning would have been impossible. But for two hours, while the white robed men of Cleric fought against the car of the crimson slashes to prevent the capture of the daughter of their Spokesman—and died by hundreds in the grip of those grim tentacles—Sarka was forced to labor with the Beryls until perspiration bathed his whole body and his heart was heavy as he foresaw failure. And failure meant death or worse for Jaska.

But at the end of two hours, while the men of Cleric fought like men inspired against the Aircar of the crimson slashes, a cessation in the outward speed of the earth could be noted. At the end of three hours the body of Jaska, all this time fighting manfully to attain to landing place on the Earth, was at last bulking larger; but the tentacles of the Aircar were groping after her, reaching for her, striving to catch

and clasp her to her death.

The two Sarkas watched and prayed while the might of the Beryls, traveling at top speed, fought against the force of whatever was used by the Moon-men to compel the Moon to withdraw. Still the men of Cleric fought that single car, and died by hundreds in the fighting. White robed figures which became shriveled and black in the grip of those tentacles.

Countless of the men of Cleric deliberately cast themselves against those tentacles, throwing their lives away to give Jaska more leeway in her race for life.

"Will she make it, father?" queried Sarka in a whisper.

"If the courage and loyalty of her people stand for anything, she will make it," he replied.

On she came at top speed, and now through the micro-telescopes the Sarkas could see the agony of effort on her face, even through the smooth mask used by the people of Earth for flight in space where

there was no atmosphere. Courage was there, and the will of never-say-die; and Jaska, moreover, was coming back to the man she loved. In a nebulous sort of way Sarka realized this, for though these two had not mated there was a resonant inner sympathy between them which had rounded into an emotion of overpowering force since Jaska had proved to Sarka that she was to be trusted—that he had been something less than a faithful lover when he had mistrusted her, ever so little.

Closer now and closer, and at last the Aircar of the crimson splashes was drawing away, losing in the race for life. It was falling back, as though minded to turn about and race back for the Moon, now a ball in the sky, far away, the outlines of its craters growing dim and misty with distance. Now the men of Cleric, those who remained, were breaking contact with the Aircar, and forming a valiant rear-guard for the retreat of Jaska.

Throughout the Earth, as the Beryls fought with ever increasing speed to lower the rate of the earth's outward race from the Moon, was such a trembling,

such a vibration induced by conflicting, alien forces as there had not been even in that moment when back there in its orbit, the Earth could have either been kept within its orbit, or hurled outward into space at the touch of a finger.

Now Jaska, surrounded by her father's men, was almost close enough to touch the Earth.

She made it, weak and weary, and rested for a moment while her father's men steadied her. Then, thrusting them aside, with gestures bidding them return to their Gens, she lifted into the air again, and fled straight for the laboratory of Sarka.

She entered tiredly through the exit dome, and all but collapsed into the arms of Sarka. Gently he removed her helmet of the anti-gravitational ovoid, noting as she leaned against him the tumultuous beating of her heart. Then her gentle eyes opened and she whispered to Sarka.

"You trust me now?"

For answer he bent and kissed her softly on the lips—for the kiss, from the far distant time when the first baby was kissed by the first mother, had been the favored caress of mankind. Her face was transfigured as she read his answer in his eyes, and the touch of his lips. Then, remembering, fear flashed across her face. She straightened, and grasping Sarka by the hand, hurried with him into the observatory.

She took the seat in which Dalis had sat before he had gone out to the command of his Gens, studied for many minutes the battle in space between the two alien worlds.

"Dalis is winning," said the Elder Sarka quietly,
"apparently!"

"The qualification is a just one," said Jaska softly.

"'Apparently,' indeed! You will note now that, though men of the Gens of Dalis swarm all about the Aircars, and even clamber atop them, no more are dying in the grasp of those tentacles? Is Dalis arranging a treacherous truce with the Moon-men?"

"I have been wondering about that," said Sarka softly, "for it is my belief that nothing not conducive to his own selfish interests would have forced Dalis to leave this place and take command of his Gens, as I had first ordered, unless he had schemes planned of which father and I could know nothing. Now that I think of it, Jaska, how did Dalis know our secret code of fingers?"

Jaska started, and turned a blanched face to Sarka.

"*Did* he know?" she cried. "Did he? If he did that proves a suspicion that I have entertained since the first moment when Dalis swept into the fight, and I sensed that alien signals were being flashed back and forth!"

"Flashed back and forth!" ejaculated Sarka. "How do you mean? That Dalis was somehow able to communicate with the Moon-men in their own language, or through their own signals?"

"Why not? He knew our secret code, did he not? I never gave it to him, and I know that you did not. No,

Dalis has some means, never discovered or suspected by you Sarkas, whereby he is able to understand alien tongues and alien sign manuals!"

"That means," said Sarka the Elder in a dead voice, "that by forcing Dalis to go out at the head of his Gens...."

"We have," interrupted Sarka the Younger, "placed a new weapon of treason in his hands! Dalis, at the very moment of contact with the Aircars, loaded with Moon-men, broke in on their signals—they must have had some means of signalling one another—and communicated with them in their own way! Do you think it possible that, with all his Gens, he may go over to the Moon-men, form an alliance with them?"

For many moments no one dared to answer the question; yet, from what the Sarkas knew of him, it was not impossible at all. For Dalis was the master egotist always, and never overlooked opportunity to gain something for himself.

It was Jaska who broke the silence.

"Did you note carefully," she said, "those Aircars which were partially destroyed by our ray directors and atom-disintegrators?"

The Sarkas nodded.

"Did you note that no men, formed like our own, no creatures of any sort whatever, fell from the cars?"

Again the awesome silence, and the keen brains of the Sarkas wrestled with this vague hint of the uncanny.

"You mean, Jaska ... you mean...."

"That the occupants of Aircars are part of the cars, but—Beings of the Moon! That they are either metal monsters endowed with brains or tiny creatures irrevocably attached to the cars themselves!"

"But how," said Sarka at last, "are we to be sure? I can understand what Dalis might do if the Moon-men granted his wish for an alliance with them. It is easy to understand why his Gens would follow his lead, for

with the Moon forced outward from the Earth faster than his Gens could retreat, there is but one direction for his Gens to go—toward the Moon! They would go to the Moon as captives and trust the keen brain of Dalis to gain the mastery, sooner or later, over the Moon-men. And then...."

"And then—?" repeated Sarka the Elder.

"Then, Dalis has already been inspired by the speed with which those Aircars travel! You will remember that he did not take kindly to leaving the Earth and making his abode on some other planet! But why could he not do so, combine forces and knowledge with the people of that planet—and then return to Earth in alliance with them?—after we have depleted our forces by placing a large portion of our people on Mars and Venus and Saturn?"

"Sarka, my son," said Sarka's father, "before we continue with our flight to Mars, we must know the truth! We must somehow learn exactly what is going on on the Moon! If you could reach the Moon, alone, undetected, and bring back a report...."

For a moment he left it there, and the faces of all three were gray with worry and abysmal fear.

"I can't go bodily, father," said Sarka at last, "but you remember my secret exit dome, to the right of the observatory, from which I have never yet dared exit from this place for fear that it might cost me my life?"

Sarka the Elder nodded, while Jaska looked puzzled. Another evidence of the fact that Sarka had not always trusted her, for she knew nothing of a secret exit dome. Sarka's eyes, as he looked at Jaska, mutely asked her forgiveness, which she gave him with her smile.

"I remember, son, and now...?"

"Surely it is worth risking one's life to know what new menace looms over the children of men!"

"What is the use of this secret dome?" asked Jaska softly.

"It is merely an elaboration of the regular exit dome,

combined with certain phases of our atom-distintegrators, and the principle involved in the anti-gravitational ovoids. I step into the secret exit dome, garbed for flight Outside, and will myself to appear bodily in a certain place. It is instantaneous. I step into the dome, for example, and will myself to appear whole upon the Moon, and there I will appear!"

"You mean that during the period of transposition you are invisible?"

"Yes, invisible because non-existent, except for the essential elements of me, broken down by the secret exit dome, reassembled at the place willed in their entirety! I can't fly there, for a million eyes would see me approach! I must go in secret, as a spy, and wearing the clothing and insignia of a member of the Gens of Dalis!"

Silence in the observatory for a brief breathing space, and then Jaska spoke that speech out of the books of antiquity, which remains the classic expression of loyalty.

"Whithersoever thou goest, there will I go also!"

From the laboratory came a sudden burst of laughter, the laughter which all three recognized as the laughter of Dalis; but when they entered the place of the Revolving Beryl, there was no one there—and a feeling of dread, all encompassing, held them thralled for the space of several heart-beats. Dalis, they knew, was thousands of miles away, upon the Moon; yet here in the place of the Master Beryl they all three had just heard his sardonic laughter!

Chapter 12: *Ashes of the Moon*

Through the micro-telescopes it was possible to see what had happened after Dalis had assumed command of the Gens of Dalis. For even though the Moon, in spite of the speed of the Beryls, was being forced further and further from the Earth, the eyes of the micro-telescopes picked out and enlarged details to such an extent that the battle seemed to be transpiring under the eyes of the beholders.

A terrific jumble, in which Earthlings and Aircars were all tumbled together in mad chaos, a great mass of writhing, green-garbed figures. Infinite in number—in the midst of which were the gigantic Aircars, like monster beetles being beset by armies upon armies of ants.

Then, by the time Jaska had seated herself in the observatory atop the Himalayas, to watch what developed, the battle seemed to be over, and the Moon-men had won. For the huge cars swung around between the myriads of the Gens of Dalis, and seemed to be herding them toward the Moon, as though they

were prisoners.

Telepathically, Sarka and his father had been able to catch some hint of the thoughts of the Earthlings in the battle, and these thoughts had been tinged with doubt, fear and horror, so that even thus to receive them, by mental telepathy, was to feel the searing heat of their fear.

Now, in the instant when the battle in Space seemed to be over and the Gens of Dalis were prisoners, the thought waves were no more, and a brooding silence took their place. Dalis, the Sarkas knew, possessed the power to mask his thoughts, for it was a power possessed in common by all the scientists of Earth. But the common people of his Gens did not possess that power. However, for the moment Sarka had forgotten an all important something: that, when people were outside the roof of the world, they were subservient to the will of a common commander to whom they had sworn allegiance.

If, therefore, Dalis could mask his own thoughts from the brains of men, he could also mask the thoughts of

the people of his Gens, merely by willing it! So Sarka and his father and Jaska could not know whether the Gens of Dalis had gone over in a body with him, in a truce with the people of the Moon, or whether they were dual prisoners—of Dalis and of the Moon-men!

More than ever was it necessary for someone to somehow reach the Moon and make a thorough investigation, discover just what Dalis was doing, what mischief he was hatching.

The secret exit dome seemed to be the answer.

"You can manage without me, father?" asked Sarka.

The elder Sarka nodded.

"Of the other Spokesmen of Earth," went on Sarka, "I trust Gerd the most. Might I suggest that you bring him here, trust him in all details, and let him take my place wherever possible? Or, better still, keep Jaska here with you! I ... I may not be able to return! I'll try to find a way, but—we can always communicate telepathically. Jaska...."

"Jaska," said that young lady grimly, "goes with Sarka wherever Sarka goes!"

"But it may mean death! We can only guess at the cunning of the Moon dwellers! They may have been in secret communication with Dalis for centuries! Dalis, who somehow discovered our secret finger code, may also know of the secret exit dome, and the principle upon which it operates! If he does, he may know how to combat it! Perhaps that explains his laughter! Perhaps he heard and understood every word we spoke, hears and understands every word we speak now! Who knows? He may wait until I have passed through the secret exit dome, and then make it impossible for me to be reincarnated on the Moon—or elsewhere!"

"No matter," said Jaska softly, "wherever Sarka goes, there goes Jaska! It is useless to attempt to dissuade me, and it is time you learned that!"

In spite of himself Sarka smiled, and his father met his smile with a quizzical one of his own. Both men had the same thought.

"The eternal woman!" said Sarka the Elder. "No man has ever understood her—no man ever will! And all men are ruled by her!"

Sarka shrugged, and Jaska spoke again.

"Don't you think it is time we tried this new experiment?"

Sarka nodded, and his face was suddenly alight with the excitement which burned within him.

"First," he said, "we need accoutrements of the Gens of Dalis for two people!"

Jaska smiled.

"Forseeing that we might have need of such equipment, I had several complete outfits sent here when I took charge of the Gens of Dalis as its Spokesman!"

Two minutes later, arrayed in the green clothing of the House of Dalis, swathed in it from neck to toe,

wearing their belts and the masks which were necessary to life in space where there was no atmosphere, the whole topped by the gleaming helmets whose skull-pans held the infinitesimally small anti-gravitational ovoids, Jaska and Sarka entered the secret exit dome, side by-side.

On the breast and back of each showed the yellow stars of the Gens of Dalis. There was no hiding their identity otherwise, and if any of the Gens saw them, both would be immediately recognized—for Jaska had commanded the Gens, and Sarka was the world's greatest scientist known to every human being. But they planned on carrying out their investigations by stealth.

"Father," said Sarka, "when the inner door is closed upon us, you have but to press the button to the right of the door. Press it when the light beside it glows red, which will indicate that we have willed ourselves to go to a certain destination!"

The inner door closed upon Sarka and Jaska, and, hand in hand, side by side, their bodies glowing with

knowledge of warm, sympathetic contact, they waited for a miracle which had never before been attempted.

"Are you afraid, beloved?" queried Sarka.

"When I am with you," she said softly, "I have no fear."

"Then face the outer door, and will to go wherever I will to take you!"

Side by side, hand-in-hand still, they faced the outer door, and Sarka willed:

"Let us appear together in a deserted spot, within sight but unseen, of the Moon crater from which those Aircars were sent against us!"

A sudden blur, a cessation of all knowledge, and then....

Sarka and Jaska stood side by side in a desolate expanse surrounded by bleak and appalling mountains of grotesque shape, in a light that was weirdly, awesomely blue. Their feet were invisible,

deeply rooted in some soft, fine material which looked like snow.

After a swift glance around to see if anything lived or moved in this awful desolation, Sarka stooped and dipped up some of the fine stuff with his fingers, touched it to his lips.

The material seemed to be fine blue ashes and on his tongue it had a soapy savor. He peered at Jaska, whose eyes were glowing with excitement, whose lips were parted with anticipation, and instantly he opened a mental conversation with her.

::We must speak with each other telepathically, but do not speak with me until I have explained to you how to mask your thoughts from all persons save the one with whom you hold converse! First, I love you! Second, let us see if, searching the sky, we can find the Earth!::

In a few brief, highly technical words, Sarka told his beloved how to talk with him in the manner which he had never before explained to her. They had used

telepathy before, countless times, but they had not cared who heard—while now secrecy in all things was the prime essential for success, even for life.

When he had told her, and she replied, ::I understand perfectly, and it seems quite easy,:: they turned and surveyed the heavens, out of which, by this new miracle of the secret exit dome, they had dropped to the face of the Moon.

Away across the space between worlds, its transfiguration plainly visible to the two, they could make out and identify the world from which they had come. Save that they knew themselves standing on the Moon, they would have thought as far as appearances went, that the place where they had come was the Moon, many times enlarged. It seemed incredible that they had come so far in the twinkling of an eye; but that they had was proved by the fact of their physical presence.

::Look, Jaska!:: said Sarka suddenly. ::See how our Earth glows, as though it were afire inside!::

They stared at the great circular yellowish flame that he pointed out, and Sarka, always the scientist whose science was one of exactness, tried to estimate just where, on the Earth's surface, the glow was.

::Jaska,:: he said again, ::that glow comes out of the heart of the Gens area which Dalis ruled! And no one lives there, since Dalis' Gens flew out to do battle! That's why we did not know of it before we left! That glow, somehow, beloved, is the cause of the outward-from-the-Earth journey of the Moon! First we must locate the Moon-source of the glow, and render it incapable of further forcing itself away! For do you realize that, unless we do so, we will never again see home?::

Jaska said nothing, but her eyes were troubled for a moment. Then she smiled again.

::What care I if I become a prisoner on the Moon, if you are with me?::

Sarka was just now realizing the wonder of this raven-haired woman whom, knowing her for half a

century as he had, he had just known so little after all.

::If we seem in danger of discovery, Jaska,:: he said to her, ::drop down instantly into the ashes, for if we are discovered by Dalis.....::

He left it there and, with a deep intake of breath, started away for the nearest and highest hill. They desired to walk, yet found walking almost impossible, as they could not keep their feet on the ground save by the exercise of a really incredible effort of will. So, despairing of keeping their feet in contact with the ashes, they flew just above them, heading for the nearest weird-looking ridge.

In the strange light, which was oddly like moonlight in some painted desert of Earth, shapes were distorted and somehow menacing, colors were raw, almost bleeding—and distances that seemed but a step required hours to traverse.

Ever and anon, as they traveled they looked back up at the Earth which was their home. It still was visible,

though plainly smaller with distance, and for a time Sarka's heart misgave him; but he only clasped tighter the hand of Jaska and moved on.

They were just at the base of the first hill, which had now become a mountain of gloomy, forbidding aspect, when the first sound they had heard on the moon came to them. A sound that was a commingling of the laughter of Dalis, the barking of jackals of the olden times, the humming of a million Beryls revolving at top speed, and a strident buzzing such as neither had ever heard.

Had they been discovered? Was the sound a warning? They could not know; but as they stared at the crest of the hill, two long, snaky, waving things appeared above the crest, undulating, waving to and fro, as though questing for something. They crouched low in the white ashes at the base of the mountain, and waited, scarcely breathing.

Chapter 13: *The Lunar Cubes*

For a long time Sarka and Jaska remained still, like sentinels, listening to the strange discord which seemed to emanate from behind the hill at whose base they crouched.

::Look!:: said Sarka at last. ::There against the sky, beyond and between those two waving tentacles! Note that column of light, scarcely lighter than the light which surrounds it everywhere? It looks like a massive column just lighter than everything around it, yet so little lighter that you have to watch closely to see it at all?::

Jaska stared for all of a minute, before she thought back her answer.

::I see it,:: she said.

::Note now whether it goes, as it reaches outward into Space!::

Jaska followed the mighty height of the thing,

outward and outward, and then gasped.

::Sarka,:: she said, ::its end touches the Earth in the very heart of that strange glow we spoke about!::

::Exactly! And people of Earth know nothing about it, because it is invisible to them! It is only from Outside that the glow it makes against the Earth is visible! If we can divert its direction, or render it useless in any way, the Moon will no longer be thrust away by its force!::

A pause of indecision, then Sarka thought again:

::Let us go, Jaska! Keep behind me, right on my heels!::

Slowly, fighting against something that seemed determined to pull, or hurl, them outward from the surface of the Moon with each forward movement they made, they essayed the side of the hill, pausing at the end of what seemed like hours in a sort of hollow just large enough to mask their bodies and stared over its edge into one of the craters of the

Moon. Out of the depths of that crater came the discordant sounds, which now were almost deafening, and out of that crater too came the almost invisibly bluish column whose outer tip touched the Earth.

Right before them, so close that they all but rested in its shadow, was one of those monster Aircars, its tentacles moving to and fro as though wafted into motion by some vagrant breeze. But since neither Sarka nor Jaska could feel the breeze, Sarka knew that it was life which caused the waving motion of those tentacles of terror.

::Note,:: he said to Jaska, ::that there is a tiny trap-door in the bottom of the Aircar, and that the thing rests on a half-dozen of those tentacles!::

::I see,:: came Jaska's reply.

Jaska went on:

::Note the gleaming thing on the ground, right below the Aircar? I wonder what it is?::

They studied the thing there, which seemed to be a huge jewel of some sort that glittered balefully in the eery light of the Moon. It was, perhaps, twice the size of an average man's torso, and was almost exactly cubical in shape. As Sarka studied the thing, he sensed that feeling flowed out of it—that the cube, whatever it was, was alive!

He tore his glance away from it, and realized that he accomplished the feat with a distinct effort of will—as though the cube had willed to hold his gaze, knew he was there. His eyes, peering around the inner slope of the crater—which dipped over, some hundreds of feet down, and plunged downward to some unknown depth—noted a broad, flat stone, off to his right; and around the rim of the crater he counted a full hundred of the Aircars, all with their tentacles waving as if they belonged to sentient creatures.

Below each one, as he studied them and strained his eyes to make out details, he caught the baleful gleam of other cubes like the first he had seen. The Aircars, it seemed, were either sentinels, at the lip of the crater, or were the dwelling places of sentinels—and

the cubes were those sentinels!

It seemed absurd, but it came to Sarka in a flash that that was the answer, and his eyes came back to the first cube, because it was nearer and more easy to study.

::I will not be swayed by the will of the thing,:: Sarka told himself. ::Nor will I allow it to analyze me! Jaska, do you do likewise!::

Beside him, Jaska shivered. He turned to look at her. Her face was coldly white, and her eyes were big with terror and fascination as she stared at that first cube, resting so balefully there under the first Aircar.

He shook her, and she seemed to bring her eyes to his with a terrific, will-straining effort.

::Look at me!:: he told her, telepathically. ::Keep your eyes on me, for to look at the cube spells danger!::

But his own eyes went back to the thing, and he studied it closely. A cold chill raced through his body

as he noted that its gleam was becoming dull, fading slowly out. It had gleamed brightly at first, and now was losing its sheen, fading away to invisibility. He thought he should be able, regardless of gleam or color, to see its outline; but its outline, too, seemed to be becoming faint, indistinct.

Then, in a trice, it was gone, and a feeling of uneasiness, more compelling than he had ever known before, coursed through the soul of Sarka. Where had the cube gone? What was it? What was its purpose? He tore his eyes away from the spot where he had last seen it, and stared away to the shadow beneath the second nearest Aircar, where he had glimpsed another of the cubes.

The cube there, too, was fading out.

::Sarka! Sarka! Look!:: came to his brain the thoughts of Jaska.

Sarka turned and stared at her, and a feeling of fear for which he could not account at all took fast hold of him. The eyes of Jaska, wide and staring as they had

been when he commanded her to look away from the cube under the Aircar, were staring at that flat, table-like rock, off to his right.

There, almost in the center of the rock, a gleaming something was taking shape! Just a dull spot, in the center of the yellow glow; then the beginning of the outline of a cube. Then, all at once, the cube itself, gleaming and baleful!

Sarka gasped in terror. He had seen the cube vanish, its glow disappear, and now here it was, almost close enough to touch, on a rock beside him, gleaming and baleful as before! That it was the same cube he had seen under the first Aircar, he somehow knew without being told. That it was a sentient *thing* he also knew, for now there was no mistaking the fact that, but for the presence in the little hollow of Jaska and Sarka, the cube would not have moved.

Swift as light, Sarka's right hand darted to his belt, where his ray director should be nestled against his need of it. And with his first movement, the cube's brilliance vanished instantly, the cube disappeared,

and appeared again right before the face of Sarka, so close he could touch it! Yet he did not turn the ray director against it, nor did he extend his hand to touch the thing—because he was afraid to do so!

Even as the cube appeared before his eyes, thrice baleful and menacing in its close proximity, his eyes darted back to that broad flat rock, where the second gleaming cube now appeared!

::Great God, Jaska!:: he sent mentally, ::what does it mean?::

::These,:: she answered bravely back, ::are Moon-soldiers! And, unless we manage not to appear furtive, we are undone!::

Still Sarka made no move, while other gleaming cubes appeared on the flat rock. Five other cubes appeared beside the first, at the rim of the hollow which held the forms of Jaska and Sarka. The cubes were closing on them, oddly like a squad of Earthlings in the olden times, advancing by rushes against an entrenched enemy!

The buzzing sound which they had first heard now seemed accentuated, but, instead of being outside of the listeners, seemed inside them, hammering against their very brains! Messages were being sent to them, or passed back and forth between and among the cube-men about them—and they hadn't the slightest idea how to make answer, know whether an answer was expected of them, or what the cube-men thought about them!

Since there was nothing else to do, they lay there, hands clasped, as children in the dark clasp hands, and waited for what might transpire.

Suddenly the discord from the inside of the crater ceased, and all was still, while it came to Sarka that the cube-men who stood before him were in grim communication with something invisible to Sarka and Jaska, somebody, perhaps, deep in the bowels of the Moon, over inside the crater.

They knew, those two, that the cube-soldiers were reporting their presence, and asking instructions; that the Moon had gone silent to listen, and that within a

few moments their fate would be decided. What should they do?

In his hand Sarka held his ray director, with which he knew he could blast one or all of the cubes into nothingness. But still he held his hand, made no move.

Something, however, had to be done, for the discord was starting again, growing in volume. It made Sarka think, oddly enough, of a deaf mute fighting for speech! Then came the first intelligible sound....

A burst, from the depths of the crater, of sardonic laughter!

::Dalis!:: said Sarka, and moved. While Sarka moved, Jaska held fast to his arm. Casting her fear to the winds, furious because of the laughter of Dalis, Sarka thrust his ray director back into his belt and stood upright.

Bending over he seized the first of the gleaming cubes and hurled it over the edge of the crater, saw it start

plummeting down. But even before it fell out of sight within the crater its gleam had dulled until it was almost impossible to see the thing. Racing as though racing against time, Sarka caught up cube after cube and hurled them all after the first.

Out of the crater there came no sound of heavy objects striking, though Sarka felt there should have, for the cubes were almost as heavy as a man.

Then his hair almost stood on end under his helmet, for under that first Aircar, where he had first seen it, the initial cube was again gleaming into life!

The thing had dissolved while being hurled over the rim, and reformed in its proper place, its station as silent sentinel under the Aircar!

These cubes then, were indeed sentinels—sentinels impossible to injure. Though no force had been used against Sarka and Jaska, Sarka had the feeling that they were powerless, and that here on the edge of a crater of the Moon awful forces were being mustered against them. Mustered slowly, sluggishly, yet surely,

as though the mentality which mustered them knew them helpless, and that there was no need to hurry!

As for Jaska, she merely clung to Sarka and waited—trusting him no matter what might transpire.

On a blind chance, Sarka brought out his ray director again, turned its muzzle toward that invisibly-blue column, pressed with his fingers, moving the director back and forth.

Instantly the blue column seemed to break short off, while the broken upper portion started racing outward toward the Earth. Sarka watched it, and noted that the yellowish glow on the Earth, even as he watched, was fading out—disappearing!

::If the ray will smash the blue column, Jaska,:: he said, ::it will also destroy its source! Come! We will go look for it!::

And, holding her hand tightly, he rose to his feet and strode boldly down the inner slope of the vast crater.

Chapter 14: *The Crater Gnomes*

It seemed to Sarka, as he moved down the inner slope of the crater, that the cubes were somehow making sport of him, laughing at him, though no hint of laughter or anything resembling laughter emanated from them.

But, shutting his lips grimly, holding fast to Jaska's hand, he proceeded on, reached the lower portion of the inner slope, where it dropped off into a seeming black abyss, and dropped, keeping to a safe speed because of the fact that both he and Jaska were attired for movement in the air—though their manner of aerial transportation could scarcely be called flying.

The anti-gravitational ovoids simply rendered ineffectual the law of gravity.

Down they dropped, endlessly it seemed, while all about them, growing gradually, a bluish glow began to make itself manifest. Sarka turned and looked at the face of Jaska and noted that it—all her being—was

glowing with this strange radiance.

He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

Looking down now, to what seemed still a vast depth, they could see figures moving, tiny, almost infinitesimal, about a great circular cone, out of the depths of which came that strange bluish column whose outer tip touched the Earth.

Some inner sense warned Sarka not to touch that column, or to permit Jaska to do so. They dropped down beside it, while Sarka, for no reason that he could assign, once more took his ray director in his free hand and held it in readiness. It seemed so tiny and futile—so foolish for two people, one of them a woman—to go into the very heart of an alien world, against an unknown enemy, armed with such a tiny weapon. Two people against unguessed myriads, whose very nature was an enigma, even to Sarka.

Closer now appeared the bottom of the crater, whose floor seemed to be covered with something that looked like blue sand, or rock. From this bluish

substance the glow which bathed the two Earthlings seemed to emanate.

The funnel of the crater had now given away to the immensities of space, in all directions, and the cold of outside was being replaced by a warmth which promised soon to be even uncomfortable.

Then, without a jar, the two landed at the bottom of the crater, side by side, close enough almost to that great cone to touch it. Out of the cone came that bluish column, to shoot up through the funnel down which the two had lightly dropped ... and the motion of the—whatever it was—was accompanied by a muted moaning sound, like that of a distant waterfall.

They paused there, in amazement, taking stock of their surroundings. Huge tunnels, whose roofs were lost to invisibility in the bluish haze, whose extremities could only be guessed at, reached off in all directions. As far as the two could tell they were the only living souls within the crater, though both knew better.

Sarka had the feeling, and he knew Jaska shared it with him, that innumerable eyes were studying them, innumerable intellects were cataloguing them. And somehow he sensed the presence, somewhere near, of the traitor Dalis!

Then that discordant sound again, breaking so swiftly that it fell upon the eardrums of Sarka and Jaska like the crack of doom. Out of the many tunnels, from all directions, came hordes of beings which would have made the nightmares of Paracelsus—first of the scientists of Earth—pale to insignificance.

Paracelsus had written and illustrated his nightmares. Had hinted of strange acts of flesh-grafting—as the grafting of legs on the head of man. He had spoken, and written about, ghastly operations, from which men came forth as part men, part spiders; part men, part scorpions, dogs, cats, crocodiles....

Sarka thought, as his mind went back to those ancient books of his people in which still remained vestiges of the theories of Paracelsus, that somehow, in his dreams, Paracelsus must have visited the craters of

the Moon.

These people ... if they could be called people....

They had heads like the heads of Earthlings, broad-domed of brow, lacking eyelashes or lids, so that their eyes were perpetually staring. They possessed no bodies at all, and their legs, thin and attenuated to the size of the wrists of average men, seemed to support the massive heads with difficulty!

From all directions they came, looking like spiders such as Sarka the First had described to Sarka, when Sarka had been a mere boy. They came on the floor, out of the tunnels; they dropped from the walls of the tunnels, and down from the invisible roofs, landing on the floor as lightly as feathers—and all converged on Jaska and Sarka.

They seemed to have no fear at all, but only a vast curiosity.

Closer and closer they came.

Jaska's grip tightened on the hand of Sarka, for one of the creatures, with a spiderish leap, had jumped upon her, fastening its legs in her tight-fitting costume, where he hung, his face within an inch or two of hers. His lidless eyes, unblinking, stared deeply into hers.

Others jumped up beside the first, and still others clambered over Sarka, until both Sarka and Jaska were covered by them like beetles attacked by ants. But these strange gnomelike creatures, who did not fear these strangers, apparently meant them no harm.

Then, after a thorough scrutiny, began the strangest talking Sarka had ever heard. The crater-Gnomes seemed to communicate by making strange clucking sounds with their tongues, sounds which were unmusical and discordant, and which, as the Gnomes who stood back from them, because already the two were covered until no more could cling to Jaska or Sarka, joined in the speech—mounted in the cavern to a vast crescendo of sound.

Sarka knew then that this was the sound which had come out to them while they crouched at the crater

rim. These were people of the Moon: but if these were Moon-men, what, or who, were those gleaming cubes?

::Stand perfectly still,:: Sarka mentally admonished Jaska, ::they apparently mean us no harm!::

He had not spoken aloud, had not allowed his thought to reach any but Jaska; yet instantly the discordant clucking ceased, and the Gnomes were quiet, as though they politely listened to someone who had interrupted them, yet whose interruption they resented, or were curious about.

Wondering how the creature would regard his action, Sarka reached forth and plucked away the first Gnome which had jumped upon Jaska, and placed him gently on the ground. The thing merely stared at Sarka with his lidless eyes, as though wondering at Sarka's meaning. Then his lips, which were triangular, rather than straight as those of Earthlings, began again that strange clucking.

Immediately the Gnomes which clung to Jaska and

Sarka dropped away, and scuttled into the midst of the myriads that stood and watched. They did not understand the speech of these Earthlings, but they were unusually clever in comprehending the meaning of gestures.

::Hold fast to me, Jaska,:: thought Sarka toward her—and wondered anew as the Gnomes instantly ceased their clucking sounds—::for I am going to try an experiment.::

Holding her hand still, he turned and strode straight toward the huge cone out of which rose the bluish column.

Instantly the Gnomes broke into a frightful clucking of tongues, a sound that mounted to ear-drum-breaking intensity, and in a trice, climbing over one another to get into position, they moved in between Sarka and the cone. So eager were they to bar his further progress that they stood atop one another, until the depth of them was as tall as Sarka standing upright.

Yet, though they plainly said to Sarka: "You must not

approach the cone," they did not seem to be angry with their visitors, but only curious. Sarka looked at Jaska, noted how wanly she smiled.

Then he turned, and headed for the nearest of the monster tunnels.

Instantly he detected a surprising eagerness in the renewed clucking of tongues, while the Gnomes raced ahead, behind, all about the two, capering like pet animals, showing these strangers the way into the tunnel.

As they entered it, Sarka tried to discover whence came the bluish glow. The floor seemed to be of bluish sandstone, though its color, too, might have been caused by the glow. It was warm, too, so warm that perspiration was breaking out on the cheeks of Sarka.

Whence came the glow? Apparently from the very walls of the tunnel, or its roof; but surely from somewhere, surely from some secret place, whence it was diffused all over.

::And Jaska,:: said Sarka, ::the Moon, according to my father's researches, is literally honeycombed with craters like this one!::

Again, as he thought, that strange, sudden cessation of the clucking of the Gnomes. Whither were they leading them? It was plain to be seen that the Gnomes were heading for some destination, almost herding Sarka and Jaska toward it. Capering creatures, who behaved witlessly, yet were far from witless. If Sarka were not sadly mistaken, these were Moon-men—and women, too, perhaps, since he could not tell the sex of them—and those gleaming cubes were their outer guards, perhaps slaves.

If the cubes were really of metal—they had felt warm to Sarka's touch—then these Moon-men had gone further in science than Earthlings, as they had imbued at least some metals, or stones, with intelligence sufficiently advanced for them to perform actions independently of their masters' wills.

Sarka, too, was remembering another thing: that he had touched one of these Gnomes, to remove it from

Jaska—and had felt a distinct shock that was patently electrical!

The bluish glow was increasing, becoming more soft and mellow, shading gradually into golden, as they advanced—shading still as they preceded until it was almost white, almost blinding, in its radiance.

Then, of a sudden, the clucking of the Gnomes ended, and the creatures ceased their capering, fell into something that might have been an ordered military formation, and with Jaska and Sarka in the midst of them, moved straight toward a broad expanse of the tunnel wall, in the face of which appeared three long lines, deeply cut in the shape of a triangle.

The Gnome who had first leaped upon Jaska advanced to the wall, paused with his face almost against the lower line of the triangle, and remained there, intently staring, while the other Gnomes remained mute and unmoving.

Stronger and stronger appeared the blinding light. Slowly the inner portion of the triangle began to give

inward, like a door. And out of the opening came that blinding radiance.

As the triangular door stood entirely open, Sarka and Jaska stood in thunderstruck silence, staring like people bereft of their senses. For there, standing in the opening, the now white radiance itself a mantle to cover her, was a woman, unclothed save for the radiance, who might have been of the Earth, save that she was more beautiful than any woman of Earth.

Beside her the radiant beauty of Jaska paled, became wan and sickly.

But Sarka noted immediately her eyes, whose depths bewildered, amazed him. For in them he could see no expression, no feeling, but only abysmal cruelty. That she was Sarka's master, and Jaska's master, and master of all these Gnomes, became instantly apparent for telepathically she addressed Sarka.

::I am busy now. The Moon-people will hold you prisoners in the Place of the Blue light, until I am ready to give you to the Cone!::

Chapter 15: *The Place of the Blue Light*

So the Gnomes were Moon-people, masters of the Moon cubes! And people and cubes were ruled by a woman who resembled a woman of Earth!

The Gnomes took them back the way they had come.

Where, Sarka wondered, were the people of the Gens of Dalis? And where was Dalis himself! Sarka was sure that, in those first discords which had come out of the crater, he had heard at least a hint of the laughter of Dalis.

And this woman clothed in radiance—who was she? And what? That she was a creature of the Moon, and yet resembled in all ways a woman of Earth, save that she was more beautiful than any woman Sarka had ever seen, seemed almost impossible to believe. Yet he had seen her. So had Jaska, and as Sarka and Jaska, with the capering Gnomes still about them, were led away to a fate at which they could only guess, Sarka wondered at Jaska's silence and at the strange lack of expression on her face.

He pressed her hand, but somehow she failed to return the pressure, mystifying more than ever. This sudden coldness was not like Jaska.

Back they went through the vast cavern where the cone of the bluish column still moaned and murmured. Sarka moved as close to the cone as the Gnomes would permit, and peered up along the mighty length of the column. At its tip was still the Earth, like a star viewed from the bottom of a deep well.

Smaller, too, it seemed, which proved that Sarka's breaking of the blue column had been but momentary, that the column had almost instantly regained its contact with the Earth. What was its source, what the composition of the column?

At the moment there could be no answer to the question. Now the Gnomes were escorting them into another tunnel, whose glow was even bluer than that which the two had experienced in the other tunnels. And the deeper they penetrated, the more distant from the cavern of the Cone, the deeper in color

became that light.

Finally the Gnome who had mentally asked permission of the Radiant Woman to show her Jaska and Sarka passed before another expanse of wall, identical in appearance with that of the wall of the triangle from which the Radiant Woman had appeared.

This time the Gnome managed ingress by a strange clucking sound, with his triangular lips held close to the base-line of the triangle.

Now the door swung open; but the radiance which now came out was not clear white, as in the case of the outer door, but deeply, coldly blue. For the first time the Gnomes used force with their prisoners, thus proving to them that they were indeed prisoners. Their tiny feet caught at Sarka and at Jaska, and forced them through the door, which swung shut behind them.

Sarka looked at Jaska who, in this strange new light, had taken on the color of indigo, and smiled at her.

She did not return his smile, but her eyes looked deeply, somewhat sorrowfully, into his. As though she asked him a question he could not understand, to which he could therefore give no answer.

Sarka was now conscious of the fact that the heat of their prison-house—whose character they did not as yet know—was becoming almost unbearable. They were alone, too, for the Gnomes had not entered the door of triangle. Sarka partially removed his life mask, and testing the atmosphere of the place, found it capable of being breathed without the mask. He signalled mentally to Jaska to remove her mask, and when the girl had done so he took her in his arms and kissed her on the lips.

She accepted his caress, but did not return it, and her eyes still peered deeply into his.

::Well, beloved,:: he said. ::I am terribly sorry. But I did not want you to come because I was afraid that something of this sort would happen.::

She did not answer.

::What is it, Jaska?:: he said at last.

::What did you think of that woman?:: she asked softly.

::Beautiful!:: he said enthusiastically. ::Fearfully beautiful! But did you see her eyes? She had no more mercy in her heart than if she were made of stone! And she hated us both the moment she saw us!::

::And you, Sarka—did you hate her, too?::

Sarka stared at her, not comprehending.

::I feel,:: he said, ::that if we are ever to escape her, we must kill her, or render her incapable of retaining us!::

Then, of her own accord, Jaska placed her arms around Sarka, and gave him her lips. Her new behavior was as incomprehensible to Sarka as her former enigmatic expression had been. Wise in the ways of science was Sarka, but he knew nothing of women!

Now hand in hand again, they began a survey of their prison house. The bluish glow was unbearable to the eyes, and tears came unbidden and ran down the cheeks of the prisoners. In a minute or two, perspiration was literally bathing the bodies of the two. After a questioning exchange of glances, Sarka swiftly divested himself of his costume, stripping down to the gray toga of Earth's manhood. With a shrug, Jaska removed her clothing to her own toga, and the two suits Sarka carried under his arm.

They started ahead, exploring, then sprang back with a cry of fright. Sarka did not know whether it was Jaska or himself who had cried out; for just as they moved forward, a rent opened in the floor at their feet, and their eyes for a moment—they could stand no longer—peered into a bluely flaming abyss which, save for the color, reminded Sarka of the word pictures of Hell he had read in Earth's books of antiquity!

As the two stepped back, the rent in the floor closed instantly. Sarka had noted where the end of it had been, and started to detour, his eyes on the floor.

Over to his left the blue glowing wall reached up to invisible immensity. But as he would have passed along the wall, the rent opened again, effectually barring his way.

Beyond the rent he could see a vast continuation of the cavern, and he felt that, could they only pass the rent, they might reach a place where the heat was not so unbearable, and they could stay and talk in comfort.

Releasing Jaska, he stepped back and prepared to leap the spot where the rent had been. High he jumped, and far, surprised at the length of his own leap. He landed lightly, far beyond the area where the rent had been, and even as he landed, a rent opened again at his feet, thus effectually barring further progress!

::It could just as easily,:: he told himself, ::have opened under my feet, and dropped me into the abyss!::

From behind him came the sudden sound of

screaming. He whirled to look back, to see Jaska standing there, arms outstretched toward him, her eyes wide with fear and horror, and as he stood watching, she raced to him, unmindful of abysses that might open under her feet, and flung herself into his arms.

::Come back!:: she moaned. ::Come back! Don't you see? *They* don't wish you to explore further! We are in their power, and must simply await their pleasure, whoever or whatever they are! They see all we do!::

So they turned back, and stood against the door which held them prisoners; and the heat of the place seemed to enter into them, to gnaw at their very vitals. After a time Sarka found himself almost tearing at his throat, fighting for breath.

Gasping, the tears bathing their cheeks until even their tears and their perspiration would flow no more, they huddled now just inside the massive stone door, arms about each other, and almost prayed for death. Sarka at least prayed for death for both of them; but Jaska prayed for a way of deliverance, prayed that

herself and Sarka might somehow win free, and be together again.

Sarka, who knew little of women, marveled at the grandeur of her courage, and wondered that he really knew this radiant woman so little. He compared her in his mind with the unclothed woman who had ordered them here as prisoners, and it came to him that Jaska was all perfection, all tender womanhood, while the Radiant Woman was a monster, without soul or compassion—a creature of horror who mocked God with her outward seeming of perfection.

Jaska read his thoughts, and smiled wanly to herself, and Sarka wondered how, suffering as he knew she must be suffering, she could find the courage to smile.

Then, for a time, the two became comatose, mastered by the blue heat, and in dreamlike imaginings wandered in strange fields which could only, to these two, have been racial memories, since neither had ever seen such fields. There were cool streams, all a-murmur, and breezes which cooled their sun-tanned cheeks. Water touched their tongues, and cooled their

whole bodies as they gratefully imbibed it.

In their wanderings, in which Sarka was a faun and Jaska a nymph, they talked together in a language which only these two comprehended—a language which dealt in figures of speech, a language which depended upon handclasps for periods, glances of the eyes for commas, and the singing of their hearts for complete understanding.

Then a cool breeze, cool by comparison, caressed their pain-distorted cheeks, and the Gnomes came in, found them lying there, and clucked endlessly as though wondering what to do with them.

From hand to tiny hand, their feet serving as hands, the Gnomes passed garments—garments of the Gens of Dalis, and clothed again the two whom the Place of the Blue Light had all but slain. Of that ghastly experiment Sarka retained but one real memory....

That bluish light, in the midst of the abyss, shifting and swaying like blue serpents swimming in Hades ... that bluish light of the Cone, which he had broken up

for a brief moment by the use of his ray director. Was this bluish light in the abyss the source of the light in the Cone? If one were to destroy it at its source....

The two regained consciousness completely as the triangular door closed behind Sarka and Jaska and the Gnomes, and they were taken into the refreshing coolness of the tunnel, led back again in the direction of the room where they had seen the Radiant Woman. Both Jaska and Sarka noticed that they were clothed in new clothing, and a shy blush tinged the cheeks of Jaska as her eyes met those of Sarka.

This time they entered the vast chamber of radiance behind the first triangular door, and were forced to their knees to do obeisance to the Radiant Woman, who sat on a gleaming yellow stone for dais! The guards who forced Sarka and Jaska to their knees, were clothed in the green of the Gens of Dalis, and Dalis himself, his face stern, but bearing no sign of recognition of these two, stood at the right hand of the Radiant Woman!

::You come to us as spies,:: the thought of the Radiant

Woman impinged upon the brains of Sarka and of Jaska, ::and as spies you should be given to the Cone. But if you swear eternal allegiance to me, to obey me in all things, to forego your allegiance to Earth, your lives will be spared! What say you?::

Boldly Sarka stared into the almost opaque eyes of the woman. Then his glance went to the face of Dalis.

"What," he asked boldly, in the language of Earth, "does the traitor Dalis say?"

"I have sworn allegiance to Luar, who addresses you, and am her ally in all things! I have but one addition to make to what she says: Jaska belongs to me!"

The sudden leering grin of Dalis was hideous.

Sarka peered at Jaska, framing his answer. But Jaska spoke first.

"For myself, O Dalis," she said swiftly, "I can answer in but one way. Return me to the Place of the Blue Light, and forget me there!"

Sarka smiled, while his heart leaped with joy.

::And I, O Luar,:: he said mentally to the Radiant Woman, ::prefer death with Jaska, at the Place of the Blue Light, than life as a traitor to the world of my nativity!::

Instantly Luar began the clucking sound which was the language of the Gnomes, at the same time allowing her thoughts as she spoke to impress themselves upon the brains of the prisoners.

::Take them away! Take them to the Cavern of the Cone, and when they have suffered as much as such inferior beings are capable of suffering, thrust them into the base of the Cone!::

Chapter 16: *Cavern of the Cone*

The Gnomes had been bidden to take the prisoners to the Cavern of the Cone, but to the surprise of Sarka and Jaska, they were taken back to the Place of the Blue Light! This time the Gnomes entered the place with them, closing and securing the door behind them.

But the Place of the Blue Light had changed!

Now it had no floor of blue, as it had had before, but only a corridor perhaps wide enough to allow the passage of four grown men, walking side by side, while the abyss of which the two had got but the merest hint through the opening and closing rents filled all the center of the place!

The Gnomes seemed impervious to the unendurable heat, and these, moving together, one behind the other, one beside the other, one atop the other, formed a living wall between Sarka and Jaska and the rim of the flaming blue abyss, to protect them from the heat.

Yet through the bodies of this living wall of Gnomes, a wall which was higher than the heads of Sarka and Jaska, the heat forced its way to the prisoners, and burned them anew with its agony.

To what dread rendezvous were they going? Where, save for the few guards at the house of Luar, were the people of the Gens of Dalis? Sarka felt, somehow, that the answers to all these questions would soon be made manifest, and a feeling of exaltation he could not explain was possessing him as he advanced. Around the corridor, whose one side was the wall reaching up to invisibility, whose other side dropped off into the abyss, the Gnomes herded the prisoners.

The leader of the Gnomes was again the Gnome who had first leaped upon Jaska to examine her curiously. Now, watching the lidless eyes of this being, Sarka fancied he could detect a hint of some expression. The Gnome was excited at some prospect, some climax which they were approaching. What? On and on they moved. The blue flames from the abyss, roaring in a way that neither of the prisoners had ever experienced, reached upward in searing tongues

toward the invisible roof of this place.

Then, when they had progressed far from the door of entry, Sarka gasped at a new manifestation. Out of the abyss, some distance ahead, came a gleaming thing, something that had apparently evolved itself out of the flames of the abyss. Blue of color it was, because of the flames from the pit; but Sarka recognized it with a start which he could not suppress nor understand.

It was one of those cubes, such as he and Jaska had seen at the lip of the Moon-crater! As they approached, guided by the Gnomes, other cubes appeared out of the abyss, others in numbers swiftly augmented, until a veritable battalion of them had marshalled itself, there at the lip of the abyss.

Straight toward these cubes the Gnomes led Sarka and Jaska, and when they had reached the center of the group, they halted, forming a circle, still a wall to mask the prisoners from the heat of the abyss. The leader of the Gnomes stopped with his face, his lidless eyes, close to one of the cubes.

For a moment he paused thus, and Sarka felt sure that somehow the Gnome was holding thought converse with the cube; but, try as he might, he could find no meaning in the weird conversation for himself. It was oddly like listening to a conversation in a code beyond his knowledge.

Then the Gnome turned back to Sarka and Jaska. By a pressure of tiny feet, he tried to indicate that Sarka and Jaska should unclasp their hands. But they only clung the tighter, and now threw their arms about each other.

The Gnome desisted, much to the joy of the lovers, while Sarka studied the cubes, wondering what their mission was with Jaska and himself.

Slowly, together, the cubes began to lose their bluish glow, their cube shape—to vanish utterly.

In a trice, still locked in each other's arms, Sarka and Jaska saw the Gnomes through what appeared to be an even bluer haze. Besides, the heat of the abyss no longer tortured them, and their bodies were cooling

in a way that was unbelievably refreshing.

"What is it, beloved?" whispered Jaska. "What is it?"

Sarka stared at the Gnomes, now in retreat, capering as they had first capered when the two had fallen into their hands, toward the door by which all had entered. Mystified, Sarka put forth his hand. It came in contact with something solid, and oddly warm, which stirred an instantly responsive chord in the brain of Sarka.

This feeling was the same as he experienced when he had lifted those cubes and hurled them into the crater—where they had dissolved in falling, and instantly reappeared, each under its own Aircar!

::Jaska!:: he explained. ::Jaska! The cubes have dissolved themselves, and have reformed in the shape of a globe, as a protective covering about us, to protect us from the heat of the abyss! Apparently we are not to be killed at once! These cubes are slaves of the Gnomes, of whom Luar is ruler!::

They were indeed locked inside a globe, a globe whose integral parts were the cubes of their acquaintance; and the atmosphere of the interior was not uncomfortable, but otherwise. Sarka and Jaska were feeling normal for the first time since they had landed on the Moon. But what was the meaning of this strange imprisonment?

They were soon to know!

For the globe which enclosed them, moved to the edge of the flaming abyss, and dropped into the bluish glow! It did not drop heavily, like a falling object on Earth, but rather floated downward, right into the heart of the flames. At this new manifestation of the strangeness of science on the Moon, Sarka was at once all scientist himself, striving to find adequate answers for things which, from cause to effect, were entirely new to him. With Jaska still clasped close against him, he seated himself in the base of the globe and studied the area through which they were passing.

Blue flames which seemed to be born somewhere, an

infinite distance below them; blue flames which he knew to be the element that, shot outward from the great cone, had forced the Moon away from the Earth.

No sound of the roaring flames came through the globe, but every movement of them was visible.

Sarka turned and peered through the bottom of the globe; but all he could see below were the flames, a molten indigo lake of them. Now, as they floated downward, the glow was giving away to lighter blue, to white, almost pure white, like the radiance which covered Luar like a mantle.

Sarka felt himself on the eve of vast important discoveries, and the scientist in him made him, for the moment, almost forget the woman at his side. Jaska, unbothered about anything, now that Sarka was at her side, regarded his expression of deep concentration with a tolerant smile.

Whiter now was the light, and faster fell the globe which held the two.

The color of the globe, now fallen below the area of blue, had taken on, chameleonlike, the color of the white flames that bathed it.

Then, apparently right in the center of a lake of white flames, though Sarka could see no solid place on which the globe had landed, the globe came to rest.

Now everything was plain to see, and Sarka studied his surroundings with new interest. He felt a mounting sensation of scalp-prickling horror.

For, scattered throughout the lake of white flames, in all directions, as far as the eye could reach—standing alone, suffering untold agonies, from the expressions on their faces—were people of the Gens of Dalis!

No longer were they clothed in green and wearing on breast and back the yellow stars of their Gens. Now they were nude as they had come into the world and standing there, each was holding out hands in horror, to hold back myriads of the Gnomes, who would have forced them to submerge themselves in the white flames of the lake!

Was the Gens of Dalis being burned alive? What was the meaning of this?

For a moment, filled with horror, Sarka looked away from the spectacle. Off to his right, as he sat, he noted that the flames, which here seemed lighter than they had in high levels, were converging on a single spot toward the side of the lake of white flames—as smoke converges on the base of a chimney leading outward to the air!

He knew as he stared that he was gazing at the spot where the bluish column of the cone was born!

Shaking his head, he turned back to the mighty spectacle of this horrible thing that was being done to the people of the Gens of Dalis.

In his brain there suddenly crashed a thought whose source he could only guess at, whose meaning mystified him more than anything yet experienced. The thought might have emanated from Luar, or from Dalis. But the more he thought of the matter, the more he thought how the phrasing of the thought was

like the telepathy of Sarka the Second, now thousands of miles away, upon the Earth. And this was the thought:

::If they fight the flames, the flames will destroy them! If they go into them freely, voluntarily, they will be rendered immune to heat and to cold, to life and to death. But it is better that they die, for Earth's sake!::

What did it mean?

Sarka thought of the radiant white light which perpetually bathed the person of Luar, and thought that he had somehow been given a hint of its source. If the Gens of Dalis were voluntarily bathed in the lake of white flames, would they become as Luar?

Somehow, though he knew that such bathing would save their lives, the idea filled him anew with horror. He found himself torn between two duties. If he sent his thought out there to the Gens of Dalis, people of Earth, his people, they would be saved, but might forever become allies of the people of the Moon. If Sarka did not tell them, they would die—and there

were millions of them.

But his science had always been a science of Life, and it still was.

::Enter the flames!:: he telepathically bade his people.

::Enter the flames!::

But they did not heed him, and for the first time the atmosphere of the interior of the globe seemed filled with savage, abysmal menace! Plain to Sarka was the meaning of that menace: The cubes which composed this globe were loyal to their masters, the masters to a mistress, Luar, and would countenance no meddling.

Likewise it was impossible, if the Gnomes willed it to the cubes, for Sarka to transmit his thoughts to the Gens of Dalis through the transparent walls of the globe!

They were prisoners, indeed, of Dalis and of Luar!

But could Sarka and Jaska turn their new-found

knowledge to their own use? Sarka was thinking back, back to one of the ancient tomes of his people. It spoke, someplace, of a man who had got trapped in the heart of a seething volcano, where the heat of it had cured him of his illnesses, made him whole again, given him new youth and freshness.

But since the cubes could forestall his transmission of thought, and perhaps could read and understand thoughts, how was he to tell Jaska? How show her that a way of deliverance had been given into their hands, if they only possessed the courage to use it!

Again came that thought, which Sarka recognized as the telepathy of his father:

::Courage! You will win, and Jaska with you!::

Thoughts could come in to them then, but could not go out. Or did it mean that the cubes, or the masters of the cubes, did not care if the prisoners received messages from outside, because they knew themselves capable of frustrating anything the prisoners planned? Perhaps. More than likely that

was it.

But, looking through the bottom of the globe, into the sea of white flames below, Sarka gripped more tightly his ray director, and tried to marshal the forces of his courage. There was surely some way of escape. Some way out of their strange predicament.

Chapter 17: *Casting the Die*

Somehow Sarka believed that this white radiance of the abyss held the secret of the omnipotence of Luar, if omnipotence she possessed. That she did seemed sure, else Dalis would not have been with her. Besides, she had asked Sarka and Jaska to swear allegiance to her. Yes the secret was here, in the heart of the lake of white flames.

It might have been the Moon Fountain of Youth, or of omnipotence. There was no telling, unless Sarka tried an experiment.

His fury at Dalis now knew no bounds, and he was conscious of a desire, too poignant almost to be borne, in some way to circumvent the arch-traitor. For here in the craters of the Moon Dalis was working out a strange amplification of the scheme which he had, centuries before, proposed to Sarka the First. He was subjecting the people of his Gens to the white flames.

If they immersed themselves voluntarily, they became as Luar was, but still subservient to the will of Dalis—

and, in his hands, invincible instruments of war! Dalis had doubtless already been bathed in the flames.

Sarka was not sure, for in the home of Luar the white light was so blinding it would have been impossible to make sure that the white radiance clothed the others with Luar.

"That's it!" said Sarka to himself. "That's it! Dalis and those guards at the dais of Luar have already been subjected to the white flames! The rest who immerse themselves, voluntarily, come forth as Luar and Dalis! Who do not, die. Dalis' manner of forcing the survival of the fittest! His idea of the flood in grandfather's time, only now he causes his selection by flames instead of flood! He believes that only those worthy to survive, and to stand at his back in whatever he conceives to be his need, will guess the secret of the immersion. The others will die!"

What a terrible alternative, when Dalis could as easily have given the secret to all his people! Could have told them how to save themselves! But it was not Dalis' way. Here, in the beginning of what was to become a dual sovereignty of the Moon, Dalis had

already taken thought on the matter of over-population, and was destroying the many that the few—the strongest, most ruthless—might survive! Hundreds of thousands, millions of the Gens of Dalis, stood at the door of life, and did not know how to enter, merely because Dalis withheld the key! And, pausing in terror before the flames, they died, when a step and a plunge would have saved them all!

"If he lives to be a million, if he lives through everlasting life," said Sarka to himself, "and does penance through a thousand reincarnations, Dalis can never atone for this wholesale destruction of humanity! But I ... I wonder!"

Sarka realized the nicety of the revenge of Dalis upon Jaska and himself. Dalis had not given the secret to the prisoners, but by his use of the cubes, he had plunged them into the very heart of the horror, where they could see the suffering of the people of the Gens. Then, when they had seen and appreciated the horror of it all, they would follow the people of the Gens to death!

But Luar had spoken of thrusting them into the base of the Cone!

Then they were not for the flames after all! How could it be done? The globe composed of the cubes had but to transport the prisoners to the base of the Cone, press against that base, and open to let the prisoners free—and in the heart of the white-blue column they would be hurled outward from the Moon, into space. The mere prospect of such horror caused the perspiration to break forth anew on the body of Sarka.

But there might be a way.

"I wonder," he asked himself, "if the Earth people in *this* crater could read my thoughts in spite of their agonies, if I could get my thought to them through the globe? I wonder if, reading my thoughts, they would obey?"

Bit by bit, as parts of a puzzle fall into place, he made his plan, and his heart beat high with excitement. Jaska bent before him to look into his eyes, and he

knew that she was trying to read his face. She knew, wise Jaska, that this brilliant lover of hers was making a plan, and she believed in the sure success of it because it would be *his*!

She smiled at him, her courage high, and waited!

Holding the ray director between his body and that of Jaska, he took a terrible, ghastly chance. Dalis had known the secret sign manual of these two; but would the intelligence of the cubes comprehend it? He must take the chance, slender as it seemed. His free hand began to spell out, with all speed, the mad plan he had conceived.

[The white flames are harmless if one plunges into them voluntarily. Are you afraid to attempt it? No? Then unfasten your clothing, and have it so arranged that you can drop entirely out of it when I give you the signal, which will be a mere widening of the eyes, like this! You understand? We must go nude into the flames, so that they will bathe our whole bodies! But, when you slip out of your clothing, tear your anti-gravitational ovoid from the skull-pan of your helmet,

and hold it in your mouth! Then depend upon me, and have no fear!]

[I have no fear,] replied the fingers of Jaska. [I go to death with you if you wish—or to Life!]

Feeling the menace of the cubes almost gripping at his throat as he got into action, Sarka unfastened his own clothing, ripped the ovoid from his helmet, placed it in his mouth. Then, looking at Jaska, he gave her the signal.

Instantly, at her nod, he brought forth the ray director, pressed it with his fingers, directing its muzzle toward the curve of the globe, swinging it around in a circle, cutting out the bottom of the globe of cubes.

The action must have been one of untold surprise to the cubes which made up the globe, for before anything could be done to stay the hand of Sarka, his ray director had cut out the bottom of the globe, and Jaska and himself, divested now of all clothing, had fallen from the globe.

Unbearable heat slashed and tore at them. They still held hands, and when their feet touched upon something solid, they were gasping with the unbelievable heat; and it was ripping at their lungs like talons of white hot steel. But, pausing not at all, Sarka raced ahead with Jaska, and dived straight into the lake of white flames.

As he dived he directed his thoughts toward the people of the Gens who stood, undecided, dying by slow inches, on their little oases in the lake. And this was the thought, which was a command.

::Plunge into the flames! They will not hurt you!
Plunge in, and obey my commands, O people of the Gens of Dalis! I, Sarka, command that you obey me! Jaska, who commanded you at the will of Dalis, also commands. Gather with Jaska and me at the base of the Cone! You have but to follow the converging of the flames!::

Together the two plunged in, and it seemed all at once as though the fire had gone out of the white flames, for they were cool and soothing to the touch.

Sarka could feel new life being borne in him, could feel himself revitalized, exalted, lifted to the heights. He suddenly experienced the desire to run, and shout his joy for all to hear. But reason held him. Not thus easily would Luar and Dalis, the traitor, give over their designs against these two.

But in the heart of the flames, they dropped down, while they turned their faces toward the base of the Cone, or where they thought the base to be, even as Sarka gave another command to the now invisible people of the Gens of Dalis.

::Hold your ovoids in your mouths and follow! Obey my will!::

They dropped now to what seemed to be cool flagstones, while above them showed an orifice in a wall, into which those tongues of flame were darting. They paused there, side by side, their faces radiant, and looked back the way they had come.

Coming out of the white flames, like battalions on parade, were the people of the Gens of Dalis—scores

and hundreds of them, who had sensed and heeded the mental commands of Sarka. Like genii appearing out of the flames they came, to muster about Sarka and Jaska.

Then, when it seemed that no more were coming, Sarka turned to the base of the Cone, his face high shining with courage and confidence, and stepped straight into the flames that led into the Cone. Beside him came Jaska, while behind him came the people of the Gens of Dalis who dared to do as he had commanded.

They were sucked into the Cone like chips sucked into a whirlpool, and Sarka willed a last command as they entered:

::Quit the column at the lip of the crater, and muster about the Aircars!::

Chapter 18: *The People of Radiance*

The exaltation of Sarka knew no bounds, and looking into the eyes of Jaska, he knew she felt it, too. For her face was shining, and all of her, the wondrous shining brilliance of her, was bathed in the white radiance that mantled Luar. And now, since Jaska too knew that radiance, her beauty was greater even than that of Luar. Sarka thrilled anew at the glory of her.

But even as he stepped into the base of the Cone, he stepped out of the blue column at the lip of the Moon-crater. Swift as light, and swifter, had been the flight upward from the Cavern of the Cone; yet, so keen were his perceptions, he knew when he had passed through the chamber of the bluish glow, into which he and Jaska had first dropped upon arrival.

Now they were on the lip of the crater, and the people of the Gens who had followed him, were slipping out of the blue column, like insects out of a flame, and converging on the Aircars whose tentacles still waved as they had when Sarka had last seen them.

Sarka looked at these people in amazement. To him there was a divinity now about their nudeness which nudity never before had suggested to him. For the people shone, and there was something glorious in those divinely white bodies. They reminded Sarka of his people's books of antiquity, and his childhood's pictures of angels....

But the effect of those white flames!...

There was no explaining it. But Sarka felt that whatever he willed to do he could do; that whatever he wished for was his, whether it was his by right or no. He felt that he could move mountains, with only the aid of his hands. Looking at Jaska he conceived all sorts of new beauty in her, for she was the brightest, to him, of all the people who had passed through the lake of white flames, and been cleansed in their heat.

"No wonder Luar has mastered the Moon!" he cried to Jaska. "For when she was bathed in the white flames, her will is paramount!"

"But how, if she passes the people of the Gens of Dalis

through the flames, will she retain her sovereignty?"

"Because Dalis, too, has passed through, and his will is the will of the Gens! They will obey him, and he has sworn allegiance to Luar, or given some sort of oath of fealty!"

"How strange that but one person on the Moon has been bathed in the white flames!"

"How do we know," Sarka almost whispered it, "that she is, originally, of the Moon? Does she not look too much like our people, to be from another world entirely?"

"I do not know, but ... you mean ... you mean...?"

"I scarcely know; but Dalis would swear allegiance to no man, much less to a woman, unless he knew that man, or woman, far better than he has had opportunity, in a matter of hours only, to know Luar!"

He left it there then, as he strode boldly, with Jaska by his side, to the nearest of the Aircars.

As he approached the car, the gleam cube beneath it seemed to gleam brighter and brighter, as though it echoed the radiance of Sarka. Sarka knew, studying this phenomenon, that he possessed at least a hint of the secret of Luar's omnipotence. There had been a hint before, but by now its meaning was clearer. The white flames, out of the heart of the dying Moon, gave new life, exaltation, not only to the bodies but to the brains of those who passed through it, and with their brains quickened, they possessed such knowledge as men of Earth, for ages, had wished to possess.

Transmutation of metals ... the ability, at will, to endow the higher, more selective metals with intelligence ... and the ability to retain command of the intelligences thus endowed. This explained the power of Luar over the Gnomes, and the power of the Gnomes over the cubes—if they possessed that power.

But the Gnomes, what of them? What were they?

But for a space Sarka must await the answer to that question, for there was little time. Already he knew that the tale of his escape, and his taking over of a

portion of the Gens of Dalis, must have gone like wildfire through all the crater, and from this crater, perhaps, had been transmitted to all the craters of the Moon. All the craters....

That explained to him the absence from the lake of white flames, where he had seen so few, comparatively, of the people of Dalis' Gens. The Moon was honeycombed by such craters, and perhaps the white flame connected them all, made them all one. And Luar commanded all from her dais in this crater Sarka and his people were escaping. The millions of the Gens had been swallowed by the craters of the Moon, at command of Luar, acceded to by Dalis—and all over the Moon the very things which Sarka and Jaska had witnessed were taking place.

Even now, as Sarka raced for the Aircar, and Jaska with him, he could feel a backward pulling that was well-nigh invincible. Someone was willing him to return, willing the Gnomes to pursue him, willing the cubes to refuse obedience to him; but he laughed and stepped to the Aircar, passing by the nearest writhing tentacle as though he knew it possessed no power to

harm him. The tentacle swept aside, and did not try to bar him, while he sent his will crashing against that brightly gleaming cube. "Into the Aircar! We enter with you!"

The cube vanished instantly, and it seemed to Sarka that invisible hands caught at his feet, lifting him up through the trap-door in the belly of the Aircar, up and inside. The door swung shut, and in the forward end of the vast Aircar gleamed the cube which had obeyed his command!

Sarka sent one thought careening outward from the Aircar, a command to the cubes which stood watch beneath the other Aircars.

::Obey the Radiant People, and through them, *me!*::

The light of the cube made the interior of the Aircar as light as day, and Sarka was struck at once with another phenomenon. He could see through the sides of the car in any direction.

And what he saw filled him with a sudden fear!

Out of the crater poured myriads of the Gnomes, and up the sides of it came myriads of the gleaming cubes, all racing toward the cars.

::Get back! Get back!:: he commanded the Gnomes and the cubes.

At the same time he issued his commands to the cube within his own car, and to the cubes which by now were inside the other Aircars, realizing that the cubes themselves were the motive power of the Aircars—and that his will was the will of these individual cubes.

::Fly at once! Fly outward at top speed toward the Earth!::

Instantly, as though a single signal had started all the cars, a dozen Aircars rose majestically from the crater, while Sarka studied the Gnomes and the cubes in turmoil on the rim. He noted then, a strange circumstance: that when he commanded the Gnomes and the pursuing cubes to keep back, they hesitated, dazedly, as though they did not know whether to

advance or to retreat; that when he merely watched them, they came on.

He laughed aloud at this measuring of mental swords with Luar, and with Dalis. For he could sense the conflict very plainly. She commanded the Gnomes and the cubes to attack, he commanded them to retreat, and they remained undecided, like people drawn between two extremities, and uncertain which direction to take.

Upward, side by side now, floated the Aircars of the Moon, and in the forepeak of each, one of the gleaming cubes, like—like anti-gravitational ovoids of the Moon! At the fast falling rim of the crater boiled the Gnomes and the cubes, stirring and tumbling, hampered by their very numbers, as they tried to attack at will of Luar and retreated in confusion at the will of Sarka.

Then there was Jaska beside Sarka, her face fearful, as he pointed off across the gloomy expanse of the Moon.

From all sides, from all directions, from other craters which these two had not even seen, came scores and hundreds of the monster cars!

They had beaten Luar and Dalis but for a moment, then! Now, at her command, the countless other Aircars were coming in to head them off, to fight them back to the surface of the Moon. It would be a race against time, and against death. But of at least a dozen of the Aircars, Sarka was master, and he did not fear the issue. That strange exaltation which the white flames had given him filled him with a confidence that nothing could shake.

He shot a thought at the gleaming cube in the forepeak.

::Faster! Faster! There is no limit to your speed!
Faster! Faster! Even faster!::

Instantly the Moon seemed literally to drop away beneath the dozen Aircars which carried the Radiant People, while the Aircars of Luar and of Dalis fell hopelessly behind.

Sure that they would win in this race now, since he was just beginning to realize the vastness of his power—the all-encompassing, all-mastering power of the human mind and will, which the white flames of the Moon had made almost god-like—Sarka turned his eyes toward a coldly gleaming sphere in the star-spangled heavens ahead.

It was the Earth, and it seemed ringed in flames! From its edges there seemed to shoot long streamers of yellow or golden flames, which broke into sunlike pinwheels of radiance at their tips. Something, there on the precious Earth, was decidedly wrong!

Instantly, telepathically, he sought to gain mental contact with his father.

::Father, we are coming!:: he said, across those countless miles. ::What is happening?::

For a full minute there was no answer. Then it came, feeble, broken, weighted with fear; but it was a thought-message, unmistakably, of Sarka the Second.

::Hurry, son! Hurry! For Dalis has indeed betrayed us! I could not maintain control of the Earth with the Beryls, for some strange catastrophe has destroyed all the Beryls in the area Dalis ruled! The shifting of positions of the Earth and the Moon has so altered the relative effects of the pull of gravity exerted by the planets that Mars has been brought into dangerous proximity to us and is already so close that her ether-lights are playing over us! Surely you must be able to see them! We have received messages, but as yet I have only been partially able to decode them! What I have decoded, however, presages catastrophe—for I am sure that Mars and the Moon are in confederation, and that the Moon-people have deliberately forced us into contact with her ally!::

Cold fear clutched at the throat of Sarka as he caught the message. He decided not to tell Jaska for the moment. He looked to right and left, at the Aircars on either side of him, then issued his commands.

::Faster! Faster! Be prepared to land in the area of the Gens of Cleric, as close as possible to my laboratory!::

A strange, awesome sight, that flight of the rebels of Dalis' Gens from the Moon to the Earth—like gleaming stars across the void. Far out in Space they fled at terrific speed through almost utter darkness, but their light was still blinding, lighting the way.

Chapter 19: *Desolation*

Stranger, more thrilling even than had been the flight of the Earth after being forced out of its orbit, was the flight of those dozen Aircars of the Moon, bearing the rebels of Dalis' Gens back to Earth.

Martian fire-balls and the terrific Moon-cubes wreak tremendous destruction on helpless Earth in the final death struggle of the warring worlds.

For the light which glowed from the bodies of the rebels, which had been given them by their passage through the white flames, was transmitted to the cars themselves, so that they glowed as with an inner radiance of their own—like comets flashing across the night.

Strange alchemy, which Sarka wondered about and, wondering, looked ahead to the time when he should be able, within his laboratory, to analyze the force it embodied, and thus gain new scientific knowledge of untold value to people of the Earth.

As the cars raced across outer darkness, moving at top speed, greater than ever attained before by man, greater than even these mighty cars had traveled, Sarka looked ahead, and wondered about the fearful report his father had just given him.

That there was an alliance between Mars and the Moon seemed almost unbelievable. How had they managed the first contact, the first negotiations leading to the compact between two such alien peoples? Had there been any flights exchanged by the two worlds, surely the scientists of Earth would have known about it. But there had not, though there had been times and times when Sarka had peered closely enough at the surface of both the Moon and of Mars to see the activities, or the results of the activities, of the peoples of the two worlds.

Somehow, however, communication, if Sarka the Second had guessed correctly, had been managed between Mars and the Moon; and now that the Earth was a free flying orb the two were in alliance against it, perhaps for the same reason that the Earth had gone a-voyaging.

Side by side sat Sarka and Jaska, their eager eyes peering through the forward end of the flashing Aircar toward the Earth, growing minute by minute larger. They were able, after some hours, to make out the outlines of what had once been continents, to see the shadows in valleys which had once held the oceans of Earth....

And always, as they stared and literally willed the cubes which piloted and were the motive power of the Aircars to speed and more speed, that marvelous display of interplanetary fireworks which had aroused the concern of Sarka the Second.

What were those lights? Whence did they emanate? Sarka the Second had said that they came from Mars, yet Mars was invisible to those in the speeding Aircars, which argued that it was hidden behind the Earth. There was no way of knowing how close it was to the home of these rebels of Dalis' Gens.

And ever, as they flashed forward, Sarka was recalling that vague hint on the lips of Jaska, to the effect that Luar, for all her sovereignty of the Moon, might be,

nonetheless, a native of the Earth. But....

How? Why? When? There were no answers to any of the questions yet. If she were a native of Earth, how had she reached the Moon? When had she been sent there? Who was she? Her name, Luar, was a strange one, and Sarka studied it for many minutes, rolling the odd syllables of it over his tongue, wondering where, on the Earth, he had heard names, or words, similar to it. This produced no result, until he tried substituting various letters; then, again, adding various letters. When he achieved a certain result at last, he gasped, and his brain was a-whirl.

Luar, by the addition of the letter *n*, between the *u* and the *a*, became Lunar, meaning "of the Moon!" Yet Lunar was unmistakably a word derived from the language of the Earth! It was possible, of course, that this was mere coincidence; but, taken in connection with the suspicions of Jaska, and the incontrovertible fact that Luar resembled people of the Earth, Sarka did not believe in this particular whim of coincidence.

Who was Luar?

His mind went back to the clucking sounds which, among the Gnomes of the Moon, passed for speech. He pondered anew. He shaped his lips, as nearly as possible, to make the clucking sounds he had heard, and discovered that it was very difficult to manage the letter *n*!

The conclusion was inescapable: This woman, Luar, had once been *Lunar*, the *n*, down the centuries, being dropped because difficult for the Gnomes to pronounce.

"Yes, Jaska," he said suddenly, "somewhere on Earth, when we reach it, we may discover the secret of Luar—and know far more about Dalis than we have ever known before!"

Jaska merely smiled her inscrutable smile, and did not answer. By intuition, she already knew. Let Sarka arrive at her conclusion by scientific methods if he desired, and she would simply smile anew.

Sarka thought of the manner in which Jaska and he had been transported to the Moon; of how much Dalis

seemed to know of the secrets of the laboratory of the Sarkas. Might he not have known, two centuries ago, of the Secret Exit Dome, and somehow managed to make use of it in some ghastly experiment? And still the one question remained unanswered: Who was Luar?

The Earth was now so close that details were plainly seen. The Himalayas were out of sight, over the Earth, and by a mental command Sarka managed to change slightly the course of the dozen Aircars. By passing over the curve of the Earth at a high altitude, he hoped also to see from above something of the result of the strange aerial bombardment of which his father had spoken.

In their flight, which had been, to them a flight through the glories of a super-heavenly Universe, they had lost all count of time. Neither Sarka nor Jaska, nor yet the people in those other Aircars, could have told how long they had been flying, when, coming over the curve of the Earth, at an elevation of something like three miles, they were able at last to see into the area which had once housed the Gens of

Dalis.

A gasp of horror escaped the lips of Sarka and of Jaska.

The Gens of Dalis had occupied all the territory northward to the Pole, from a line drawn east and west through the southernmost of what had once been the Hawaiian Islands. Upon this area had struck the strange blue light from the deep Cone of the Moon.

Here, however, the light was invisible, and Sarka flew on in fear that somehow his Aircars would blunder into it, and be destroyed—for that the blue light was an agent of ghastly destruction became instantly apparent.

The dwellings of the Gens of Dalis were broken and smashed into chaotic ruins. Over all the area, and even into the area of the Gens southward of that which had been Dalis, the blind gods of destruction had practically made a clean sweep. Sarka had opportunity to thank God that, at the time the blue

column had struck the Earth, it had struck at the spot which had been almost emptied of people, and realized that blind chance had caused it. For, in order for the Gens of Dalis to be in position to launch their attack against the Moon, he had managed, by manipulating the speed of the Beryls, to bring that area into position directly opposite the Moon.

Had it been otherwise, the blue column might have struck anywhere, and wiped out millions of lives!

"God, Jaska," murmured Sarka. "Look!"

Think of a shoreline, once lined with mighty buildings, after the passage of a tidal wave greater than ever before known to man. The devastation would be indescribable. Multiply that shoreline by the vast area which had housed the Gens of Dalis, and the mental picture is almost too big to grasp. Chaos, catastrophe, approaching an infinity of destruction.

The materials of which the vast buildings, set close together, had been made, had been twisted into grotesque, nightmarish shapes, and the whole fused

into a burned and gleaming mass—which covered half of what had once been a mighty ocean—as though a bomb larger and more devastating than ever imagined of man, a bomb large enough to rock the Earth, had landed in the midst of the area once occupied by the Gens of Dalis!

Yet, Sarka knew, remembering the murmuring of the blue column as it came out of the cone, all this devastation had been caused in almost absolute silence. People could have watched and seen these deserted buildings slowly fuse together, run together as molten metal runs together, like the lava from a volcano of long ago under the ponderous moving to and fro of some invisible, juggernautlike agency.

Sarka shuddered, trying to picture in his mind the massing of the minions of Mars, who thus saw a new country given into their hands—if they could take it. Had the Earth been taken by surprise? Had Sarka the Second been able to prepare for the approaching catastrophe?

::Father,:: he sent his thoughts racing on ahead of

him, ::are those lights which are striking the Earth causing any damage?::

::Only,:: came back the instant answer, ::in that they destroy the courage of the people of the Earth! The people, however, now know that Sarka is returning, and their courage rises again! The flames are merely a hint of what faces us; but the people will rise and follow you wherever you lead!::

So, as they raced across the area of devastation, the face of Sarka became calm again. On a chance, he sent a single sentence of strange meaning to his father.

::The ruler of the Moon is a woman called Luar, which seems a contraction of Lunar!::

For many minutes Sarka the Second made no answer. When it came it startled Sarka to the depths of him, despite the fact that he had expected to be startled.

::There was a woman named Lunar!::

Chapter 20: *Sarka Commands Again*

Ahead, through the storms which still hung tenaciously to the roof of the world, flashed those dozen Aircars of the Moon. Now Sarka could plainly see the dome of his laboratory, and from the depths of him welled up that strange glow which Earthlings recognize as the joy of returning home, than which there is none, save the love for a woman, greater.

Now he could see the effect of those flares, or lights, from Mars, which impinged on the face of the Earth, though he could see no purpose in them, no reason for their being, since they seemed to do no damage at all, though the effect of them was weird in the extreme.

Outer darkness, rent with ripping, roaring storms, flurries of ice, snow and sleet, shot through and through by balls of lambent flames in unguessable numbers. Every lights which struck the surface of the Earth, bounded away and, half a mile or so from the surface again, burst into flaming pin-wheels, like skyrockets of ancient times. Strange lights, causing

weird effects, but producing no damage at all, save to lessen to some extent the courage of Earthlings, because they did not understand these things. And always, down the ages, man had stood most in fear of the Unknown.

Sarka peered off across the heavens where a ball of flame now seemed to be rising over the horizon, and was amazed at the size of this planet. Mars was close to Earth, so close that, had they possessed Aircars like those of the Moon-people—which remained to be seen—they could easily have attacked the Earth.

Across the face of the Earth flashed those fiery will-o'-the-wisps from Mars, without rhyme or reason; yet Sarka knew positively that they possessed some meaning, and that the Earth had been forced thus close to Mars for a purpose. What that purpose was must yet be discovered.

Then, under the Aircars, the laboratory of Sarka.

Down dropped the Aircars to a landing near the laboratory, and to the cubes in the forepeak of each

Sarka sent the mental command:

::Assure yourselves that the Aircars will remain where they are! Muster inside the laboratory, keeping well away from the Master Beryl!::

Then to the people who had returned, clothed in strange radiance, from the Moon with Sarka and with Jaska he spoke:

::Leave the cars and enter my laboratory, where further orders will be given you!::

With Jaska still by his side, Sarka entered the laboratory through the Exit Dome. Inside, clothing was swiftly brought for the rebels, for Sarka and for Jaska. But, even when they were clothed, these people who had come back seemed to glow with an inner radiance which transfigured them.

Sarka the Second, his face drawn and pale, came from the Observatory to meet his son, and the two were clasped in each other's arms for a moment. Sarka the Second, who had looked no older than his

son, seemed to have aged a dozen centuries in the time Sarka had been gone.

But it was not of the threatened attack by Martians that Sarka the Second spoke. He made no statement. He merely asked a question:

"Was Lunar very beautiful, and just a bit unearthly in appearance?"

Sarka started.

"Yes. Beautiful! Wondrously, fearfully beautiful: but I had the feeling that she had no heart or soul, no conscience: that she was somehow—well, bestial!"

A moan of anguish escaped Sarka the Second.

"Dalis again!" he ejaculated. "But much of the fault was mine! Before you were born, we scientists of Earth had already several times realized the necessity of expansion for the children of Earth if they were to continue. Dalis' proposal to my father was discarded, because it involved the wholesale taking of life. But

after the oceans had been obliterated, and the human family still outgrew its bounds, Dalis came to my father and me with still another proposal. It involved a strange, other-worldly young woman whom he called Lunar! Her family—well, nothing was known about her, for her family could not be traced. Wiped out, I presume, in some inter-family quarrel, leaving her alone. Dalis found her, took an interest in her, and the very strangeness of her gave him his idea, which he brought to my father and me.

"His proposal was somewhat like that which you made when we sent the Earth out of its orbit into outer space, save that Dalis' scheme involved no such program. His was simply a proposal to somehow communicate with the Moon by the use of an interplanetary rocket that should carry a human passenger.

"He put the idea up to this girl, Lunar, and she did not seem to care one way or another. Dalis was all wrapped up in his ideas, and gave the girl the name of Lunar, as being symbolical of his plans for her. He coached and trained her against the consummation of

his plan. We knew something, theoretically at least, about the conditions on the Moon, and everything possible was done for her, to make it feasible for her to exist on the Moon. My error was in ever permitting the experiment to be made, since if I had negated the idea. Dalis would have gone no further!

"But I, too, was curious, and Lunar did not care. Well, the rocket was constructed, and shot outward into space by a series of explosions. No word was ever received from Lunar, though it was known that she landed on the Moon!

"I say no word was ever received, yet what you have intimated proves that Dalis has either been in mental communication with her, hoping to induce her to send a force against the Earth, and assist him in mastering the Earth, overthrowing we Sarkas—or has been biding his time against something of the thing we have now accomplished."

This seemed to clear up many things for Sarka, though it piled higher upon his shoulders the weight of his responsibilities. The other-worldliness of Lunar,

called now Luar, explained her mastery of the Gnomes, and through them the cubes, and her knowledge of the omnipotent qualities of the white flames of the Moon's core, which might have been, it came to Sarka in a flash, the source of all life on the Moon in the beginning!

"But father," went on Sarka, "I don't see any sense in this aerial bombardment by Mars!"

"I believe," said Sarka the Second sadly, "that before another ten hours pass we shall know the worst there is to be known: but now, son, instead of going into attack against the Moon, we go into battle against the combined forces of Mars and of the Moon!"

Sarka now took command of the forces of the Earth. Swiftly he turned to the people of the Gens of Dalis who had come back with him.

"You will be divided into eleven equal groups, as nearly as possible. Father, will you please arrange the division? Each group will be attached to the staff of one of the Spokesman of the Gens, so that each

Spokesman will have the benefit of your knowledge with reference to conditions on the Moon. Each group will re-enter its particular Aircar, retaining control of the cube in each case, of course, and will at once repair to his proper station. Telepathy is the mode of communication with the cubes, and you rule them by your will. Each group, when assembled by my father, will choose a leader before quitting this laboratory, and such leader will remain in command of his group, under the overlordship of the Spokesman to whom he reports with his group. You understand!

"Your loyalty is unquestioned. You will consecrate your lives to the welfare of the Gens to which you are going, since you no longer have a Gens of your own!"

Sarka turned to the cubes, which had formed in a line just inside the Exit Dome, and issued a mental command to the cube that had piloted his Aircar from the Moon. The cube faded out instantly, appearing immediately afterward on the table of the vari-colored lights.

"Father," said Sarka, "while I am issuing orders to the

Spokesmen, please see if you can discover the secret of these cubes: how they are actuated, the real extent of their intelligence! The rest of you, with your cubes, depart immediately and report to your new Gens!"

Within ten minutes the divisions had been made, and the Radiant People had entered the Aircars and, outside the laboratory, risen free of the Earth, and turned, each in its proper direction, for the Gens of its assignment. The Sarkas and Jaska watched them go.

There remained but one Aircar, standing outside on half a dozen of those grim tentacles, with two tentacles swinging free, undulating to and fro like serpents. Harnessed electricity actuating the tentacles—cars and tentacles subservient to the cubes.

The Aircars safely on their way, Sarka stepped to the Master Beryl, tuned it down to normal speed, and signalled the Spokesmen of the Gens.

"The Moon and Mars are in alliance against us, and Dalis has allied himself and his Gens with the ruler of

the Moon! I don't know yet what form the attack will take, but know this: that the safety of the world, of all its people, rests in your hands, and that the war into which we are going is potentially more vast than expected when this venture began, and more devastating than the fight with the Aircars of the Moon! Coming to you, in Aircars which we managed to take from the Moon-people, are such of the people of the Gens of Dalis as were able to return with me. Question them, gather all the information you can about them, and through them keep control of the cubes which pilot the Aircars, for in the cubes, I believe, lies the secret of our possible victory in the fight to come!"

Sarka scarcely knew why he had spoken the last sentence. It was as though something deep within him had risen up, commanded him to speak, and deeper yet, far back in his consciousness, was a mental picture of the devastation he had witnessed on his flight above the area that had once housed the Gens of Dalis.

For in that ghastly area, he believed, was embodied

an idea greater than mere wanton destruction, just as there was an idea back of the fiery lights from Mars greater than mere display. Somehow the two were allied, and Sarka believed that, between the blue column, and the fiery lights from Mars, the fate of the world rested.

He could, he believed, by manipulation of the Beryls that yet remained, maneuver the world away from that blue column—which on the Earth was invisible. But to have done so would have thwarted the very purpose for which this mad voyage had been begun. The world had been started on its mad journey into space for the purpose of attacking and colonizing the Moon and Mars.

The Moon had been colonized by the Gens of Dalis, already in potential revolt against the Earth. Mars was next, and by forcing the Earth into close proximity to Mars the people of the Moon had played into the hands of Earth-people—if the people of Earth were capable of carrying out the program of expansion originally proposed by Sarka!

If they were not ... well, Sarka thought somewhat grimly, the resultant cataclysmic war would at least solve the problem of over-population! Inasmuch as the Earth was already committed to whatever might transpire, Sarka believed he should take a philosophic view of the matter!

Sarka turned to an examination of the Master Beryl, and even as he peered into the depths of it, he thought gratefully how nice it was to be home again, in his own laboratory, upon the world of his nativity. He even found it within his heart to feel somewhat sorry for Dalis, and to feel ashamed that he had, even in his heart, mistreated him.

Then he thought, with a tightening of his jaw muscles, of the casual way in which Dalis had destroyed Sarka the First, of his forcing his people to undergo the terrors of the lake of white flames without telling them the simple secret; of his betrayal of the Earth in his swift alliance with Luar; or Luar herself when, as Lunar, a strange waif of Earth, Dalis had sent her out as the first human passenger aboard a rocket to the Moon. All his pity vanished, though he still believed

he had done right in sparing Dalis' life.

Suddenly there came an ominous humming in the Beryl, and simultaneously signals from the vari-colored lights on the table. Sarka whirled to the lights, noting their color, and mentally repeating the names of the Spokesmen who signalled him.

Even before he gave the signal that placed him in position to converse with them, he noted the strange coincidence. The Spokesmen who desired speech with him were tutelary heads of Gens whose borders touched the devastated area where Dalis had but recently been overlord!

An icy chill caressed his spine as he signalled the Spokesmen to speak.

"Yes, Vardee? Prull? Klaser? Cleric?"

The report of each of them was substantially the same, though couched in different words, words freighted heavily with strange terror.

"The devastated area has suddenly broken into movement! Throughout that portion of it visible from my Gens area, the fused mass of debris is bubbling, fermenting, walking into life! An aura of unearthly menace seems to flow outward from this heaving mass, and the whole is assuming a most peculiar radiance—cold gleaming, like distant starshine!"

"Wait!" replied Sarka swiftly. "Wait until the people I have sent you have arrived! Report to me instantly if the movement of the mass is noticeably augmented, and especially so if it seems to be breaking up, or coagulating into any sort of form whatever!"

Then he dimmed the lights, indicating that for the moment there was nothing more to be said. Just then his father, face very gray and very old, entered the room of the Master Beryl from the laboratory.

"Son!" he said. "The crisis is almost upon us! The Martians are coming!"

Chapter 21: *Cubes of Chaos*

Sarka raced into the Observatory, wondering as he ran how the attack of the Martians would manifest itself; but scarcely prepared for the brilliant display which greeted his gaze. Compared to the oncoming flames from Mars, the preceding display of lights had been as nothing. The whole Heavens between the Earth and Mars seemed alight with an unearthly glare, as though the very heart of the sun had burst and hurled part of its flaming mass outward into space.

On it came with unbelievable speed.

But there was no telling, yet, the form of the things which were coming.

"What are they?" whispered Jaska, standing fearlessly at Sarka's side. "Interplanetary cars? Rockets? Balls of fire? Or beings of Mars?"

"I think," said Sarka, after studying the display for a few minutes, "that they are either rockets or fireballs,

perhaps both together! But the Martians cannot consolidate any position on the Earth without coming to handgrips. Since they must know this, we can expect to see the people of Mars themselves when, or soon after, those balls of fire strike the Earth!"

Sarka raced back to the room of the Master Beryl as a strident humming came through to him.

The Spokesmen of the Gens whose borders touched those of the devastated Dalis area, were reporting again, and their voices were high pitched with fear that threatened to break the bounds of sanity.

"The ferment in the devastated area," was the gist of their report, "is assuming myriads of shapes! The fused mass has broken up into isolated masses, and each mass of itself is assuming one of the many forms!"

"What forms?" snapped Sarka. "Quickly!"

"Cubes! Thousands and millions of cubes, and the cubes themselves are forming into larger cubes, some

square, some rectangular! In the midst of these formations are others, mostly columnar, each column consisting of cubes which have coalesced into the larger form from the same small cubes! The columnar formations are topped by globes which emit an ethereal radiance!"

"Listen!" Sarka's voice was vibrant with excitement. "Spokesmen of the Gens, make sure that every individual member of your Gens is fully equipped with flying clothing including belts and ovoids—prepared for an indefinite stay outside on the roof of the world! Get your people out swiftly, keeping them in formation! Keep about you those people of Dalis whom I sent you, and understand before you break contact with your Beryls, that instructions received from these people come from me! In turn, after you have quitted the hives, anything you wish to say to me you can repeat to any one of the glowing people of Dalis!"

The contacts were broken. Sarka stared into the Beryl, glancing swiftly in all directions, to see whether his orders were obeyed.

Out of the myriads of hives were flying the people of all the Gens of Earth, their vast numbers already darkening the roof of the world. The advance fires from Mars seemed to have no effect on them, which Sarka had expected, since the fires seemed to consume nothing they had touched previously.

By millions the people came forth. People dressed in the clothing of this Gens or that, wearing each the insignia of the house of his Spokesman. A brave show. Sarka could see the faces of many, now in light, now in shadow, as the advance fires of Mars lighted them for a moment in passing, then left them in shadow as the bursting balls of fire faded and died.

Strange, too, that the fireballs made no noise. Noiseless flame which rebounded from the surface of the Earth broke in silence, deluging the heavens with shooting stars of great brilliance. Through its display flew the people of the Gens, mustering in flight above flight, each to his own level, under command of the Spokesmen of the Gens.

"How long, father," queried Sarka, "should it take to

empty the Gens areas?"

"The people of Earth have been waiting for word to go into battle since we first sent the people of Dalis against the Moon-men. They still are ready! The dwellings of our people, *all* of them, can be emptied within an hour!"

"I wonder," mused Sarka, "if that is soon enough!"

Perhaps yes, perhaps no. It would be a race, in any case. Sarka divided his attention between the rapidly changing formations of the Moon-cubes in that devastated area and the onrushing charge of the fire-balls from Mars. All were visible to him through the Master Beryl, and from the Observatory, though the Martian fire-balls were now so close that the vanguard of them could even be seen in the Master Beryl, adjusted to view only activities on the surface of the Earth.

Even as the last flights of the Gens of Earth were slipping into the icy air from the roof of the world, the Moon-cubes began their terrifying, appalling attack,

every detail of which could be seen by Sarka from the Master Beryl.

Those columns, composed of cubes, seemed to be the leaders of a vast cube-army. The top of each of them was a gleaming globe whose eery light played over the country immediately surrounding each column, their weird light reflected in the squares, rectangles and globes that other cubes had formed.

Sarka sought swiftly among the columns for the one which might conceivably be in supreme command; but even as he sought the Moon-cubes moved to the attack. The globes on the tops of the columns dimmed their lights, and the squares, rectangles and globes got instantly into terrible motion.

Southward from the position in which they had formed they began to move, the squares and rectangles apparently sliding along the surface of the scarred and broken soil, the globes rolling.

Southward there was the vast wall of the Gens that bordered the devastated area in that direction, and the

cube-army was instantly at full charge toward this, in what Sarka realized was, to be a war of demolition!

Within a minute, Sarka was conscious of a trembling of all the laboratory, and the eyes of Jaska were wide with fear. Swiftly the trembling grew, until sound now was added to the vast, awesome tremor—a vast, roaring crescendo of sound that mounted and mounted as the speed of the cube-army increased. The vanguard of the cube-army struck the dwelling of the Gens southward of that of Dalis, and a mighty, rocketing roar sounded in the Master Beryl, was audible inside the laboratory, even without the aid of the Beryl, at whose surface Sarka stared as a man fascinated, hypnotized.

The cube-army struck the dwellings, disappeared into them as though they had been composed of tissue paper, and continued on! Over the tops of the cube-army toppled the roofs of the dwellings, there, in the midst of the cubes, to be ground to powder, with a sound as of a million avalanches grinding together in some awesome, sun-size valley. Southward, in the wake of the chaotic charge, moved a mighty, gigantic

crevasse, whose sides were the walls of the hives left standing. And still the cube-army moved in, grinding everything it touched to dust, trampling buildings into nothingness, destroying utterly along a front hundreds of miles wide, and as deep as the dwellings of men!

"God!" cried Sarka, his voice so tense that both his father and Jaska heard it above the roaring which shook and rocked the world. "Do you see? The Moon-cubes are destroying the dwelling of our people, and the Martians are to destroy the people who have fled!"

"There must be a way," said Sarka the Second quietly, "to circumvent the cubes! But what? Your will still rules the cubes which piloted you from the Moon?"

"Yes," replied Sarka tersely, "but there are only a dozen of the cubes. What can they do against countless millions of them? Cubes which are Moon-cubes, brought to the Earth in the heart of that blue column, here reformed to create an army which is invincible, because it cannot be slain! It means that

the Moon-people themselves, thousands of miles out of our reach, have but to sit in comfort and watch their cube-slaves destroy us! When they have laid waste the Earth, the Martians have but to finish the fight!"

"If, beloved," said Jaska, "your will commands those twelve cubes, it can also command all the others, for they must be essentially the same. Call on the rebels of Dalis to help you!"

"Then what of the Spokesmen of the Gens, who will be out of contact with me?"

"They must stand on their own feet, must fight their own battle! Call to you the people who have passed through the white flames, and fight with the distant will of Luar and of Dalis for control of the cube-army!"

Again that exaltation, which convinced him he could move mountains with his two hands, coursed through the being of Sarka.

Quietly he answered Jaska.

"I believe you are right," he said softly. "Those of us who have passed through the flames which bore these Moon-cubes will control the cubes, even bend them to our will. The Spokesmen must vanquish the Martians or perish!"

Then he sent his mental commands to the Spokesmen:

::Meet the Martians when they arrive and destroy or drive them back! You live only if you win! We speak no more until victory is ours! People of the Gens of Dalis, go to the areas being devastated by the cubes, taking your cubes and Aircars with you, and I will join you there! *And Jaska with me!::*

Sarka had not himself mentally spoken the last four words. Jaska had thought-spoken them, before he could prevent. He turned upon her, lips shaping a command that she remain behind. But she forestalled him.

"I, too, have been through the white flames! You may have need of all of us!"

Chapter 22: *The Struggle for Mastery*

The people of all the Gens of Earth were now between two fires. The cube-army, ruled by the mistress of the Moon, was laying waste the dwellings of the Gens, destroying them with a speed and surety of which no earthquake, whatever its proportions, would have been capable. The Gens were forced out upon the roof of the world—where, scarcely had they maneuvered into their prearranged formations, than the Martians struck.

Those huge balls of fire, larger even than the Aircars of the Moon, landed in vast and awe-inspiring numbers on the roof of the world—landed easily, with no apparent effort or shock. The light of them made all the world a place of vast radiance, save only that portion which was being destroyed by the cube-army, and this area had a cold, chill radiance of its own.

By groups and organisations the fire-balls of Mars landed, and rested quiescent on the surface of the globe.

Sarka, pausing only long enough in his laboratory to study this strange attack and to discover how it would get under way, was at the same time preparing to go forth to take his own strange part in the defensive action of Earthlings. A vast confidence was in him....

"We will lose millions of people, father," he said softly. "But it will end in our victory, in the most glorious war ever fought on this Earth!"

"That is true, my son!" replied the older man sadly.

For several minutes the vast fire-balls, which seemed to be monster glowing octagons, rested where they had landed, and even then the Gens of the people were closing on them, bringing their ray directors and atom-disintegrators into action.

Then, when the Earthlings would have destroyed the first of the vast fire-balls—and Sarka was noting that the flames which bathed the balls seemed to have no effect whatever on Earthlings, save to outline them in mantles of fire—the fire-balls wakened to new life.

They opened like the halves of peaches falling apart, and out upon the roof of the world poured the first Martians Earth had ever seen!

They were more than twice the size, on the average, of Earth people, and at first glance seemed to resemble them very much, save that their eyes, of which each Martian was possessed of two, were set on the ends of long tentacles which could stretch forth to a length of two feet or more from the eye-sockets and thus be turned in any direction. Each eye was independent of its neighbor, as one could look forward while the other looked backward, or one could look right while the other looked left.

Each Martian possessed two arms on each side of a huge, powerful torso, and legs that were like the bolls of trees, compared to the slender limbs of Earthlings. All the Martians seemed to be dressed in the skins of strange, vari-colored beasts. Each carried in his upper right hand a slender canelike thing some three feet in length, from whose tip there flashed those spurts of flame which had puzzled the Earth people before the actual launching of the attack.

Beyond these weapons, the Martians seemed to possess no weapons of offense at all, nor of defense.

"With our ray directors and atom-disintegrators," said Sarka, moving into the Exit Dome with Jaska, "we can blast them from the face of the Earth!"

But in a moment he realized that he had spoken too hastily.

The nearest fire-ball was, of course, within the area of the Gens of Cleric, and Sarka could here see with his naked eyes all that transpired. The Martian passengers, who moved swiftly away from their fire-ball vehicles, then a flight of the Gens of Cleric descended upon the fireball and its fleeing passengers, with tiny ray directors and atom-disintegrators held to the fore, ready for action.

The Martians, at some distance from their glowing vehicle, paused and formed a ragged line, facing the ball, staring at the descending people of the Gens of Cleric, their tentaclelike eyes waving to and fro, oddly like the tentacles of those Aircars of the Moon.

The flight was hovering above the first fireball. In a second now, at the command of an underling, the ray directors would destroy fire-ball and Martians as thoroughly as though they had never existed at all.

But then a strange thing happened. At that exact moment, timing their actions to fractions of seconds, the Martians raised and pointed their canelike weapons of the spurting flames. They pointed them, however, not at the Earthlings, but at the fire-ball which had brought them to Earth!

Instantly the fire-ball exploded as with the roaring of a hundred mighty volcanoes—and the descending flight of the Gens of Cleric was blasted into countless fragments! Bits of them flew in all directions. Many dropped, the mangled, infinitesimal remains of them, down to the roof of Earth, while many were hurled skyward through formations above them—while those formations, to a height of a full two miles, were broken asunder. Many flights above that first flight were smashed and broken, their individual members hurled in all directions by that one single blast of a single fire-ball.

Individuals who escaped destruction were hurled end over end, upward through other flights higher above, and the whole aggregation of flights which had been concentrated on that first fire-ball was instantly demoralized, while full fifty per cent of its individuals were instantly torn to bits!

Sarka groaned to the depths of him.

"The leader of the Martians, or the master who sent them here, sent them here to win. For if they do not win, they cannot return to Mars, as they will have destroyed their vehicles! Their confidence is superhuman!"

"Have faith in the courage of Earthlings, son!" said Sarka.

It was much to ask, for if one single one of these fire-balls could wreak such havoc with the people of Earth, what would be the destruction by the countless other unexploded fireballs of the Martians?

Still, the Spokesmen themselves must discover a way

to hold their own, to win against the Martians. For Sarka there was greater work to do. He must oppose the wills of Luar and of Dalis in a mighty mental conflict, which would decide whether the homes of men would be saved, or utterly destroyed by the Moon-cubes.

But as he left through the Exit Dome, with Jaska by his side, he shuddered, and was just a little sick inside as he saw the fearful result of that first explosion of a Martian fire-ball! Bits of human wreckage were scattered over the Earth for a great distance in all directions from where the fire-ball had exploded. And at that spot a gigantic crater had been torn in the roof of the world, going down to none knew what depths.

Even the Martians, here only to consolidate positions which had passed the demolition of the Moon-cubes, were capable of demolitions almost as ghastly and complete as those of the cubes!

The sound was incapable of being described, for outside the laboratory the sound of the advance of the Moon-cubes eating into the dwellings of men,

tumbling them down, grinding them to powder, was cataclysmic in its mighty volume. A million express trains crashing head-on into walls of galvanized iron at top speed, simultaneously.

Ear-drum crashing blows as fireballs exploded. The screams and shrieks of maimed and dying Earthlings—of Earthlings unwounded but possessed of abysmal fear....

Then, resolutely, Sarka turned his back on the conflict between the Martians and the people of Earth, and hurtled across the devastated roof of the world toward that area which was feeling the destructive force of the vandal cube-army. As he flew, Jaska keeping pace with him in silence, his mind was busy.

Passage through the white flames of the Moon had given him the key. Those white flames—source of all life on the Moon—rendered almost godlike those whom it bathed ... gave them unbelievable access of mental brilliance ... were the source of that blue column which had forced the Earth outward toward Mars ... were the source, in some way, of the cubes

themselves, as he and Jaska, after passing through them, owed their now near-divinity to the same white flames! Those flames had made Luar mistress of the Moon—therefore of the Gnomes and of the cubes! Therefore, Sarka, having been bathed in the flames, should make himself master of the cubes, if he could out-will the combined determinations of Luar and of Dalis!

His confidence was supreme as he fled through outer darkness toward the eery light which came from the area of demolitions. Looking ahead, he could see tiny glows in the sky, which he knew to be the rebels of Dalis' Gens, flying to keep their rendezvous with him.

Higher mounted his courage and his confidence as he approached the roaring crash, perpetual and always mounting, which showed him where the cube-army was busiest. The sound vibrated the very air, causing the bodies of Sarka to tingle with it, causing them to flutter and shake in their flight with its awesome power. But they did not hold back, flew onward through the gloom, leaving behind them the brightly lighted areas where Gens of Earth battled with the

fireballs of the Martians, moving into the area of the eery glowing of the cubes.

Just as he approached the spot where mighty dwellings were tumbling before the march of the cube-army, he sent a single command toward the cube which had piloted him from the Moon.

::Come to me on the edge of the crevasse nearest the place of most destruction!::

Would the cube now be subservient to his will? He wondered. Everything depended upon that. If not, then he might as well try to stay the forces of a mighty avalanche with his breath, as halt the cube-army with his will.

But strangely enough, the closer he came to the vast area of tumbling dwellings the calmer he became, the more sure that he would win against the cubes.

For when he landed at the lip of the crevasse, across which he could look for a hundred miles, a single cube gleamed brightly almost at his feet, awaiting his

orders!

One by one, by twos, threes, fours, dozens, came the glowing people who had been bathed in the white flames of the Moon's life-source, and as each dropped down beside him, Sarka gave a command.

"Drop down in the midst of the cubes! Make your own cube the rallying point for this vast army of cubes, force the cubes to desist in their mighty destruction, be subservient to your will—and do you, each of you, be subservient to *my* will!"

Away dropped the rebels, glowing points of white flame, dropping down the sides of the crevasse, a mighty, awesome canyon, into the very heart of the activity of the cubes, and from the brain of Sarka, aided by the will of Jaska, went forth a simple command:

::Cease your march of destruction, O Moon-cubes, and harken to the will of Sarka, your master! Draw back from your labors, and muster, not as squares, rectangles and columns, but as individual cubes, in

the area already devastated by you! Rally about the glowing people who have passed through the flames which were your Moon-mother, and wait for orders! Take no further heed of commands from Dalis and Luar!::

Instantly it seemed to Sarka that he had drawn into some invisible vortex which tore at his brain, at his body, at his soul. Inside him a cold voice seemed to say:

::Fool, Sarka! My will is greater than yours!::

But though the force of the will of Luar, whose thought he recognized, tore at him, almost shriveled the soul and brain of him with its might, he continued to send his thought-command out to the Moon-cubes, forcing it through the wall of Luar's will, hurling it like invisible projectiles at the cube-army below.

Exultation possessed him, buoyed him up, gave him greater courage and confidence as the moments passed for even as all his being concentrated on the will-command to the cubes, his senses told him that

the mighty sound of destruction was dying away, fading out.

Slower now the dwellings fell, slower moved the Moon-cubes; and as they slowed in their mighty march through the dwellings of men, so increased the confidence, the power of will, of Sarka and his people—the rebels of the Gens of Dalis.

Then, after an hour, whose mighty mental conflict had bathed Sarka in the perspiration of superhuman effort, the sound of destruction ceased all together, and the dwellings ceased to fall.

A silent shout, like an inborn paean of rejoicing, surged through Sarka as he noted the retreat from the dwellings of men, of the Moon-cubes! Back and back retreated the squares and the rectangles, the columns and the globes, breaking apart as they retreated.

Within fifteen minutes after the destruction had ceased, millions of gleaming cubes winked upward from the bottom of the crevasse—motionless,

quiescent!

Sarka sent forth another thought.

::I am your master, O cubes of the Moon!::

No sound, no movement, answered him.

::Luar and Dalis are no longer able to command you!::

Still no sound or movement of the cubes.

Then, taking a deep breath, as of a swimmer preparing to dive into icy water, Sarka gave a new command.

::Dissolve! Reform on the roof of the world in globes! Roll over the face of the Earth, destroy the fire-balls of Mars—and take prisoners, inside the globes, the attackers from Mars!::

Instantly the gleaming cubes vanished, and darkness as of a mighty pit possessed the crevasse of destruction. Then, at the lip of the great crevasse, the

cubes swept into form—myriads of globes which gleamed with the cold blue brilliance of the Moon!

They had no sooner formed as globes than they were in action again, rolling over the roof of the world as with a rising crescendo of thunder tumbling down the night-black sky. So mighty was their rush that the roof of the world trembled and shook.

Above their charge raced Sarka and Jaska, and with them the rebels of the Gens of Dalis.

All were present when the cubes crashed into the fire-balls from Mars, swept the Martians within themselves as prisoners, held them securely—and continued on, destroying the fire-balls in myriads. Here and there fire-balls exploded on contact, destroying the globes, which immediately reformed again, as though the explosions had not been felt at all.

Sarka had won the allegiance of the Moon-cubes, which had defeated and taken prisoners the Martians, destroying the vehicles in which they might have

returned to Mars. And as realization came, darkness settled over the roof of the world; the last flare of Mars faded and died.

This done, the cubes formed in mighty rows, facing the laboratory of Sarka. His heart beating madly with exultation, Sarka studied them. Then he stepped into the Observatory, gazed away across the space which separated the Earth from the Moon, sent a mental message winging outward.

::Luar! Dalis!::

Faintly, fearfully, came the answer.

::We hear, O Sarka!::

::Shift the blue column away from the Earth! Do not interfere as we return to our orbit about the sun! Obey, or I combine the total knowledge of Mars, the Earth, and the Moon in an attack against you and your Martian ally! Inform your ally that their people will not return, that the Earth has need of them—but that two Gens of Earth will be received by Martians in

perfect amity, and these Gens allowed bidding places on Mars! Unless your ally obeys, the Martians in my hands will be destroyed!::

In an hour the answer came, the snarling thought-answer of Dalis.

::We hear! We obey! But Dalis is never beaten while he lives! His day will come!::

Sarka found himself feeling even a little sorry for sorely beaten Dalis; but his face was grim as he sent another command to the people of Dalis who had passed through the life-source of the Moon.

::Take command of the cubes, and force them to repair the damage which has been done to the dwellings of men—to repair them completely, over all the face of the Earth!::

As the glowing people hurried to obey, Sarka softly asked his father:

"But what shall we do with the Martians?"

Sarka the Second smiled.

"Release them and send them to the lowest level where, guarded by the cubes, they will be set to constructing fireballs like those in which they arrived for the use of Earth if Dalis, or the Martians, ever attack again! And, son...."

"Yes, O my father?" said Sarka softly.

"I have another suggestion for the employment of the cubes! Let them build Aircars to be used by the Gens of Prull and of Klaser, as transportation to Mars whenever you are ready for them to go!"

Sarka smiled boyishly, happily.

"Yes, O my father; and is there anything else?"

"Yes! Take Jaska as your mate! Do you not see that she is waiting for you to speak?"

Sarka turned to Jaska, whose face was glorious in her surrender, and whose lips were parted in a loving

smile—which faded only when Sarka's lips caressed it away.

#37 From An Amber Block, By Tom Curry:

A giant amber block at last gives up its living, ravenous prey.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"These should prove especially valuable and interesting without a doubt, Marable," said the tall, slightly stooped man. He waved a long hand toward the masses of yellow brown which filled the floor of the spacious workrooms, towering almost to the skylights, high above their heads.

"Is that coal in the biggest one with the dark center?" asked an attractive young woman who stood beside the elder of the men.

"I am inclined to believe it will prove to be some sort of black liquid," said Marable, a big man of thirty-five.

There were other people about the immense rooms, the laboratories of the famous Museum of Natural History. Light streamed in from the skylights and windows; fossils of all kinds, some immense in size, were distributed about. Skilled specialists were chipping away at matrices other artists were reconstructing, doing a thousand things necessary to the work.

A hum of low talking, accompanied by the irregular tapping of chisels on stone, came to their ears, though they took no heed of this, since they worked here day after day, and it was but the usual sound of the paleontologists' laboratory.

Marable threw back his blond head. He glanced again toward the dark haired, blue eyed young woman, but when he caught her eye, he looked away and spoke to her father, Professor Young.

"I think that big one will turn out to be the largest

single piece of amber ever mined," he said. "There were many difficulties in getting it out, for the workmen seemed afraid of it, did not want to handle it for some silly reason or other."

Professor Young, curator, was an expert in his line, but young Marable had charge of these particular fossil blocks, the amber being pure because it was mixed with lignite. The particular block which held the interest of the three was a huge yellow brown mass of irregular shape. Vaguely, through the outer shell of impure amber, could be seen the heart of ink. The chunk weighed many tons, and its crate had just been removed by some workmen and was being taken away, piece by piece.

The three gazed at the immense mass, which filled the greater part of one end of the laboratory and towered almost to the skylights. It was a small mountain, compared to the size of the room, and in this case the mountain had come to man.

"Miss Betty, I think we had better begin by drawing a rough sketch of the block," said Marable.

Betty Young, daughter of the curator, nodded. She was working as assistant and secretary to Marable.

"Well—what do you think of them?"

The voice behind them caused them to turn, and they looked into the face of Andrew Leffler, the millionaire paleontologist, whose wealth and interest in the museum had made it possible for the institution to acquire the amber.

Leffler, a keen, quick moving little man, whose chin was decorated with a white Van Dyke beard, was very proud of the new acquisition.

"Everybody is talking about the big one," he continued, putting his hand on Marable's shoulder.

"Orling is coming to see, and many others. As I told you, the workmen who handled it feared the big one. There were rumors about some unknown devil which lay hidden in the inklike substance, caught there like the proverbial fly in the amber. Well, let us hope there is something good in there, something that will make worth while all our effort."

Leffler wandered away, to speak to others who inspected the amber blocks.

"Superstition is curious, isn't it?" said Marable. "How can anyone think that a fossil creature, penned in such a cell for thousands and thousands of years, could do any harm?"

Professor Young shrugged. "It is just as you say. Superstition is not reasonable. These amber blocks were mined in the Manchurian lignite deposits by Chinese workers under Japanese masters. They believe anything, the workers. I remember working once with a crew of them that thought—"

The professor stopped suddenly, for his daughter had uttered a little cry of alarm. He felt her hand upon his arm, and turned toward her.

"What is it, dear?" he asked.

She was pointing toward the biggest amber block, and her eyes were wide open and showed she had seen something, or imagined that she had seen

something, that frightened her.

Professor Young followed the direction of her finger. He saw that she was staring at the black heart of the amber block; but when he looked he could see nothing but the vague, irregular outline of the inky substance.

"What is it, dear?" asked Young again.

"I—I thought I saw it looking out, eyes that stared at us—"

The girl broke off, laughed shortly, and added, "I suppose it was Mr. Leffler's talking. There's nothing there now."

"Probably the Manchurian devil shows itself only to you," said her father jokingly. "Well, be careful, dear. If it takes a notion to jump out at you, call me and I'll exorcise it for you."

Betty blushed and laughed again. She looked at Marable, expecting to see a smile of derision on the

young man's face, but his expression was grave.

The light from above was diminishing; outside sounded the roar of home-going traffic.

"Well, we must go home," said Professor Young.

"There's a hard and interesting day ahead of us tomorrow, and I want to read Orling's new work on matrices before we begin chipping at the amber."

Young turned on his heel and strode toward the locker at the end of the room where he kept his coat and hat. Betty, about to follow him, was aware of a hand on her arm, and she turned to find Marable staring at her.

"I saw them, too," he whispered. "Could it have been just imagination? Was it some refraction of the light?"

The girl paled. "I—I don't know," she replied, in a low voice. "I thought I saw two terrible eyes glaring at me from the inky heart. But when father laughed at me, I was ashamed of myself and thought it was just my fancy."

"The center is liquid, I'm sure," said Marable. "We will find that out soon enough, when we get started."

"Anyway, you must be careful, and so must father," declared the girl.

She looked at the block again, as it towered there above them, as though she expected it to open and the monster of the workers' imagination leap out.

"Come along, Betty," called her father.

She realized then that Marable was holding her hand. She pulled away and went to join her father.

It was slow work, chipping away the matrix. Only a bit at a time could be cut into, for they came upon many insects imbedded in the amber. These small creatures proved intensely interesting to the paleontologists, for some were new to science and had to be carefully preserved for study later on.

Marable and her father labored all day. Betty, aiding them, was obviously nervous. She kept begging her

father to take care, and finally, when he stopped work and asked her what ailed her, she could not tell him.

"Be careful," she said, again and again.

Her father realized that she was afraid of the amber block, and he poked fun at her ceaselessly. Marable said nothing.

"It's getting much softer, now the outside shell is pierced," said Young, late in the day.

"Yes," said Marable, pausing in his work of chipping away a portion of matrix. "Soon we will strike the heart, and then we will find out whether we are right about it being liquid. We must make some preparations for catching it, if it proves to be so."

The light was fading. Outside, it was cold, but the laboratories were well heated by steam. Close by where they worked was a radiator, so that they had been kept warm all day.

Most of the workers in the room were making ready

to leave. Young and Marable, loath to leave such interesting material, put down their chisels last of all. Throughout the day various scientific visitors had interrupted them to inspect the immense amber block, and hear the history of it.

All day, Betty Young had stared fascinatedly at the inky center.

"I think it must have been imagination," she whispered to Marable, when Young had gone to don his coat and hat. "I saw nothing to-day."

"Nor did I," confessed Marable. "But I thought I heard dull scrapings inside the block. My brain tells me I'm an imaginative fool, that nothing could be alive inside there, but just the same, I keep thinking about those eyes we thought we saw. It shows how far the imagination will take one."

"It's getting dark, Betty," said her father. "Better not stay here in the shadows or the devil will get you. I wonder if it will be Chinese or up-to-date American!"

The girl laughed, said good night to Marable, and followed her father from the laboratory. As they crossed the threshold a stout, red-faced man in a gray uniform, a watchman's clock hanging at his side, raised his hat and smiled at the young woman and her father.

"Hello, Rooney," cried Betty.

"How d'ye do, Miss Young! Stayin' late this evenin'?"

"No, we're leaving now, Rooney. Good night."

"G' night, Miss Young. Sleep happy."

"Thanks, Rooney."

The old night watchman was a jolly fellow, and everybody liked him. He was very fond of Betty, and the young woman always passed a pleasant word with him.

Rooney entered the room where the amber blocks were. The girl walked with her father down the long

corridor. She heard Marable's step behind them.

"Wait for me a moment, father," she said.

She went back, smiling at Marable as she passed him, and entered the door, but remained in the portal and called to Rooney, who was down the laboratory.

He came hurrying to her side at her nervous hail.

"What is it, ma'am?" asked Rooney.

"You'll be careful, won't you, Rooney?" she asked in a low voice.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. I'm always careful. Nobody can get in to harm anything while Rooney's about."

"I don't mean that. I want you to be careful yourself, when you're in this room to-night."

"Why, miss, what is there to be wary of? Nothin' but some funny lookin' stones, far as I can see."

The young woman was embarrassed by her own

impalpable fears, and she took leave of Rooney and rejoined her father, determined to overcome them and dismiss them from her mind.

All the way home and during their evening meal and afterwards, Professor Young poked fun at Betty. She took it good-naturedly, and laughed to see her father in such fine humor. Professor Young was a widower, and Betty was housekeeper in their flat; though a maid did the cooking for them and cleaned the rooms, the young woman planned the meals and saw to it that everything was homelike for them.

After a pleasant evening together, reading, and discussing the new additions to the collection, they went to bed.

Betty Young slept fitfully. She was harassed by dreams, dreams of huge eyes that came closer and closer to her, that at last seemed to engulf her.

She awakened finally from a nap, and started up in her bed. The sun was up, but the clock on the bureau said it was only seven o'clock, too early to arise for

the day's work. But then the sound of the telephone bell ringing in the hall caused her to get up and don her slippers and dressing gown and hurry out into the living room.

Before she reached the phone, however, she heard her father's voice answering.

"Hello.... Yes, speaking. Good morning, Smythe."

Smythe was the janitor of the museum. Betty, standing behind her father, wondered what he could want that he should phone so early in the morning. Her father's next words sent a thrill of fright through her heart.

"My God! I—I can't believe it!" cried Young. "Is he dead?"

There was a pause; Betty caught the sound of the excited Smythe's tones through the receiver.

"Who—who is it?" she whispered, clasping her parent's arm.

"I'll be right down, yes."

Young hung up, turned to his daughter. His face was sad, heavily lined with shadows of sorrow.

"Dear, there's been a tragedy at the museum during the night. Poor Rooney has been murdered—at least so they believe—and Smythe, who found him, wants me to come down and see if anything has been stolen. I must go at once. The body is in our laboratory."

"Rooney? Ah, poor fellow."

The girl wept a little, but braced herself to assist her father.

"I'm going with you," she said.

"No, no. You'd better remain here: you can come along later," said Young. "I don't like to have you see such sights, dear. It wouldn't be good for you."

"I'll be all right. I promise you I will."

She insisted and he was forced to let her accompany him to the museum. They hailed a cab and were soon at the door. The elevator took them to the top floor, and swiftly they passed along the corridors and came to the portal which led into the rooms where the amber blocks were.

Smythe greeted them, a worried look on his seamed face. "I've sent for an ambulance, Professor," he said.

Young nodded, brushed past him, and entered the laboratory. In the morning light the amber blocks had taken on a reddish tinge. Now, they seemed to oppress the young woman, who had bravely remained at her father's side as he walked quickly to the base of the biggest block.

A vague shape lay in the shadows between the wall and the largest amber mass. Professor Young bent over the body of Rooney, and felt the pulse.

"He's been dead some time," he said.

She nodded, stricken to the heart by this terrible end

of her old friend Rooney.

"There's nothing we can do for him, now," went on her father soberly. "It looks as though he had been set upon and stabbed time after time by his assailant or assailants, whoever they were."

"How—how pale he is," said Betty. "Poor Rooney was so jolly and red-faced, but his skin is like chalk."

"And he's shrunken, too. It seems there's no blood left in his veins," said her father.

Marable, who had been called also, came in then and aided in the examination. He said good morning to Betty and her father, and then went to bend over Rooney's body.

"See the look of abject terror on his face," Betty heard Marable say to her father as the two examined the corpse. "He must have been very much afraid of whoever killed him."

"They beat him up frightfully," said Young. "There

must have been several of the assassins; it would take more than one man to do such damage."

"Yes. His ribs are crushed in—see, this gash, Professor, would be enough to cause death without any of the other wounds."

Betty Young could not take her eyes from the ghastly sight. She steeled herself to bear it, and prayed for strength that she should not faint and cause her father trouble. She could see the two men examining a large blistered area under the corpse's armpit, in the center of which was a sharp vertical slit which had without doubt punctured the artery near the surface of the axilla. Perhaps it had pierced even to the heart.

"Bloodless," exclaimed Marable, noticing the same thing as her father had spoken of. "It is as if the blood had been pumped out of his body!"

"Yes, I think it has drained out."

"There is not much of a pool here where he lies,

though," said Marable, in a low voice. "See, there are only splotches about, from various cuts he received."

"Maybe he was dragged here from another room," said Young. "When the others come, we will soon know if anything is missing. It seems that men desperate enough to commit such a murder would not leave without trying to get what they came after. Unless, of course, the killing of Rooney frightened them away before they could get their booty."

Smythe approached the group, with a physician in tow. The latter confirmed the facts which Marable and Young had found: that Rooney had been killed by the deep gash near the heart and that most of the blood was drained from the body.

"They seem like the slashes from an extremely sharp and large razor," said the medical man.

Others were coming in to look at Rooney, and the museum was buzzing with activity as various curators, alarmed about the safety of their valuable collections, feverishly examined their charges.

"He punched his clock in here at two A.M.," said Smythe. "I seen that. It's the last time he'll ever do his duty, poor feller."

"Curious odor," said the doctor, sniffing. "It smells like musk, but is fetid. I suppose it's some chemical you use."

"I noticed that, too," said Professor Young. "I don't recognize it, myself."

Marable, who had been looking at the floor between the great block of amber and the body, uttered an exclamation which caused the two men to look up.

"There are wavy lines leading around back of the block," said Marable, in answer to their questions.

The young man disappeared behind the block, and then he called to them excitedly to join him. Betty Young pressed closer, and finally slipped past the corpse and stood by her father.

Before her, she saw a large pool of black liquid. It had

been hidden by the corner of the block, so that they had not noticed it, so busy were they looking at Rooney.

And there was a great cavity in the heart of the amber block. Pieces of the yellow brown mass lay about, as though they had fallen off and allowed the inky substance to escape.

"It's hardened or dried out in the air," said Young.

"It looks like black lacquer," said Betty.

The musky smell was stronger here. The great amber block seemed to stifle them with its size.

"Our chipping and hammering and the heat of the radiator causing it to expand must have forced out the sepia, or whatever it is," said Young. There was a disappointed note in his voice "I had hoped that inside the liquid we would discover a fossil of value," he went on.

Marable looked at Betty Young. They stared at one

another for some seconds, and both knew that the same thought had occurred to the other. The frightful eyes—had they then been but figments of the imagination?

Marable began looking around carefully, here and there. Betty realized what he was doing, and she was frightened. She went to his side. "Oh, be careful," she whispered.

"The giant block has been moved a little," he replied, looking into her pretty face. "Have you noticed that?"

Now that she was told to look, she could see the extremely heavy amber block was no longer in the position it had been in. Marks on the floor showed where it had been dragged or shifted from its original resting place.

Betty Young gasped. What force could be so powerful that it could even budge so many tons? A derrick had been used, and rollers placed under the block when men had moved it.

Reason tried to assert itself. "It—it must have exploded. That would cause it to shift," she said faintly.

Marable shrugged. His examination was interrupted by the arrival of the museum's chemist, sent for by Young. The chemist took a sample of the black liquid for analysis. Reports were coming in from all over the museum, different departments declaring, one after another, that nothing had been disturbed or stolen from their sections.

Betty Young went again to Marable's side. She followed the direction of his eyes, and saw long, clawlike marks on the floor, radiating from the sepia.

"Doctor Marable," she said, "please don't—don't look any longer. Leave this terrible place for the day, anyway, until we see what happens in the next twenty-four hours."

He smiled and shook his head. "I must make a search," he replied. "My brain calls me a fool, but just the same, I'm worried."

"Do you really think ...?"

He nodded, divining her thought. The girl shivered. She felt terror mounting to her heart, and the matter-of-fact attitudes of the others in the great laboratory did not allay her fears.

Rooney's body was removed. The place was cleaned up by workmen, and Marable's search—if that was what his constant roving about the laboratory could be called—ceased for a time. The chemist's report came in. The black liquid was some sort of animal secretion, melonotic probably.

In spite of the fact that they had learned so many facts about the murder, they as yet had not solved the mystery. Who had murdered Rooney, and why? And where had his blood gone to? In no other rooms could be found any traces of a struggle.

"If you won't do anything else, please carry a gun," begged Betty of Marable. "I'm going to try to take father home, right after lunch, if he'll go. He's so stubborn. I can't make him take care. I've got to

watch him and stay beside him."

"Very well," replied Marable. "I'll get a revolver. Not that I think it would be of much use, if I did find—" He broke off, and shrugged his broad shoulders.

Leffler came storming into the room. "What's this I hear?" he cried, approaching Marable. "A watchman killed in the night? Carelessness, man, carelessness! The authorities here are absurd! They hold priceless treasures and allow thieves to enter and wreak their will. You, Marable, what's all this mean?"

Leffler was angry. Marable looked into his red face coolly. "We do the best we can, Mr. Leffler," he said. "It is unlikely that anyone would wish to steal such a thing as that block of amber."

He waved toward the giant mass.

Leffler made a gesture of impatience. "It cost me many thousands of dollars," he cried.

"It is time for lunch, Professor," said Betty.

Marable bowed to Leffler and left the millionaire sputtering away, inspecting the various specimens he had contributed.

The one o'clock gong had struck, and all the workers and investigators were leaving in paleontological laboratories for a bite to eat.

Marable, with Betty, went out last. Leffler was over in one corner of the room, hidden from their sight by a corner of an amber block. They could hear Leffler still uttering complaints about the carelessness of the men in charge of that section of the museum, and Marable smiled at Betty sadly.

"Poor Rooney," he said. "Betty, I feel more or less responsible, in a way."

"No, no," cried the girl. "How could you have foreseen such a thing?"

Marable shook his head. "Those eyes, you know. I should have taken precautions. But I had no idea it could burst from its prison so."

For the first time Marable had definitely mentioned his idea of what had occurred. The girl had understood it all along, from their broken conversation and from the look in the young scientist's eyes.

She sighed deeply. "You will get a revolver before you search further?" she said. "I'm going to. Smythe has one, and I know he'll lend it to me."

"I will," he promised. "You know, Leffler has the same idea we have, I think. That's why he keeps talking about it being our fault. I believe he has seen something, too. His talk about the devil inside the block was half in earnest. I suppose he put it down to imagination, or perhaps he did not think this fossil to be dangerous."

They went out together, and walked toward the restaurant they frequented. Her father was there, lunching with one of the superintendents of the museum. He smiled and waved to Betty.

Everyone, of course, was discussing the killing of

Rooney.

After an hour, during which the two young people spoke little, Marable and Betty Young left the restaurant and started back toward the museum. Her father was still at his table.

They walked up the driveway entrance, and then Marable uttered an exclamation. "Something's wrong," he said.

There was a small crowd of people collected on the steps. The outer doors, instead of being open as usual, were closed and guards stood peering out.

Marable and Betty were admitted, after they had pushed their way to the doors.

"Museum's closed to the public, sir," replied a guard to Marable's question.

"Why?" asked Marable.

"Somethin's happened up in the paleontological

laboratories," answered the guard. "Dunno just what, but orders come to clear the rooms and not let anybody in but members of the staff, sir."

Marable hurried forward. Betty was at his heels. "Please get yourself a gun," she said, clutching his arm and holding him back.

"All right. I'll borrow one from a guard."

He returned to the front doors, and came back, slipping a large pistol into his side pocket.

"I want you to wait here," he said.

"No. I'm going with you."

"Please," he said. "As your superior, I order you to remain downstairs."

The girl shrugged. She allowed him to climb the stairs to the first floor, and then she hurried back in search of Smythe.

Smythe obtained a gun for her, and as she did not wish to wait for the slow elevator, she ran up the steps. Smythe could not tell her definitely what had occurred in the upper laboratory that had caused the museum to be closed for the day.

Her heart beating swiftly, Betty Young hurried up the second flight of stairs to the third floor. A workman, whom the girl recognized as a manual laborer in the paleontological rooms, came running down, passing her in full flight, a look of abject terror on his face.

"What is it?" she cried.

He was so frightened he could not talk logically.

"There was a black fog—I saw a red snake with legs —"

She waited for no more. A pang of fear for the safety of Marable shot through her heart, and she forced herself on to the top floor.

Up there was a haze, faintly black, which filled the corridors. As Betty Young drew closer to the door of

the paleontological laboratories, the mist grew more opaque. It was as though a sooty fog permeated the air, and the girl could see it was pouring from the door of the laboratory in heavy coils. And her nostrils caught the strange odor of fetid musk.

She was greatly frightened; but she gripped the gun and pushed on.

Then to her ears came the sound of a scream, the terrible scream of a mortally wounded man. Instinctively she knew it was not Marable, but she feared for the young professor, and with an answering cry she rushed into the smoky atmosphere of the outer laboratories.

"Walter!" she called.

But evidently he did not hear her, for no reply came. Or was it that something had happened to him?

She paused on the threshold of the big room where were the amber blocks.

About the vast floor space stood the numerous masses of stone and amber, some covered with immense canvas shrouds which made them look like ghost hillocks in the dimness. Betty Young stood, gasping in fright, clutching the pistol in her hand, trying to catch the sounds of men in that chamber of horror.

She heard, then, a faint whimpering, and then noises which she identified in her mind as something being dragged along the marble flooring. A muffled scream, weak, reached her ears, and as she took a step forward, silence came.

She listened longer, but now the sunlight coming through the window to make murky patches in the opaque black fog was her chief sensation.

"Walter!" she called.

"Go back, Betty, go back!"

The mist seemed to muffle voices as well as obscure the vision. She advanced farther into the laboratory, trying to locate Marable. Bravely the girl pushed

toward the biggest amber block. It was here that she felt instinctively that she would find the source of danger.

"Leffler!" she heard Marable say, almost at her elbow, and the young man groaned. The girl came upon him, bending over something on the floor.

She knelt beside him, gripping his arm. Now she could see the outline of Leffler's body at her feet. The wealthy collector was doubled up on the ground, shrivelled as had been Rooney. His feet, moving as though by reflex action, patted the floor from time to time, making a curious clicking sound as the buttons of his gray spats struck the marble.

But it was obvious, even in the murky light, that Leffler was dead, that he had been sucked dry of blood.

Betty Young screamed. She could not help it. The black fog choked her and she gasped for breath. Leaving Marable, she ran toward the windows to throw them open.

The first one she tried was heavy, and she smashed the glass with the butt of the gun. She broke several panes in two of the windows, and the mist rolled out from the laboratory.

She started to return to the side of Marable. He uttered a sudden shout, and she hurried back to where she had left him, stumbling over Leffler's body, recoiling at this touch of death.

Marable was not there, but she could hear him nearby.

Cool air was rushing in from the windows, and gradually the fog was disappearing. Betty Young saw Marable now, standing nearby, staring at the bulk of an amber block which was still covered by its canvas shroud. Though not as large as the prize exhibit, this block of amber was large and filled many yards of space.

"Betty, please go outside and call some of the men," begged Marable.

But he did not look at her, and she caught his fascinated stare. Following the direction of his gaze, the girl saw that a whisp of smoky mist was curling up from under the edge of the canvas cover.

"It is there," whispered Betty.

Marable had a knife which he had picked up from a bench, and with this he began quietly to cut the canvas case of the block, keeping several feet to each side of the spot where the fog showed from beneath the shroud.

Marable cut swiftly and efficiently, though the cloth was heavy and he was forced to climb up several feet on the block to make his work effective. The girl watched, fascinated with horror and curiosity.

To their ears came a curious, sucking sound, and once a vague tentacle form showed from the bottom of the canvas.

At last Marable seized the edge of the cut he had made and, with a violent heave, sent the canvas flap

flying over the big block.

Betty Young screamed. At last she had a sight of the terrible creature which her imagination had painted in loathing and horror. A flash of brilliant scarlet, dabbled with black patches, was her impression of the beast. A head flat and reptilian, long, tubular, with movable nostrils and antennae at the end, framed two eyes which were familiar enough to her, for they were the orbs which had stared from the inside of the amber block. She had dreamed of those eyes.

But the reptile moved like a flash of red light, though she knew its bulk was great; it sprayed forth black mist from the appendages at the end of its nose, and the crumpling of canvas reached her ears as the beast endeavored to conceal itself on the opposite side of the block.

Marable had run to the other side of the mass. The air, rushing in from the windows, had cleared the mist, in spite of the new clouds the creature had emitted, and Betty could see for some feet in either direction now.

She walked, with stiff, frozen muscles, around to join Marable. As she came near to him, she saw him jerking off the entire canvas cover of the block to expose the horrible reptile to the light of day.

And now the two stood staring at the awful sight. The creature had flattened itself into the crevices and irregular surfaces of the block, but it was too large to hide in anything but a huge space. They saw before them its great bulk, bright red skin blotched with black, which rose and fell with the breathing of the reptile. Its long, powerful tail, tapering off from the fat, loathsome body, was curled around the bottom of the block.

"That's where it's been hidden, under the shroud. We've been within a few feet of it every moment we've been at work," said Marable, his voice dry. "There were many hiding places for it, but it chose the best. It came out only when there was comparative quiet, to get its food...."

"We—we must kill it," stammered the girl.

But she could not move. She was looking at the immense, cruel, lidless eyes, which balefully held her as a serpent paralyzes a bird. The tubular nostrils and antennae seemed to be sniffing at them, waving to and fro.

"See the white expanse of cornea, how large it is," whispered Marable. "The pupils are nothing but black slits now." The interest excited by this living fossil was almost enough to stifle the dread of the creature in the man.

But the girl saw the huge flat head and the crinkled tissue of the frilled mouth with its sucker disks.

Suddenly, from the central portion of the sucker-cup mouth issued a long, straight red fang.

The two drew back as the living fossil raised a short clawed leg.

"It has the thick body of an immense python and the clawed legs of a dinosaur," said Marable, speaking as though he were delivering a lecture. The sight,

without doubt, fascinated him as a scientist. He almost forgot the danger.

"Oh, it's horrible," whispered the girl.

She clung to his arm. He went on talking. "It is some sort of terrestrial octopus...."

To the girl, it seemed that the living fossil was endless in length. Coil after coil showed as the ripples passed along its body and the straight fang threatened them with destruction.

"See, it is armored," said Marable. "Betty, no one has ever had such an experience as this, seen such a sight, and lived to tell of it. It must be ravenous with hunger, shut up in its amber cell inside the black fluid. I—"

A sharp, whistling hiss interrupted his speech. The reptile was puffing and swelling, and as it grew in bulk with the intake of the air, its enamel-like scales stood out like bosses on the great body. It spat forth a cloud of black, oily mist, and Marable came to himself

at last.

He raised his revolver and fired at the creature, sending shot after shot from the heavy revolver into the head.

Betty Young screamed as the reptile reared up and made a movement toward them. Marable and the girl retreated swiftly, as the beast thumped to the floor with a thud and started at them, advancing with a queer, crawling movement.

It was between them and the door. Betty thrust her gun into Marable's hands, for his own was empty and he had hurled it at the monster.

"Hurry! Run for your life!" ordered Marable, placing himself between Betty and the reptile.

She would not leave him till he swerved to one side, going dangerously close to the beast and firing into its head. The rush of the flowing body stopped; it turned and pursued him, leaving the girl safe for the moment, but separated from Marable.

Luckily, on the smooth marble it could not get an efficient grip with its clawlike arms. It was clumsy in its gait, and for a time the man eluded it.

Betty Young, looking about for a weapon, calling for help at the top of her lungs, caught sight of a fireman's ax in a glass case on the wall. She ran over, smashed the glass with the small hammer, and took out the heavy ax.

Shot after shot reverberated through the big laboratory as Marable tried to stop the monster. Betty, bravely closing in from the rear, saw Marable leaping from side to side as the brute struck viciously at him time and again.

The creature had been emitting cloud after cloud of black fog, and the atmosphere, in spite of the open windows, was dim in its vicinity. Vaguely Betty heard shouts from the far hall, but all she could do was to call out in return and run toward the horror.

Marable, out of breath, had climbed to the top of an amber block. Betty, close by, saw the reptile rear its

bulk up into the air, until it was high enough to strike the man.

Before it could send forth its death-dealing fang to pin Marable to the block, however, Betty Young brought the ax down on its back with all her strength.

There was a sickening thud as the sharp weapon sunk deep into the fleshy back. She struck again, and the creature fell in folds, like a collapsing spring. It lashed back at her, but she leaped clear as it slashed in agony, thrashing about so that the whole room seemed to rock.

Marable came scrambling down the side of the block to help her. He was breathing hard, and she turned toward him; as Betty looked away, a portion of the scarlet tail hit her in the body and she fell, striking her head on the floor.

Marable reached down, seized the ax, and in a desperate frenzy hacked at the reptile's awful head.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration of Marable attacking the long, dragon-like monster with four legs with an ax, while Betty lies on the ground behind it. The scene is covered in smoke, and the giant block of amber looms in the background. Image description end.]

He leaped in and out like a terrier, sinking the ax deep into the neck and head of the beast. He gave the impression of slashing at heavy rubber, and Betty Young, trying to drag herself away from that

dangerous body, heard his whistling breath.

They were almost hidden from one another now, in the mist which came from the thing's nostrils.

"Help, help!" screamed the girl, mustering her last strength in the despairing cry.

She saw Marable go down, then, as the reptile hit him a glancing blow with its body. When the powerful young fellow did not rise, the girl thought it was all over. The air really became black to her; she fainted and lay still.

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When Betty Young opened her eyes, the air had cleared greatly, and she could see the familiar outlines of the paleontological laboratory and the bulks of the amber blocks. Her father was holding her head in his lap, and was bathing her temples with water.

"Darling," he said, "are you badly hurt?"

"No," she murmured faintly. "I'm—I'm all right. But—but Walter—did it—"

"He's all right," said her father. "The reptile was dying, and could do him no damage. We finished it off."

Then, Marable, covered with blood, which he was trying to wipe from his hands and clothes, came and smiled down at her.

"Well," said Professor Young, "you two have mutilated a marvelous and unique specimen between you."

There were several men examining something nearby. Turning her eyes in their direction, Betty saw they were viewing the remains of the reptile.

Marable helped her to her feet, and stood with one arm about her. Professor Orling, the famous specialist on fossil reptiles, was speaking now, and the others listened.

"I think we will find it to be some sort of missing link

between the dinosaurs and mososaurs. It is surely unbelievable that such a creature should be found alive; but perhaps it can be explained. It is related to the amphibians and was able to live in or out of the water. Now, we have many instances of reptiles such as lizards and toads penned up in solid rock but surviving for hundreds of years. Evidently this great reptile went through the same sort of experience. I would say that there has been some great upheaval of nature, that the reptile was caught in its prison of amber thousands and thousands of years ago.

Through hibernation and perhaps a preservative drug it emitted in the black fluid, this creature has been able to survive its long imprisonment. Naturally, when it was released by the cutting away of part of the amber which penned it in, it burst its cell, ravenous with hunger. The fanglike tooth we see was its main weapon of attack, and it set upon the unfortunate watchman. After knocking him unconscious, its sucker-like fringe glued the mouth near the heart while the fang shot into the arteries and drew forth the body fluids. There is a great deal to be done with this valuable find, gentlemen. I would suggest that—"

Marable grunted. "Oh, hell," he murmured in Betty Young's ear. "To the devil with paleontology, Betty. You saved my life. Come out and let's get married. I love you."

The girl smiled up into his eyes. The scientists close by were listening fascinatedly to Orling's words, and had no time to watch the two young people, for they stared at the reptile's body as the great man went from section to section, lecturing upon one point after another.

"You've forgotten paleontology for a moment, thank goodness," said Betty. "I'm glad."

"Yes, Betty dear. This terrible experience has shaken me, and I realized how much I love you when I saw you in danger. What an awful few minutes! If I had to live them over again, I don't think I could face them."

"Never mind," she murmured. "We are safe, Walter. After all, it's not every woman who is helped by a living fossil to make the man she loves realize he loves her!"

#38 The Terror Of Air-level Six, By Harold Vincent Schoepflin:

From some far reach of leagueless space came a great pillar of flame to lay waste and terrorize the Earth.

Aproximate word count: 16,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was a sweltering evening in mid-August, during that unprecedented heat wave which broke Weather Bureau records in 2011. New York City had simmered under a blazing sun for more than three weeks, and all who were able had deserted the city for spots of lesser torridity. But I was one of those unfortunates who could not leave on account of the pressing urgency of business matters and, there being nothing else to do, kept doggedly at my work until it seemed

that nerves and body must soon give way under the strain. To-night, as I boarded the pneumatic tube, I dropped into the nearest seat and could not even summon the energy to open my newspaper.

For some minutes I sat as in a daze, wishing merely that the journey was over, and that I was on my own front porch out in Rutherford. After awhile I stirred and looked around. Seeing none of my acquaintances in the car, I finally opened the newspaper and was considerably startled by the screaming headlines that confronted me from its usually conservative first page

SECOND COAST TRANSPORT PLANE LOST!

Disaster Like First in Air-Level Six!

No wonder the newsboys had been crying an extra on Broadway! I had given no heed to the import of their shoutings, but this was real news and well worthy of an extra edition. Since the mysterious loss of the SP-61, only four days previously, the facilities of the several air transportation systems were seriously handicapped on account of the shaken confidence of

the general public. It was not surprising that there was widespread reluctance at trusting human lives and valuable merchandise to the mercies of the inexplicable power which had apparently wiped out of existence the SP-61, together with its twenty-eight passengers and the consignment of one-half million dollars in gold. And now the NY-18 had gone the way of the other!

Details were meager. Both ships had failed to reply to the regular ten-minute radio calls from headquarters and had not since been seen or heard from. In both cases the last call had been answered when the ship was proceeding at full speed on its regular course in air-level six. The SF-61 last reported from a position over Mora in New Mexico, and four days of intensive search by thousands of planes had failed to locate ship or passengers. To-day, in the early hours of the morning, the NY-18 reported over Colorado Springs, on the northern route, and then, like the SF-61, dropped out of existence insofar as any attempts at communicating with or locating her were concerned. She, too, carried a heavy consignment of specie,

though only eleven passengers had risked the westward journey.

Someone had dropped into a seat at my side, and I looked up from my reading to meet the solemn eyes of Hartley Jones, a young friend whom I had not seen for several months.

"Why, hello, Hart," I greeted him. "Glad to see you, old man. Where in Sam Hill have you been keeping yourself?"

"Glad to see you, too, Jack," he returned warmly. "Been spending most of my time out at the hangar."

"Oh, that's right. You fellows built a new one at Newark Airport, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Got a great outfit there now, too. Why don't you drop around and see us one of these days?"

"I will, Hart, and I want you to take me up some time. You know I have never been in one of these new ships of yours. But what do you think of this mess?" I

pointed to the black headlines.

He grinned joyously and flipped back the lapel of his coat, displaying a nickeled badge. "George and I are starting out to-night to look around a little," he gloated. "Just been appointed deputy air commissioners; and we got a couple of guns on our newest plane. Air Traffic Bureau thinks there's dirty work afoot. Twelve-motored planes don't disappear without leaving a trace. Anyhow, we've got a job, and we're going to try and find out what's wrong. How'd you like to come along?"

"What?" I replied. "You know darn well I'm too busy. Besides, I'd be no good to you. Just extra load, and not pay load at that. And then, I'm broke—as usual."

Hartley Jones grinned in his engaging way. "You'd be good company," he parried; "and, what's more, I think the trip would do you a lot of good. You look all shot to pieces."

"Forget it," I laughed. "It's just the heat. And I'll have to leave you here, Hart. Drop in and see us, will you?"

The wife was asking for you only yesterday."

"Jack, dear," my wife greeted me at the door of my modest suburban home, "Mr. Preston just called, and he wants you to call him right back."

"Oh, Lord," I groaned, "can't I forget the office for one evening?" Preston was manager of the concern for which I worked.

Nevertheless, though our two fine youngsters were clamoring for their dinner, I made the telephone call at once.

"Makely," came the voice of the boss, when the connection was completed, "I want you to take the night plane for Frisco. Hate to ask you, but it must be done. Townley is sick and someone has to take those Canadian Ex. bonds out to Farnsworth. You're the only one to do it, and after you get there, you can start on that vacation you need. Take a month if you wish."

The thought of Hartley Jones' offer flashed through

my mind. "But have you read of the loss of the NY-18?" I asked Preston.

"I have, Makely. There'll be another hundred a month in your check, too, to make up for the worry of your family. But the government is sending thirty Secret Service men along on the SF-22, which leaves tonight. In addition, there will be a convoy of seven fighting planes, so there is not likely to be a repetition of the previous disasters."

That hundred a month sounded mighty good, for expenses had been mounting rapidly of late. "All right, Mr. Preston," I agreed. "I will be at the airport before midnight. But how about the bonds?"

"I'll drive around after dinner and deliver them to you. And thanks for your willingness, Makely. You'll not be sorry."

My wife had listened intently and, from my words, she knew what to expect. Her face was a tragic mask when I replaced the receiver on its hook, and my heart sank at her expression.

Then there came the ring of the telephone and, for some reason, my pulse raced as I went to the hall to answer it. Hartley Jones' cheerful voice greeted me and he was positively gleeful when I told him of my projected trip.

"Hooray!" he shouted. "But you'll not take the SF-22. You'll take the trip with me as I wanted. I tell you what: You be out at Newark Airport at eleven-thirty, but come to my hangar instead of to that of the transportation company. We'll leave at the same time as the regular liner, and we'll get your old bonds to Frisco, regardless of what might happen to the big ship. Also we might learn something mighty interesting."

I argued with him, but to no avail. And the more I argued, the greater appeal was presented by his proposition. Finally there was nothing to do but agree.

Preston arrived with the bonds shortly after the children were tucked in their beds. I did not tell him of my change in plans. He did not stay long, and I

could see that he was uncomfortable under the accusing eyes of Marie, for all his own confidence in the safety of the trip in the closely-guarded SF-22.

At precisely eleven-thirty I reached the great steel and glass hangar where Hart Jones and George Boehm carried on their experiments with super-modern types of aircraft. Hart Jones had inherited more than two million dollars, and was in a fair way to spend it all on his favorite hobby, though those who knew him best vowed that he would make many times that amount through royalties on his ever-growing number of valuable inventions.

The immense doors were open, and I gazed for the first time into the hangar whose spacious interior provided storage and manufacturing facilities for a dozen or more planes of Hart Jones' design. A curiously constructed example of his handiwork stood directly before me, and several mechanics were engaged in making it ready for flight. My friend advanced from their midst to meet me, a broad smile on his grease smeared countenance.

"Greetings, Jack," he said, taking my small bag from my hands. "Right on time, I see. And I can't tell you how glad I am that you are coming with us. So is George."

"Well, I didn't expect to," I admitted; "but there is no need of telling you that I had far rather be in your ship than in the big one."

George Boehm, the same jolly chap I had several times met in Hart's company, but fatter than ever, crawled from beneath the shiny metal body of the plane and scrambled to his feet at my side.

"Going in for a bit of adventuring, Mr. Makely?" he asked, wiping his hand with a piece of cotton waste before extending it.

"Yes," I replied, as I squeezed his chubby fingers. "Can't stick in the mud all my life, George. And I wouldn't want to be in better company for my first attempt either."

"Nor we," he returned, a mischievous twinkle in his

eyes. "Rather have a greenhorn on the Pioneer than some government agent, who'd be butting in and trying to run everything. Think you'll be scared?"

"Probably," I admitted; "but I guess I can stand it."

"Hear the latest news broadcast?" interrupted Hart Jones.

"No. What was it?" I asked.

"There has been a report from out near Cripple Creek," said Hart solemnly, "that a pillar of fire was observed in the mountains shortly after the time the NY-18 last reported. The time and the location coincide with her probable position and the report was confirmed by no less than three of the natives of that locality. Of course the statements are probably extravagant, but they claim this pillar of fire extended for miles into the heavens and was accompanied by a tremendous roaring sound that ceased abruptly as the light of the flame disappeared, leaving nothing but blackness and awe-inspiring silence behind."

"Lot of bunk!" grunted George, who was vigorously scrubbing the back of his neck.

"Sounds like a fairy tale," I commented.

"Nevertheless, there may be something in it. In fact, there must be. Three of these mountaineers observed practically the same phenomenon from quite widely separated points, though one of them said there were three pillars of fire and that these looked more like the beams of powerful search-lights. All agreed on the terrific roar. And, after all, these two liners did disappear. There must be something quite out of the ordinary about the way in which they were captured or destroyed, and this occurrence may well be supposed to have a bearing on the matter."

"Possibly they were destroyed by some freak electrical storm," I suggested.

"Where then are the wrecked vessels?" asked Hart.

"No, Jack, electrical storms do not destroy huge air liners and then suck them out into space beyond our vision. These two ships are no longer on the surface

of the earth, else they would have been long since located. The magnetic direction finders of the transportation people have covered every inch of the United States, as well as Mexico and Canada."

"Of course they might have been carried halfway around the world by a wind of unprecedented velocity." I commenced a silly argument in favor of the theory that the elements had accounted for the two vessels, but was interrupted by the mounting roar of great engines throbbing overhead.

"Hurry up there, George!" shouted Hart. "It's the SF-22 coming in. We have to be ready for the take-off in five minutes!"

He hastened to take George's place at the washbowl and all was activity within the confines of our hangar. George and I left the office and went out to the landing field, which was now brilliant with the glare of floodlights. The *Pioneer* had been trundled into the open and stood ready for the flight. Not a hundred feet above the field, the huge silver moth that was the SF-22 swept by in a wide circle that would bring her

into the wind. The roar of her engines died as she swung out of the circle of light into the surrounding darkness.

The crowds which had gathered to witness her landing buzzed with excited comment and speculation. Her nose brought slightly up, she dropped to a perfect three-point landing, the brakes screeching as she was brought to a standstill at the hangar of the transportation company.

"Come on now, you fellows," came the voice of Hart Jones from the hangar entrance, "there's no time to lose. The *Pioneer* takes off immediately after the big fellow."

We hurried to the waiting ship, which seemed like a tiny toy when compared with the giant SF-22. I had observed very little of the construction of the *Pioneer*, but I could now see that she was quite different in design from the ordinary plane. A monoplane she was, but the wing structure was abnormally short and of great thickness, and there were a number of tubes projecting from the leading edge that gave the

appearance of a battery of small cannon. The body, like all planes designed for travel in air-level six, was cigar-shaped, and had hermetically sealed ports and entrance manholes. A cluster of the cannon-shaped tubes enclosed the tail just back of the fins and rudder and, behind the wing structure atop the curved upper surface of the body, there was a sphere of gleaming metal that was probably three feet in diameter.

Before I could formulate questions regarding the unusual features of the design, we were within the *Pioneer's* cabin and Hart Jones was engaged in clamping the entrance manhole cover to its rubber seat. A throbbing roar that penetrated our double hull attracted my attention and, looking through a nearby porthole, I saw that the convoy of army planes had taken off and was circling over the SF-22 in anticipation of her start. Trim, speedy fighting ships these were, with heavy caliber machine-guns in turrets fore and aft and normally manned by crews of twelve each. The under surfaces of their bodies glistened smooth and sleek in the light from the field,

for the landing gears had been drawn within and the openings sealed by the close-fitted armor plate that protected these ordinarily vulnerable portions when in flight.

The SF-22 was ready to take off and the crowds were drawing back into the obscurity beyond the huge circle of blinding light. One after another her twelve engines sputtered into life, and ponderously she moved over the field, gathering speed as the staccato barking of the exhausts gradually blended into a smooth though deafening purr. The tail of the great vessel came up, then the wheels, and she was off into the night.

Hart Jones sat at a bewildering array of instruments that covered almost the entire forward partition of the cabin. He pressed a button and the starting motor whined for a moment. Then the single engine of the *Pioneer* coughed and roared. Slowly we taxied in the direction taken by the SF-22, whose lights were now vanishing in the darkness. I saw George open a valve on the wall and Hart stretched the fingers of his left hand to what appeared to be the keyboard of a

typewriter set into the instrument board. He pressed several of the keys and pulled back his stick. There was a whistling scream from astern and I was thrown back in my seat with painful force. With that, the motor roared into full speed and we had left the airport far behind.

"What on earth?" I gasped.

"Rocket propulsion," laughed Hart. "I should have warned you. Those tubes you saw outside at the tail and along the leading edge of the wings. Only used three of them, but that was sufficient for the take-off."

"But I thought this rocket business was not feasible on account of the wastage of fuel due to its low efficiency," I objected.

"We should worry about fuel," said Hart.

I looked about me and saw that there was very little space for the storage of this essential commodity.

"Why?" I inquired. "What fuel do you use?"

"Make our own," he replied shortly. He was busy at the moment, maneuvering the *Pioneer* into a position above and behind the SF-22 and her convoy.

"You make your own fuel enroute?" I asked in astonishment.

"Yes. That sphere you saw on top. It is the collecting end of an electrical system for extracting nitrogen and other elements, from the air. This extraction goes on constantly while we are in the atmosphere and my fuel is an extremely powerful explosive of which nitrates are the base. The supply is replenished continuously, so we have no fear of running short even in the upper levels."

George had crawled through a small opening into some inaccessible region in the stern of the vessel. I pondered over what Hart had just told me, still keeping my eyes glued to the port, through which could be seen the fleet we were following. The altimeter registered thirty-five thousand feet. We were entering air-level six—the stratosphere! Below us the troposphere, divided into five levels, each of

seven thousand feet, teemed with the life of the air. The regular lanes were filled with traffic, the lights of the speeding thousands of freight and pleasure craft moving in orderly procession along their prescribed routes.

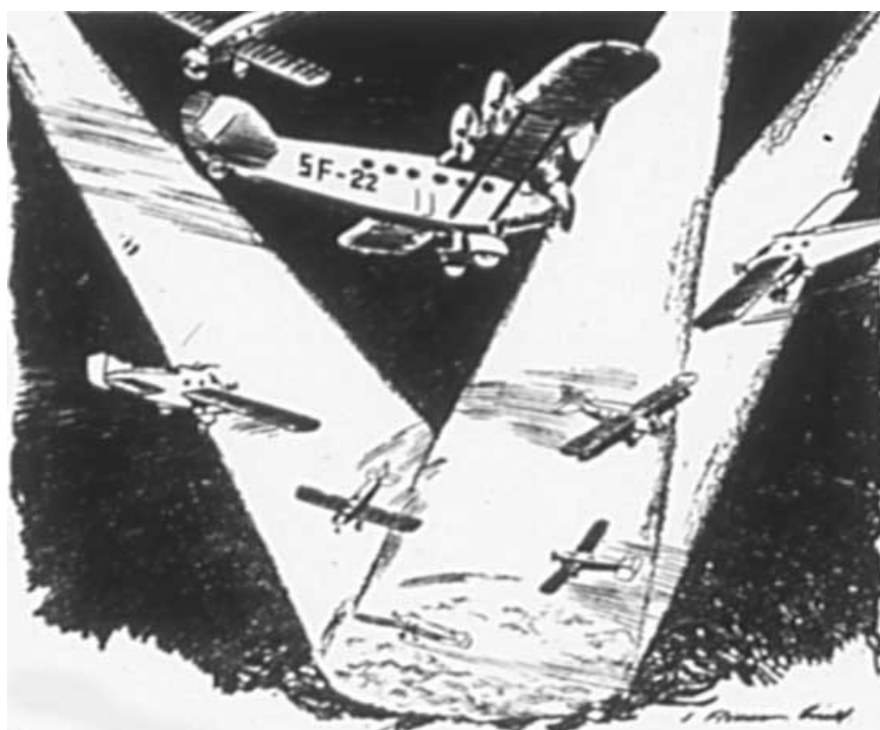
Up here in the sixth level, which was entirely for high-speed traffic of commercial and government vessels making transcontinental or transoceanic voyages, we were the only adventurers in sight—we and the convoyed liner we were following. The speed indicator showed six hundred miles an hour, and the tiny spot of light that traveled over the chart to indicate our position showed that we were nearing Buffalo.

Glancing through one of the lower ports, I saw the lights of the city shining dimly through a light mist that fringed the shore of Lake Erie and extended northward along the Niagara. Then we were out over the lake, and the luminous hue was slipping rapidly behind. I looked ahead and saw that the distance to the SF-22 and her convoy had somewhat increased. We were a mile behind and some two thousand feet

above them. Evidently Hart was figuring on keeping at a safe distance for observation of anything that might happen.

Our motor was running smoothly and the angle of the propeller blades had been altered to take care of the change in air density from the lower altitudes. It flashed across my mind that this was an ideal location for an attack, if such was to be made on the SF-22.

Then, far ahead, I saw a beam of light stab through the darkness and strike the tossing surface of the lake. Another and another followed, and I could see that the SF-22 and her convoy were surrounded by these unearthly rays.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration of many airplanes swarming in a black sky, with three beams of light shining down from above them. Image description end.]

They converged from high above to outline a brilliant circle where they met on the surface of the waters, and in the midst of the cone formed by the beams, the liner and its seven tiny followers could be seen to falter, and huddle more closely together.

It all happened in the twinkling of an eye—so quickly, in fact, that Hart and I had not the time to exchange remarks over the strange occurrence. For a moment

the eight vessels hovered, halted suddenly by this inexplicable force from out the heavens. Then there rose from the apex of the inverted cone of light a blinding column of blue-white radiance that poured skyward an instant and was gone. To our ears came a terrific roaring that could be likened to nothing we had heard on earth. The *Pioneer* was tossed and buffeted as by a cyclone, and George came tumbling from the opening he had entered, his round face grown solemn. Then came eery silence, for the *Pioneer's* motor had gone dead. Ahead there was utter darkness. The liner and her convoy had completely vanished and the *Pioneer* was slipping into a spin!

"What's up?" asked George of Hart, who was tugging frantically at the controls.

"The liner has gone the way of the first two," he replied: "and the yarn about the pillar of fire was not so far wrong after all."

"You saw the same thing?" asked George incredulously.

"Yes, and so did Jack. There came some beams of light from the sky; then the pillar of fire and the roaring you heard, after which the vessels were gone and our electrical system paralyzed."

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated George. "What to do now?"

As he spoke, the *Pioneer* came out of the spin, and we were able to resume our positions in the seats. None of us was strapped in, and we had been clinging to whatever was handiest to keep from being tossed about in the cabin. Hart wiped his forehead and growled out an oath. The instrument board was still illuminated, for its tiny lamps were supplied with current from the storage battery. But the main lights of the cabin and the ignition system refused to function. We were gliding now, but losing altitude rapidly, having already dropped to the lower limits of level five.

"Can't you use the rocket tubes?" I inquired hesitatingly.

"They are fired in the same manner as the motor,"

replied Hart; "but we might try an emergency connection from the storage battery, which is ordinarily used only in starting and for the panel lights."

George was already fussing with the connections in a small junction box from which he had removed the cover. Meanwhile, the black waters of Lake Erie were rushing upward to meet us, and the needle of the altimeter registered twelve thousand feet.

"Here's the trouble!" shouted George, triumphantly holding up a small object he had removed from the junction box. "Ignition fuse is blown."

"Probably by some radiations from the cone of light and the column that destroyed the liner. Lucky we were no closer," were Hart's muttered comments.

George produced a spare fuse and inserted it in its proper place. The cabin lights glowed instantly and the motor started at once.

"Well, I'm going up after the generators of this

mysterious force that is destroying our cross-country ships and killing our people," asserted Hart. "The rays came from high above, but the *Pioneer* can go as high as anything that ever flew—*higher*."

He snapped a switch and a beam of light that rivalled the so-called pillar of fire bored far into the night, dimming the stars by its brilliance. Again his fingers strayed to the rows of white keys and the rocket tubes shrieked in response to his pressure. This time I was prepared for the shock of acceleration, but the action was maintained for several seconds and I found the pressure against my back growing painful. Then it was relieved, and I glanced at the altimeter. Its needle had reached the end of the scale, which was graduated to eighty thousand feet!

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean to tell me that we are more than sixteen miles in the air?"

"Nearly thirty," replied Hart, pointing to another dial which I had not seen. This one was graduated in miles above sea-level, and its needle wavered between the twenty-nine and thirty mark!

Again Hart pressed the rocket buttons, and we shot still higher into the heavens. Thirty, forty, fifty miles registered the meter, and still we climbed.

"Great Scott!" blurted a voice I knew was my own, though I had no consciousness of willing the speech. "At this rate we'll reach the moon!"

"We could, if we wished," was Hart's astounding reply; "I wish you wouldn't say too much about it when we return. We have oxygen to breathe and an air-tight vessel to retain it. With the fuel we are using, we could easily do it, provided a sufficient supply were available. However, the *Pioneer* does not have large enough storage tanks as yet, and, of course, we cannot now replenish our supply with sufficient rapidity, for the atmosphere has become very rare indeed—where we are. My ultimate object, though, in building the *Pioneer*, was to construct a vessel that is capable of a trip to the moon."

"You think you could reach a great enough velocity to escape the gravitational pull of the earth?" I asked, marveling more and more at the temerity and

resourcefulness of my science-minded friend.

"Absolutely," he replied. "The speed required is less than seven miles a second, and I have calculated that the *Pioneer* can do no less than twenty."

Mentally I multiplied by sixty. I could hardly credit the result. Twelve hundred miles a minute!

"But, how about the acceleration?" I ventured. "Could the human body stand up under the strain?"

"That is the one problem remaining," he replied; "and I am now working on a method of neutralizing it. From the latest results of our experiments, George and I are certain of its feasibility."

The *Pioneer* was now losing altitude once more, and Hart played the beam of the searchlight in all directions as we descended. He and George watched through one of the floor ports and I followed suit. We were falling, unhampered by air resistance, and our bodies were practically weightless with reference to the *Pioneer*. It was a strange sensation: there was the

feeling of exhilaration one experiences when inhaling the first whiff of nitrous oxide in the dentist's chair—a feeling of absolute detachment and care-free confidence in the ultimate result of our precipitous descent.

I found considerable amusement in pushing myself from side to side of the cabin with a mere touch of a finger. There was no up nor down, and sometimes it seemed to me that we were drifting sideways, sometimes that we fell upward rather than downward. Hart and George were unconcerned. Evidently they were quite accustomed to the sensations. They bent their every energy toward discovering what had caused the disaster to the SF-22 and its convoy.

For several hours we cruised about on the strangest search ever made in the air. Alternately shooting skyward to unconscionable altitudes and dropping to levels five and six to replenish our fuel supply, we covered the greater portion of the United States before the night was over. But the powerful searchlight of the *Pioneer* failed to disclose anything

that might be remotely connected with the disappearance of the SF-22.

For me it was a never-to-be-forgotten experience. Lightning dashes from coast to coast which required but a few minutes of time—circling many miles above New York or Washington or Savannah in broad daylight with the sun low on the up-curved horizon; then shooting westward into the darkness and skirting the Pacific coast less than fifteen minutes later, but with four hours' actual time difference. Space and time were almost one.

Hart had not provided the *Pioneer* with a radio or television transmitter, but there was an excellent receiver, and, through its agency we learned that the world was in a veritable uproar over the latest visitation of the mysterious terror of the sixth air level. All commercial traffic in levels four, five and six was ordered discontinued, and the government air control stations were flashing long messages in code, the import of which could but be guessed. Vision flashes showed immense gatherings at the large airports and in the public squares of the great cities,

where the general populace become more and more excited and terrified by the awful possibilities pictured by various prominent speakers.

The governments of all foreign powers made haste to disclaim responsibility for the air attacks or for any attempt at making war on the United States. News broadcasts failed to mention Hart Jones or the *Pioneer*, since the mission had been kept secret. The phenomenon of the rays and the roaring column of light had been observed from many points on this occasion and there was no longer any doubt as to the nature of the terror as visible to the eye, though theories as to the action and source of the rays conflicted greatly and formed the basis of much heated discussion.

Eventually the advancing dawn reached San Francisco, and with its advent Hart decided to make a landing in that city so that my bonds could be delivered.

Jones was apparently a very much mystified and discouraged man. "Jack," he said, "it seems to me that

this thing is but the beginning of some tremendous campaign that is being waged against our country by a clever and powerful enemy. And I feel that our work in connection with the unraveling of the mystery and overcoming the enemy or enemies is but begun. It's a cinch that the thing is organized by human minds and is not any sort of a freak of the elements. Our work is cut out for us, all right, and I wish you would stick to George and me through the mess. Will you?"

"Sure," I agreed, readily enough. "After these bonds are delivered I am free for a month."

"Ha! Ha!" cackled George, without mirth. "A month! We're doggoned lucky if we get to the bottom of this in a year."

"Nonsense!" snapped Hart, who was considerably upset by the failure to locate the source of the disastrous rays. "There is nothing supernatural about this, and anything that can be explained on a scientific basis can be run to earth in short order. These rays are man-made and, as such, can be accounted for by man. Our greatest scientists must be

put to work on the problem at once—in fact, they have quite probably been called in by the government already."

He was maneuvering the *Pioneer* to a landing on the broad field of the San Francisco airport. Hundreds of idle planes of all sizes lined the field, and, unmindful of the earliness the hour, a great crowd was collected in expectation of sensational reports from the occupants of arriving ships. The unusual construction of the *Pioneer* attracted considerable attention and it was with difficulty that the police kept back the crowd when she rolled to a stop near the office of the local government supervisor. We hustled inside and were greeted by that official with open arms.

"Glory be!" he exclaimed. "Hart Jones and the *Pioneer*. Every airport in the land has been on the lookout for you all night. It was feared you had been lost with the SF-22 and the others. Code messages to the supervisors of all districts advised of your mission, though it has been kept out of the general news, as has the message from the enemy."

"Message from the enemy!" gasped Hart, George and I, echoing the words like parrots.

"Yes. A demand that the United States surrender, and a threat to descend into the lower levels if the demand is not complied with in twenty-four hours!"

"Who is this enemy?" asked Hart, "and where?"

"Who they are is not known," replied the official gravely; "and as to the location, the War Department is puzzled. Direction finders throughout the country took readings on the position of their radio transmitter and these readings differed widely in result. But the consensus of opinion is that the messages originate somewhere out in space, probably between fifty and one hundred thousand miles from our earth."

"Great guns!" Hart glanced at George and me, where we stood with stupidly hanging jaws. "And what does the government want of me now?"

"You are considered to be the one man who might be

able to cope with the problem, and are ordered to report to the Secretary of War, in person, immediately."

Hart was electrified into instant activity. "Here," he said in a voice of authority that commanded the official's attention and respect, "see that this package of bonds is delivered at once to the addressee and that the addressor is advised of its safe arrival. We're off at once."

Suiting action to the words, he thrust my packet into the hands of the astonished supervisor. Then, turning sharply on his heel, he flung back, "Advise the Secretary of War that I shall report to him in person in less than one hour."

As we stepped through the entrance of the *Pioneer*, he shot a final look at the official and laughed heartily at his sudden accession of energy. We had not the slightest doubt that Hart's orders would be immediately and efficiently carried out.

In precisely forty-five minutes, we stood before the

desk of Lawrence Simler, then Secretary of War, in Washington.

"You are Mr. Hartley Jones?" inquired the stern-visaged little man.

"I am, Mr. Secretary, and these are my friends and co-workers, George Boehm and John Makely."

The Secretary acknowledged the introduction gravely, then plunged into the heart of the matter at hand with the quick energy for which he was famed.

"It may or may not be a serious situation," he said, "but certainly it has thus far been quite alarming. In any event, we have taken the matter out of the hands of the Air Traffic Bureau. We are prepared to defy the ultimatum of the enemy, whoever he may be. But we want your help, Mr. Jones. Every ship of the Air Navy will be in the upper levels within the prescribed twenty-four hours, and we will endeavor to stave off their attacks until such time as you can fit the *Pioneer* for a journey to their headquarters."

"How can your antiquated war vessels, capable of hurling a high explosive shell no more than fifty miles, fight off an enemy that is thousands of miles distant?" asked Hart.

"It is believed by the research engineers of the government that, though their headquarters may be located at a great distance, the raiders drop to a comparatively low altitude at the time of one of their attacks, returning immediately thereafter to their base."

Hart Jones shook his head. "The engineers may be correct," he stated; "but how on earth can you expect a little vessel like the *Pioneer* to battle an enemy who is possessed of these terribly destructive weapons and who has sufficient confidence in his own invulnerability to declare war on the greatest country on earth?"

Secretary Simler dropped his voice to a confidential tone, and his keen gray eyes flashed excitement as he unfolded the details of the discoveries and plans of the War Department. We three listened in undisguised

amazement to a tale of the unceasing labors of our Secret Service agents in foreign countries, of elaborate experiments with deadly weapons and the chemicals of warfare.

We heard of marvelous new rays that could be projected for many miles and destroy whole armies at a single blast; rays that would, in less time than that required to tell of the feat, reduce to a mass of fused metal the greatest firstline battleships of the old days of ocean warfare. We heard of preparations for defensive warfare throughout the civilized world, preparedness that insured so terrible and final a war that it was literally impossible for a great world conflagration to again break out. We learned that the present mysterious signs of a coming war could not possibly have originated in any country on earth, else they would have been known of long in advance, due to the network of the Secret Service system. This war, so unexpectedly thrust upon us, was undoubtedly a war of planets!

"But," objected Hart, "the messages were in English, were they not?"

"They were," continued Secretary Simler, "and that puzzled our experts in the beginning. But, it may well be that our enemy from out the skies has had spies among us for many years and could thus have learned our languages and radio codes. In any event, we are to meet destructive rays with others equally destructive, and you, Hartley Jones, are the man who can make our effectiveness certain."

"I?"

"Yes. How long a time will be required in fitting out the *Pioneer* for reliable space flying?"

Hart Jones pondered the matter and I could see that he was overjoyed at the prospect of getting into the thing in earnest. "About one week," he replied, "providing you can send a force of fifty expert mechanics to my hangar at once and supply all material as fast as I shall require it."

"Excellent," said the Secretary. "We'll have the men there in a few hours and will obtain whatever you need, regardless of cost, for immediate delivery."

Incidentally, there will be several scientists as well, who will supervise the installation of two types of ray generators and their projecting mechanisms on the *Pioneer*. You will need them later."

"I don't doubt we shall," said Hart. "And now, with your permission, we shall leave for the hangar. I'm ready to start work."

"Capital!" Secretary Simler pressed every one of a row of buttons set in his desk top. We were dismissed.

"Well," said I, when we reached the outside, "he has given you quite a job, Hart!"

"You said something," he replied. "But, if this threat from the skies proves as real and as calamitous as I think it will, we all have our work cut out for us."

"Do you really believe this enemy comes from another planet?" asked George as we entered the *Pioneer* for the trip home.

"Where else can they be from?" countered Hart. "But,

really it makes no difference to us now. We have to go after them in earnest. Don't want to quit, do you, George?"

"Wha-a-at?" shouted George, as he jerked savagely at the main switch of the *Pioneer*. "You know me better than that, Hart. Did I ever let you down in anything?"

"No," admitted the smiling Hart, "you never did, bless your heart. But Jack here is another matter. He has a wife and two kids to look after. That lets him out automatically."

My heart sank at the words, for I knew that he meant what he said. And, truth to tell, I saw the justice in his remarks.

"But, Hart," I faltered, "I'd like to be in on this thing."

"I know you would, old man. But I think it's out of the question, for the present at least. You can help with the reconstruction of the *Pioneer*, however."

And meekly I accepted his dictum, though with

secretly conflicting emotions. Little did I realize at the time that Hart knew far more than he pretended and that he had merely attempted to salve his own conscience in this manner.

I was very anxious to return to my family, and, as I sped homeward in a taxicab after the *Pioneer* landed at her own hangar, my mind was filled with doubts and fears. Secretary Simler had been very brief in his talk, but his every word carried home the gravity of the situation. What if these invaders carried the war to the surface? Suppose they seared the countryside and the cities and suburbs with rays of horrible nature that would shrivel and blast all that lay in their path? My heart chilled at the thought and it was a distinct relief when I gazed on my little home and saw that it was safe—so far. I paid the driver with a much too large bank note and dashed up my own front steps two at a time.

A few hours later I tore myself away and returned to the hangar, where the *Pioneer* now reposed in a scaffolded cradle. The sight which met my eyes was astonishing in the extreme, for the hangar had been

transformed into a huge workshop with seemingly hundreds of men already at work. It was a scene of furious activity, and, to my utter amazement, I observed that the *Pioneer* was already in an advanced stage of disassembly.

I had no difficulty in locating Hart Jones, for he was striding from lathe to workbench to boring mill, issuing his orders with the sureness and decision of a born leader of men. He welcomed me in his most brisk manner and immediately assigned me to a portion of the work in the chemical laboratory—something I was at least partly fitted for.

We labored far into the night, when a siren called us to rest and food. This was to be a night and day job, and not a man of those on duty gave thought to the intense nervous and physical strain. Sixty-five of us I learned there were, though it had seemed there were several times that number.

During the rest period, Hart switched on the large television and sound mechanism of the public news broadcasts. Great excitement prevailed throughout

the United States, for there had been a leak and the news had gone abroad regarding the message from the enemy. There was widespread panic and disorder and the government was besieged with demands for authentic news. The twenty-four hours of grace had nearly expired.

Finally the public was told of what actually was happening. Our entire fleet of one thousand air cruisers was in air-level six, waiting for the enemy. America was going to fight in earnest!

Flashes of our air cruisers in construction and in action came over the screen; voice-vision records of the popular officers of the fleet followed in quick succession. Then came the blow—the first of the strange war.

Two vessels of the air fleet had been destroyed by the triple rays and pillar of fire! Fifty cruisers rushing to the scene had been unable to find any traces of the source of the deadly rays. And, this time, there was an alarming added element. The pillar of fire had risen from a point near Gadsden in Alabama and, in its

wake, there spread a sulphurous, smoldering fire that crept along the ground and destroyed all in its path. Farms, factories, and even the steel rails of the railroads were consumed and burned into the ground as if by the breath of some tremendous blast furnace. Hundreds of inhabitants of the section perished, and it was reported that the fumes from the strange fires were drifting in the direction of Birmingham, terrifyingly visible in blue-green clouds of searing vapor.

With the first news of the disaster came a wave of fear that spread over the country with the rapidity of the ether waves that carried the news. Then came stern determination. This enemy must be swept from the skies! Gatherings in public places volunteered en masse for whatever service the government might ask of them. The entire world was in an uproar, and from Great Britain, France, Germany and Russia, came immediate offers of their air fleets to assist in fighting off the Terror.

In less than an hour there were nearly five thousand cruisers in air-level six, patrolling its entire depth from

thirty-five thousand to one hundred thousand feet altitude.

We resumed work in the hangar, but the news service was kept in operation as far as the amplifiers were concerned, though the television screen was switched off on account of the likelihood of its distracting the workers.

Again came the report of a major disaster, this time over Butte in Montana. Four American vessels and one British were the victims in level six. And the city of Butte was in flames; blue, horrible flames that literally melted the city into the ground. Again there was no trace of the invaders.

How puny were the efforts of the five thousand air cruisers! Marvels of engineering and mechanical skill, these vessels were. Deadly as were the weapons they carried—weapons so terrible that war on earth was considered impossible since their development—they were helpless against an enemy who could not be located. Though our vessels were capable of boring high into the stratosphere, the enemy worked from

still higher.

"Holy smoke!" gasped Hart Jones, who had stopped at my side. "What a contract I have on my hands!"

He looked in the direction of the partly dismantled *Pioneer*, and I could see by the fixedness of his stare that he was thinking of her insignificant size in comparison with the job she was to undertake.

Above the din of the machines in the hangar rang the startled voice of a news announcer. Panic-stricken he seemed, and we stopped to listen. Another blow of the terror of the skies—and now close by! Over Westchester County in New York State there was a repetition of the previous attacks. Only two of the cruisers had vanished this time; but several towns, including Larchmont and Scarsdale, were pools of molten fire!

Sick at heart, I thought of my little home in Rutherford and of the dear ones it contained. I thought of telephoning, but, what was the use? There was no warding off of this terrible thing that had so

suddenly come to our portion of the world. It was the blowing of the last trumpet, the way things looked.

The announcer had calmed himself. His voice droned tonelessly now, as was the custom. Another raid, on the Mexican Border now. We were stupefied by the rapidity of the enemy's attacks; then electrified once more by the most astounding news of all. Alexandria, in Egypt, was the base of a pillar of fire! Fully half of the city was wiped out, and the remainder in a mortal funk, terrorized and riotous. The United States was not alone in the war!

The foreign fleets which reinforced our own were ordered home immediately. But to what avail? The world was doomed!

In the morning, after nine fearful attacks during the night, there came another message from the enemy and this was repeated in five languages and addressed to the entire world:

"People of Earth," it read, "this is our final warning. One chance has been given and you have proved

stubborn. Consider well that your civilization be not entirely destroyed, and answer as the expiration of forty-eight hours, using our transmitting frequency. Our hand is to be withheld for that period only, when, unless our demands are met, all of your large cities and towns will be destroyed. Our terms for peace are that we be permitted to land without resistance on your part; that you surrender farm and forest lands, cities and towns, able-bodied men of twenty to forty, selected women of seventeen to thirty, and tribute in the form of such supplies and precious metals as we may specify, all to the extent of forty per cent of your resources. No compromise will be accepted."

That was all. It was during a rest period at the Jones hangar and I had brought Hart and George to my home for breakfast. We sat at the table when the news instrument brought the message. Marie was pouring the coffee, and my two small boys, Jim and Jack, had gone to the playroom, from whence their joyous voices could be heard. We four were struck dumb at the announcement, and Marie looked at me with so awful an expression of dread that my coffee

turned bitter in my mouth. Marie was just twenty-eight!

"What beasts!" cried Hart. "Allow them to land without resistance? I should say not! Rather we should fight them off until all of us perish."

He had risen from his chair in his anger. Now he sat down suddenly and shook a forefinger in my face.

"Say!" he exploded. "You can't tell me that some master mind of our own world is not back of this!"

"I'm not telling you," I replied, startled at the fierce fire that flashed from his eyes.

"I know. I'm just trying to think aloud and I'm liable to say anything. But this sort of business is the work of humans as sure as you're born. Still I believe that what Simler says is true. I can't believe that any country on earth is back of the thing. It must be an attack from beings of another planet, but I think they have as a leader a man who is of our own earth."

Marie's eyes opened wide at this. "But how could that be?" she asked. "Surely no one from our earth has made the trip to one of the other planets?"

"It may be that someone has," replied Hart. "Do you remember Professor Oradel? Remember, about ten years ago, I think it was, when he and a half dozen or more of extremely radical scientists built a rocket they claimed would reach the moon? They were ridiculed and hissed and relegated to the position of half-baked, crazy inventors. But Oradel had a large private fortune, and he and his crowd built themselves a workshop and laboratory in a secluded region in the Ozarks. Here they labored and experimented and eventually the rocket ship was constructed. No person was in their confidence, but when the machine was completed they issued a statement to the press to the effect that they were ready for the voyage to the moon, and that, when they returned, a reckoning with the world was to be made for its disbelief and total lack of sympathy. Again the press subjected Oradel to a series of scathing denunciations, and the scientific publications refused

to take cognizance of his claims in any way, shape or form."

"Then, one night, a great rocket roared into the heavens, leaving a terror-stricken countryside in the wake of its brilliantly visible tail. Several observatories whose telescopes picked up and followed the trail of the contraption reported that it described a huge parabola, mounting high into the stratosphere and falling back to earth, where it was lost in the depths of the Pacific Ocean. There the thing ended and it was soon forgotten. But I believe that this rocket ship of Oradel's reached Mars or Venus and that the peoples of whichever planet they reached have been prevailed upon and prepared to war upon the world."

"That would explain their knowledge of our languages and codes." I ventured, "and would likewise account for the fact that the first of our ships to be attacked were those carrying large shipments of currency. Though if these were destroyed by the fire columns, I can not see what good the money would do them."

"Don't believe the first three were destroyed," grunted Hart. "You'll remember that in these cases the pillars of fire, or whatever you want to call them, were of a cold light, whereas now they are viciously hot and leave behind them the terrible destructive fires that spread and spread and seemingly never are extinguished. No, I think that the force used is something of the nature of an atom-disrupting triad of beams and that these set up the column as a veritable tornado, a whirling column of roaring wind rushing skyward with tremendous velocity. The first ships, I believe, were carried into the stratosphere and captured intact by the enemy.

"Since the declaration of war the nature of the column has altered. The three beams, instead of meeting at or near the surface of the earth, now join high in the heavens and the column strikes downward instead of expending its force upward. An added energy is used which produces the terribly destructive force below. And now we are able to locate fragments of the ships destroyed above, whereas previously there were no traces."

"Sounds reasonable," commented George. "But why have they not landed and waged their war right here without warning, if that is what they now intend to do?"

"A natural question, George. But I have a hunch that the space flier or fliers of the enemy are conserving fuel by remaining beyond gravity. You know, in space flying, the greatest expenditures of energy are in leaving or landing on a body and, once landed, they might not have sufficient fuel for a getaway. They know we are not exactly helpless, once they are in our midst, and are taking this means of reducing us to the point of complete subjection before risking their precious selves among us."

The telephone startled us by its insistent ring. It was a call from the hangar for Hart. The news broadcast announcer was in the midst of a long dissertation regarding the discovery only this morning that there were certain apparent discrepancies in the movements of the tides and unwonted perturbations of the moon's orbit. There flashed on the screen a view of the great observatory at Mount Wilson, and

Professor Laughlin of that institution stepped into the foreground of the scene to take up the discussion so mechanically repeated by the announcer.

"Must leave for the hangar at once," declared Hart, returning from the telephone. "Simler and his staff are there and we are wanted immediately."

"Oh, Jack!" Marie begged with her eyes.

"Got to be done, Honey," I responded, "and, believe me, I am going to do what little I can to help. Suppose we surrendered!"

I shuddered anew at the very thought and took hurried leave of my family, Hart and George awaiting me in the hall. Had I known what was to transpire before the end of the war, I am certain I would have been in much less of a hurry.

We rushed to the hangar, where Secretary Simler and his party awaited us in the office. Rather, I should say, they waited for Hart Jones.

"Mr. Jones," said the Secretary of War, when the introductions were over, "it is up to you to get the *Pioneer* in shape to go out after these terrible creatures before the forty-eight hours have expired. We have replied to their ultimatum and have told them we will have our answer ready within the appointed time, but it is already agreed between the nations of the World Alliance that our reply is to be negative. Better far that we submit to the utter destruction of our civilization than agree to their terms."

"I believe I can do it, Mr. Secretary," was Hart Jones' simple comment. "At least I will try. But you must let me have an experienced astronomer at once with whom to consult."

"Astronomer?"

"Yes—immediately. I have a theory, but am not enough of a student of astronomy myself to work it out."

"You shall have the best man in the Air Naval Observatory at once." Secretary Simler chewed his

cigar savagely. "And anything else you might need," he concluded.

"There is nothing else, sir." Hart turned from the great men who regarded him solemnly, some with expressions of hope, others with plain distrust written large on their countenances.

They left in silence and we returned to our work with renewed vigor. Within an hour there arrived by fast plane an undersized, thick-spectacled man who presented himself as Professor Linguist from the government observatory. He was immediately taken into the office by Hart and the two remained behind closed doors for the best part of four hours.

Meanwhile the hangar hummed with activity as usual. We in the chemical laboratory were engaged in compounding the high explosive used as fuel in the *Pioneer*. This was being compressed to its absolute limit and was stored in long steel cylinders in the form of a liquid of extremely low temperature. These cylinders were at once transferred to a special steel vault where the temperature was kept at a low

enough point to prevent expansion and consequent loss of the explosive, not to speak of the danger of destroying the entire lot of us in its escape.

The generating apparatus of the *Pioneer* was to be dispensed with for this trip, since it was of no value outside the atmosphere where there was no air from which to extract the elements necessary for the production of the explosive. Instead, the entire supply of fuel for the trip was to be carried aboard the vessel in the cylinders we were engaged in filling. Hart had calculated that there was just sufficient room to store fuel for a trip of about two hundred thousand miles from the earth and a safe return. We hoped this would be enough.

On the scaffolding around the *Pioneer* there were now so many workers that it seemed they must forever be in one another's way. But the work was progressing with extreme rapidity. Already there projected from her blunt nose a slender rod of shining metal which was the projector of one of the destructive rays whose generator and auxiliaries were being installed under the supervision of the government experts. The force

had been trebled and was now working in shifts of two hours each, the pace being so exhausting that highest efficiency was obtained by using these short periods.

Additional rocket tubes were being installed, and the steel framework of a bulge now showed on the hull, this bulge being an additional fuel storage compartment that would provide a slight additional resistance and consequently lower speed in the lower levels, but would prove little hindrance in level six and none at all in outer space.

When Hart emerged from his office he appeared to be very tired, indeed, but his face bore an expression of triumph that could not be mistaken. He and this little scientist from Washington had evidently arrived at some momentous conclusion regarding the enemy.

"Jack," he said, when he reached my bench during his first round of the hanger, "celestial mechanics is a wonderful thing. I had a hunch, and this astronomer chap has proved it correct with his mathematics. Our friend the enemy is out there in space at a point

where his own mass and velocity are exactly counteracted by those of the earth and its satellite, the moon. He is just floating around in space, doing no work whatsoever to maintain his own position. He has temporarily assumed the rôle of a second satellite to us and is revolving around us at a definite period that was calculated by Lindquist. The gravitational pull of the moon keeps him from falling to the earth and that of the earth keeps him from approaching the moon. The resultant of the set of forces is what determines his orbit and the disturbance in the normal balance is what has been observed by the astronomers who reported changes in the tides and in the moon's orbit."

"But Lindquist's figures prove that the vessel or fleet of the enemy must be of tremendous size to produce such discrepancies, infinitesimally small though they might seem. We have a big fellow with whom to deal, but we know where to find him now."

"How can he work from a fixed position to make his attacks on the earth at such widely separated points?" I asked.

"It isn't a fixed position in the first place, and besides the earth rotates once in twenty-four hours, while the moon travels around the earth once in about twenty-eight days. But, even so, the widespread destruction could not be accounted for. He must send out scouting parties or something of that sort. That is one of the things we are to learn when we get out there. We'll have some fun, Jack."

"Will the *Pioneer* be ready?" I asked. Evidently I was to go.

"She will, with the exception of the acceleration neutralizers. But I'm having some heavily-cushioned and elastic supports made that will, I believe, save us from injury. And I guess we can stand the discomfort for once."

"Yes," I agreed, "in such a cause, I, for one, am willing to go through anything to help keep this overwhelming disaster from our good old world."

"Jack," he whispered, "we must prevent it. We've got to!"

Then he was gone, and I watched him for a moment as he dashed headlong from one task to another. He was a whirlwind of energy once more.

Forty-three hours and twenty minutes had passed since the receipt of the enemy's ultimatum. The last bolt was being tightened in the remodeled *Pioneer*, and Secretary Simler and his staff were on hand to witness the take-off of the vessel on which the hopes of the world were pinned. The news of our attempt had been spread by cable and printed news only, for there was fear that the enemy might be able to pick up the broadcasts of the news service and thus be able to anticipate us. As usual, there were many scoffers, but the consensus of opinion was in favor of the project. At any rate, what better expedient was there to offer?

The huge airport, now unused on account of the complete cessation of air traffic, was closed to the public. But there was quite a crowd to witness the take-off, the visitors from Washington, the officials of the field, and the two hundred workers who had enabled us to make ready for the adventure in time.

There were four to enter the *Pioneer*: Hart, George, Professor Lindquist, and myself. And when the entrance manhole was bolted home behind us, the watchers stood in silence, waiting for the roar of the *Pioneer's* motor. As the starter took hold, Hart waved his hand at one of the ports and every man of those two hundred and some watchers stood at attention and saluted as if he were a born soldier and Hart a born commander-in-chief.

We taxied heavily across the field, for the *Pioneer* was much overloaded for a quick take-off. She bumped and bounced for a quarter-mile before taking to the air and then climbed very slowly indeed, for several minutes. Our speed was a scant two hundred miles an hour when we swung out over New York and headed for the Atlantic. And then Hart made first use of the rocket tubes, not daring to discharge the hot gases below while over populated land at so low an altitude. He touched one button, maintaining the pressure for but a fraction of a second. The ocean slipped more rapidly away from beneath our feet and he touched the button once more. Our speed was now nearly

seven hundred miles an hour and we made haste to buckle ourselves into the padded, hammocklike contrivances which had been substituted for the former seats. In a very few minutes we entered level six and the motor was cut off entirely.

A blast from a number of the tail rockets drove me into my supporting hammock so heavily that I found difficulty in breathing, and could scarcely move a muscle to change position. The rate of acceleration was terrific, and I am still unable to understand how Hart was able to manipulate the controls. For myself, I could not even turn my head from its position in the padding and I felt as if I were being crushed by thousands of tons of pressure. Then, the pressure was somewhat relieved and I glanced to the instruments. We were more than a thousand miles from our starting point and the speed indicator read seven thousand miles an hour. We were traveling at the rate of nearly two miles a second!

Another blast from the rockets, this one of interminable length, and I must have lost consciousness. For when I next took note of things I

found that we had been out for nearly two hours and that the tremendous pressure of acceleration was relieved. I moved my head, experimentally and found that my senses were normal, though there was a strange and alarming sensation of being wrong side up. Then I remembered that I had experienced the same thing when we first searched the upper levels of the atmosphere for the origin of the destructive rays of the enemy.

But this was different! I gazed through a nearby port and saw that the sky was entirely black, the stars shining magnificently brilliant against their velvet background. Streamers of brilliant sunlight from the floor ports struck across the cabin and patterned the ceiling. Looking between my feet I saw the sun as a flaming orb with streamers of incandescence that spread in every direction with such blinding luminosity that I could not bear the sight for more than a few seconds. Off to what I was pleased to think of as our left side, there was a huge globe that I quickly made out as our own earth. Eerily green it shone, and, though a considerable portion of the

surface was obscured by patches of white that I recognized as clouds, I could clearly make out the continents of the eastern hemisphere. It was a marvelous sight and I lost several minutes in awed contemplation of the wonder. Then I heard Hart laugh.

"Just coming out of it, Jack?" he asked.

I stared at him foolishly. It had seemed to me that I was alone in this vast universe, and the sound of his voice startled me. "Guess I'm not fully out of it yet," I said. "Where are we?"

"Oh, about sixty thousand miles out," he replied carelessly; "and we are traveling at our maximum speed—that is, the maximum we need for this little voyage."

"Little voyage!" I gasped. And then I looked at George and the professor and saw that they, too, were grinning at my discomfiture. I laughed crazily, I suppose, for they all sobered at once.

Traveling through space at more than forty thousand miles an hour, it seemed that we were stationary. Movement was now easy—too easy, in fact, for we were practically weightless. The professor was having a time of it manipulating a pencil and a pad of paper on which he had a mass of small figures that were absolutely meaningless to me. He was calculating and plotting our course and, without him, we should never have reached the object we sought.

Time passed rapidly, for the wonders of the naked universe were a never-ending source of fascination. Occasionally a series of rocket charges was fired to keep our direction and velocity, but these were light, and the acceleration so insignificant that we were put to no discomfort whatever. But it was necessary that we keep our straps buckled, for, in the weightless condition, even the slightest increase or decrease in speed or change in direction was sufficient to throw us the length of the cabin, from which painful bruises might be received.

The supports to which we were strapped and which saved us from being crushed by the acceleration and

deceleration, were similar to hammocks, being hooked to the floor and ceiling of the cabin rather than suspended horizontally in the conventional manner. This was for the reason that the energy of the rockets was expended fore and aft, except for steering, and the forces were therefore along the horizontal axis of the vessel. The supports were elastic and the padding deep and soft. Being swiveled at top and bottom, they could swing around so that deceleration as well as acceleration was relieved. For this reason the controls had been altered so that the flexible support in which Hart was suspended could rotate about their pedestal, thus allowing for their operation by the pilot either when accelerating or decelerating. How he could control the muscles of his arms and hands under the extreme conditions is still a mystery to me, however, and George agrees with me in this. We found ourselves to be utterly helpless.

My next impression of the trip is that of swinging rapidly around and finding myself facing the rear wall of the cabin. Then the tremendous pressure once more at a burst from the forward tubes. We had

commenced deceleration. For me there were alternate periods of full and semi-consciousness and, to this day, I can remember no more than the high spots of that historical expedition.

Then we were free to move once more, and I turned to face the instrument board. Our relative velocity had become practically zero; that is, we were traveling through space at about the same speed and in the same direction as the earth. The professor and Hart were consulting a pencil chart and excitedly looking first through the forward ports and then into the screen of the periscope.

"This is the approximate location," averred the professor.

"But they are not here," replied Hart.

George and I peered in all directions and could see nothing excepting the marvels of the universe we had been viewing. The moon now seemed very close and its craters and so-called seas were as plainly visible as in a four-inch telescope on earth. But we saw

nothing of the enemy.

The earth was a huge ball still, but much smaller than when I had first observed it from the heavens. The sun's corona—the flaming streamers which the professor declared extended as much as five million miles into space—was partly hidden behind the rim of the earth and the effect was blinding. A thin crescent of brilliant light marked the rim of our planet and the rest was in shadow, but a shadow that was lighted awesomely in cold green by reflected light from her satellite.

"I have it!" suddenly shouted the professor. "We are all in very nearly the same line with reference to the sun, and the enemy is between the blazing body and ourselves. We must shift our position, move into the shadow of the earth. We have missed our calculation by a few hundred miles, that is all."

All! I thought. These astronomers, so accustomed to dealing in tremendous distances that must be measured in light-years, thought nothing of an error of several hundred miles. But I suppose it was really

an inconsiderable amount, at that.

At any rate, we shifted position and looked around a bit more. We saw nothing at first. Then Hart consulted the chronometer.

"Time is up!" he shouted.

On the instant there was a flash of dazzling green light from a point not a hundred miles from our position, a flash that was followed by a streaking pencil of the same light shooting earthward with terrific velocity. Breathlessly we followed its length, saw it burst like a bomb and hurl three green balls from itself which sped at equally spaced angles to form a perfect triangle. They hovered a moment at about two thousand miles above the surface of the earth, according to the professor, who was using the telescope at the time, and shot their deadly rays toward our world. We were too late to prevent the renewal of hostilities!

Another and another streak of green light followed and we knew that great havoc was being wrought

back home. But these served to locate the enemy's position definitely and we immediately set about to draw nearer. We were still somewhat on the dark side of the object, which had prevented our seeing it. Now we swung about so that it was plainly visible. And, what a strange appearance it presented, out here in space!

Fully fifteen miles in diameter, it was a huge doughnut, a great ring of tubing with a center-opening that was at least eighty per cent of its maximum diameter. There it hovered, sending out those deadly missiles in a continuous stream toward our poor world. As we approached the weird space flier, we saw that a number of objects floated about within the great circle of its inner circumference. The NY-18, the SF-61 and the SF-22, without doubt! The theory of Hart's was correct in every detail.

We were still at about ten miles distance from the great ring and the streaking light pencils were speeding earthward at the rate of one a minute now. There was no time to lose. Already there was more destruction on its way than had been previously

wrought—several times over.

Hart was sighting along a tiny tube that projected into the forward partition and he maneuvered the *Pioneer* until she was nose on to the great ring. He pulled a switch and there came a purring that was entirely new. A row of huge vacuum tubes along the wall lighted to vivid brilliancy and a throbbing vibration filled the artificial air of the cabin.

He pulled a small lever at the side of the tube and the vessel rocked to the energy that was released from those vacuum tubes. The thin rod which had been installed at the *Pioneer's* nose burst into brilliant flame—orange tinted luminescence that grew to a sphere of probably ten feet in diameter. Then there was a heavy shock and the ball of fire left its position and, with inconceivable velocity, sprang straight for the side of the great ring. It was a fair hit and, when the weird missile found its mark, it simply vanished—swallowed up in the metal walls of the monster vessel. For a moment we thought nothing was to result. Then we burst into shouts of joy, for a great section of the ring fused into nothingness and was

gone! Fully a quarter of the circumference of the ring had disappeared into the vacuum of space. Truly, the governments of Earth had developed some terrible weapons of their own!

We watched, breathless.

The green light pencils no longer streaked their paths of death in the direction of our world, which now seemed so remote. The great ring with the vacant space in its rim wobbled uncertainly for a moment as though some terrific upheaval from within was tearing it asunder. Then it lurched directly for the *Pioneer*. We had been observed!

But Hart was equal to the occasion and he shot the *Pioneer* in the direction of the earth with such acceleration that we all were flattened into our supports with the same old violence. Then, with equal violence, we decelerated. The ring was following so closely that it actually rushed many hundreds of miles past us before it was brought to rest. From it there sprang one of the light pencils, and the *Pioneer* was rocked as by a heavy gale when it rushed past on its

harmless way into infinity. The enemy had missed.

Meanwhile, Hart was operating another mechanism that was new to the *Pioneer* and again he sighted along the tiny tube. This time there was no sound within, no ball of fire without, no visible ray. But, when he had pressed the release of this second energy, the ring seemed to shrivel and twist as if gripped by a giant's hand. It reeled and spun. Then, no longer in a balance of forces, it commenced its long drop earthward.

His job finished and finished well, Hart Jones collapsed.

Following his more than three days and four nights of superhuman endeavor, it seemed strange to see Hart slumped white and still over the control pedestal. He who had energy far in excess of that of any of the rest of us had worn himself out. Having had no rest or sleep in nearly a hundred hours, the body that housed so wonderful a spirit simply refused to carry on. Tenderly we stretched him on the cabin floor, the *Pioneer* drifting in space the while. The professor,

who was likewise something of a physician, listened to his heart, drew back his eyelids, and pronounced him in no danger whatever.

We slapped his wrists, sprinkled his face and neck with cold water from the drinking supply, and were soon rewarded by his return to consciousness. He smiled weakly and fell sound asleep. No war in the universe could have wakened him then, so we lifted him to his feet—rather I should say, we guided his practically floating body—and strapped him in George's hammock, preparing for the homeward journey. Though dangling from the straps in a position that would be vertical were we on earth, he slept like a baby. George took the controls in Hart's place and the professor and I returned to our accustomed supports.

The return trip was considerably slower, as George did not wish to push the *Pioneer* to its limit as had been necessary when coming out to meet the enemy, nor was he able to keep control of the ship against a too-rapid acceleration. Consequently, the rate of acceleration was much lower and we were not nearly

as uncomfortable as on the outgoing trip. Thus, nearly ten hours were required for the return. And Hart slept through it all.

In order to make best use of the small amount of fuel still in the cylinders, George circled the earth five times before we entered the upper limits of the atmosphere, the circles becoming of smaller diameter at each revolution and the speed of the ship proportionately reduced. An occasional discharge from one of the forward rocket tubes assisted materially in the deceleration, yet, when we slipped into level five, our speed was so great that the temperature of the cabin rose alarmingly, due to the friction of the air against the hull of the vessel. It was necessary to use the last remaining ounce of fuel to reduce the velocity to a safe value. A long glide to earth was then our only means of landing and, since we were over the Gulf of Mexico at the time, we had no recourse other than landing in the State of Texas.

Passing over Galveston in level three, we found that the Humble oil fields and a great section of the surrounding country had been the center of one of the

enemy bombardments. All was blackness and ruin for many miles between this point and Houston. At Houston Airport we landed, unheralded but welcome.

The lower levels were once more filled with traffic, and one of the southern route transcontinental liners had just made its stop at this point. The arrival of the *Pioneer* was thus witnessed by an unusually large crowd, and, when the news was spread to the city, their numbers increased with all the rapidity made possible by the various means of transportation from the city.

So it was that Hart Jones, after we finally succeeded in awakening him and getting him to his feet, was hailed by a veritable multitude as the greatest hero of all time. The demonstrations become so enthusiastic that police reserves, hastily summoned from the city, were helpless in their attempts to keep the crowd in order.

It was with greatest difficulty that Hart was finally extricated from the clutches of the mob and conveyed to the new Rice Hotel in Houston, where it was

necessary to obtain medical attention for him immediately. He was in no condition at the time to receive the richly deserved plaudits of the multitude, and, truth to tell, we others from the *Pioneer* were in much the same shape.

To me that night will always be the most terrible of nightmares. My first thought was of my family and, when I had been assigned to a room, I immediately asked the switchboard operator for a long-distance connection to my home in Rutherford. There was complete silence for a minute and I jangled the hook impatiently, my head throbbing with a thousand aches and pains. Then, to my surprise, the voice of the hotel manager greeted me.

"Mr. Makely," he said softly, and I thought there was a peculiar ring in his voice, "I think you had better not try to get Rutherford this evening. We are sending the house physician to your room at once and—there are orders from Washington, you know—you are to think of nothing at the present but sleep and a long rest."

"Why—why—" I stammered, "can't you see? I must

communicate with my family. They must know of my return. I must know if they're safe and well."

"I'm sorry, sir," apologized the manager, "Government orders, you know." And he hung up.

Something in that soft voice brought to me an inkling of the truth. An icy hand gripped my heart as I heard a knock at the door. With palsied fingers I turned the key and admitted the professor and a kindly-faced elderly gentleman with a small black bag. One look at the professor told me the truth. I seized his two arms in a grip that made him wince.

"Tell me! Tell me!" I demanded, "Has anything happened to my family?"

"Jack," said the professor slowly, "while we were out there watching Hart destroy the enemy vessel, Rutherford was destroyed!"

It must be that I frightened him by my answering stare, for he backed away from me in apparent fear. I noticed that the doctor was rummaging in his bag. I

know I did not speak, did not cry out, for my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. It seemed I must go mad. The professor still backed away from me; then, wiry little athlete that he was, he sprang directly for my knees in a beautiful football tackle. I remember that point clearly and how I admired his agility at the time. I remember the glint of a small instrument in the doctor's hand. Then all was blackness.

Eight days later, they tell me it was, I returned to painful consciousness in a hospital bed. But let me skip the agony of mind I experienced then. Suffice it to say that, when I was able, I set forth for Washington. Hart Jones was there and he had sent for me. But I took little interest in the going; did not even bother to speculate as to the reason for his summons. I had devoured the news during my convalescence and now, more than two weeks after the destruction of the Terror, I knew the extent of the damage wrought upon our earth by those deadly green light pencils we had seen issuing from the huge ring up there in the skies. The horror of it all was fresh in my mind, but my own private horror overshadowed all.

I was glad that Hart had been so signally honored by the World Peace Board, that he was now the most famous and popular man in the entire world. He deserved it all and more. But what cared I—I who had done least of all to help in his great work—that the Terror had been found where it buried itself in the sand of the Sahara when falling to earth? What cared I that the discoveries made in the excavating of the huge metal ring were of inestimable value to science?

It gave me passing satisfaction to note that all of Hart Jones' theories were borne out by the discoveries; that Oradel and his minions were responsible for this terrible war; that the planet they aligned against us was Venus and that more than a hundred thousand of the Venerians had been carried in that weird engine of destruction which had been brought down by Hart.

It was interesting to read of the fall of that huge ring; how it was heated to incandescence when it entered our atmosphere at such tremendous velocity; of the tidal waves of concentric billows in the sand that led to its discovery by Egyptian Government planes. The broadcast descriptions and the television views of the

stunted and twisted Venerians whose bodies were recovered from the partly consumed wreckage were interesting. But it all left me cold. I had no further interest in life. That the world had escaped an overwhelming disaster was clear, and it gave me a certain pleasure. But for me it might as well have been completely destroyed.

Nevertheless, I went to Washington. I felt somehow that I owed it to Hart Jones, the greatest world hero since Lindbergh. I would at least listen to what he had to say.

A fast plane carried me, a plane chartered by the government. To me it seemed that it crawled, though it was a sixth-level ship, and made the trip in record time. Why I was impatient to reach Washington I do not know, for I was absolutely disinterested in anything that might occur there. It was merely that my nerves were on edge, I suppose, and everything annoyed me.

Hart met me at the airport and greeted me like a long-lost brother. He talked incessantly and jumped

from one subject to the other with the obvious intention of trying to get my mind off my troubles until we reached his office in the Air Traffic building.

On his door there was the legend, "Director of Research," and, when we had entered, I observed that the office was furnished with all the luxury that suited his new position. I dropped into a deeply upholstered chair at the side of his mahogany desk, and, for the space of several minutes, Hart regarded me with concern, speaking not a word.

"Jack, old man," he finally ventured. "I can't talk to you of this thing. But it makes me feel very badly to see you take it so hard. There are many things you have to live for, old top, and it is to talk about these that I sent for you."

"You mean work?" I asked.

"Yes. That is the best thing for us all, in any emergency or under any circumstances whatever. Preston wants you back for one thing, and he authorized me to tell you that the job of office

manager is waiting for you at double your former salary."

My eyes misted at this. Preston was a good old scout! But I could never bear it to return to the old surroundings, even in the city. "No, Hart," I said, "I'd rather be away from New York and from that part of the country. Associations, you know."

"I understand," he replied, "and that is just what I had hoped you would decide. Because I have a job for you in the Air Service. A good one, too.

"You know there is much reconstruction work to be done on earth. More than forty cities and towns have been wiped out of existence and these must be rebuilt. That will occupy the minds and energies of thousands who have been bereaved as you have. But, in the Air Service, we have a program that I believe will be more to your liking. The log of the *Terror*, in Oradel's handwriting, was found intact, as were a number of manuscripts pertaining to plans of the Venerians.

"These misshapen creatures were quite evidently educated by Oradel to a hatred of our world. We have reason to believe that other attacks may follow, for they were obviously intending to migrate here in millions. And, according to records found aboard the *Terror*, they are of advanced scientific accomplishment. We may expect them to construct other vessels similar to the *Terror* and to come here again. We must be prepared to fight them off, to carry the war to their own planet if necessary. My work is to organize a world fleet of space ships for this purpose, and I'd like you to help me in this. The work will take you all over the world and will keep you too busy to think about—things."

It was just like Hart, and I thanked him wordlessly, but from the bottom of my heart. Yes, I would accept his generous offer. Though I was no engineer, I had a knowledge of scientific subjects a little above the average, and I could follow instructions. By George, it was the very thing! Suddenly I grew enthusiastic.

There was the sound of voices in the outer office, and Hart's secretary entered to announce the arrival of

George Boehm and Professor Lindquist. This was great!

Chubby George, red-faced and smiling as ever, embraced me with one short arm and pounded me on the back with his other fist in his jovial, joking manner. It was good to have friends like these! The professor held forth his hand timidly. He was thinking of that tackle and the half-Nelson he had used on me while the doctor slipped that needle into my arm back there in Houston.

"Don't remove your glasses, Professor," I laughed; "I'm not going to hit you. That was a swell tackle of yours, and you did me a big service down there in the Rice Hotel."

He beamed with pleasure and gripped my hand—mightily, for such a little fellow. George was whispering to Hart, and I could see that they were greatly excited over something.

"Jack," said Hart, when the professor and I finished talking things over, "George here wants you to take a

little trip over to Philly with him. He has something there he wants to show you."

I looked from one to the other for signs of a hoax. These two, under normal circumstances, were always up to something. But what I saw in their expressions convinced me that I had better go, and somehow, there rose in my breast a forlorn hope.

"All right," I agreed. "Let's go!"

Once more we four took off together, this time in a speedy little first-level cabin plane of Hart's design, piloted by the irrepressible George. I was brimming with questions, but George kept up such a running fire of small talk that I was unable to get in a single word throughout the short trip to the Quaker City. It was quite evident that something was in the wind.

Instead of landing at the airport, George swung across the city and dropped to the roof landing space of a large building which I recognized as the Germantown Hospital. We had no sooner landed when I was rushed from the plane to the penthouse over the

elevator shafts. We were soon on the main floor and George went immediately to the desk at the receiving office, where he engaged in earnest conversation with the nurse in charge.

"What are you doing—committing me?" I asked, half joking only. For, from the mysterious expression of my friends' faces, I was not sure what to expect.

"No," laughed Hart. "George learned of the existence of a patient here who may turn out to be a very good friend of yours."

I turned this over in my mind, which did not yet function quite normally. A friend? Why, I had very few that could really be termed good friends outside of those that accompanied me. It could mean but one thing. Possibly one of my children—or even my dear wife—might have escaped somehow. I followed in a daze as a white-capped and gowned nurse led us along the corridor and into a ward where there were dozens of high, white beds.

Some of the patients were swathed in bandages; some

sat up in their beds, reading or just staring; others lay inert and pale. The reek of iodoform pervaded the large room.

We stopped at the bedside of one of the staring patients, a young woman who looked unseeingly at our party. Great heavens, it was Marie!

A physician stood at the other side of her bed, finger on her pulse. The others drew back as I approached her side, raised her free hand to my lips and spoke to her.

"Marie, dear," I asked gently, forcing the lump from my throat as best I could, "don't you know me? It's Jack, Honey."

The fixed stare of the great blue eyes shifted in my direction. It seemed that they looked through and past me into some terrible realm where only horror held sway. She drew her hand from my grasp and passed it before those staring, unnatural eyes. There was an audible gulp from George. But the doctor smiled encouragement to me. I tried once more.

"Marie," I said, "where are Jim and Jackie?"

The hand fluttered to her lap, where it lay, blue-veined and pitifully thin. The stare focussed on me, seemed to concentrate. Then the film was gone from the eyes and she saw—she knew me!

"Oh, Jack!" she wailed, "I have been away. Don't you know where they are?"

My heart nearly stopped at this, but I sat on the edge of the bed and took her in my arms, looking at the doctor for approval. He nodded his head brightly and beckoned to the nurse.

"Bring the children," I heard him whisper.

My cup was full. But I must be calm for Marie's sake. She had closed her eyes now and great tears coursed down her waxen cheeks. Her body shook with sobs.

"She'll recover?" I asked the doctor.

"You bet. Just an aggravated case of amnesia. Hasn't

eaten. Didn't even know her children. Cured now, but she'll need a few weeks to build up." He snapped shut the lid of his watch.

Those succinct sentences were the finest I had ever heard.

Marie clung to me like an infant to its mother. Her sobs gradually ceased and she looked into my eyes. Little Jim and Jack had come in and were clamoring for recognition.

"Oh, Jack," Marie whispered, "I'm so happy."

She relinquished me and turned her attention to the children. I saw that my friends had left and that an orderly was placing screens about us. So I'll close the screen on the remainder of this most happy reunion.

It was several days before I had the complete story. Being lonesome during my absence when we were preparing for the voyage into space, and not knowing just when I would return, Marie had packed a grip and taken the train for Philadelphia, deciding to

spend a few days with her Aunt Margaret, or at least to remain there with the children until I returned.

She had boarded the train at Manhattan Transfer at about the time we reached the location of the *Terror* and the train was just pulling out of the station when there came the first of the new attacks of the enemy. She thought that the pillar of fire rose from the approximate location of Rutherford, but was not sure until they reached Newark, when the news was spread throughout the train by passengers who boarded it there. She worried and cried over the loss of our little home and had worked herself into a state of extreme nervousness and near-hysteria by the time they reached New Brunswick.

Then, as the long train left New Brunswick, there was another attack, this one on the town they had just left. The last two cars of the train were blown from the track by the initial concussion, and the remainder of the train brought to a grinding, jerking stop that threw the passengers into a panic.

Already hysterical, Marie was in no condition to bear

up under the shock, and the loss of memory followed. Jack and Jim clung to her, of course, and were taken to the Germantown Hospital with her when the wreck victims were transferred to that point. She had no identification on her person, and it was by sheerest luck that George, who was visiting a friend in the same hospital, chanced to see her and thought he recognized her.

That was all of it, but to me it was more than enough. From the depths of despondency, I rose to the peaks of elation. It was true that we would have to establish a new home, but this would be a joy as never before. Those I had given up as lost were restored to me and I was content. Hart would have to make some changes in the duties of that new job—the world travel was out of the picture. I had had my fill of adventure.

Besides, the hot spell was over.

#39 The Forgotten Planet, By Sewell Peaslee Wright:

The authentic account of why cosmic man damned an outlaw world to be, forever, a leper of space.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

I have been asked to record, plainly and without prejudice, a brief history of the Forgotten Planet.

That this record, when completed, will be sealed in the archives of the Interplanetary Alliance and remain there, a secret and rather dreadful bit of history, is no concern of mine. I am an old man, well past the century mark, and what disposal is made of my work is of little importance to me. I grow weary of life and living, which is good. The fear of death was lost when

our scientists showed us how to live until we grew weary of life. But I am digressing—an old man's failing.

“It's nothing. Close the exit; we depart at once.”

The Forgotten Planet was not always so named. The name that it once bore had been, as every child knows, stricken from the records, actual and mental, of the Universe. It is well that evil should not be remembered. But in order that this history may be clear in the centuries to come, my record should go back to beginnings.

So far as the Universe is concerned, the history of the Forgotten Planet begins with the visit of the first craft ever to span the space between the worlds: the crude, adventuresome *Edorn*, whose name, as well as the names of the nine Zenians who manned her, occupy the highest places in the roll of honor of the Universe.

Ame Baove, the commander and historian of the *Edorn*, made but brief comment on his stop at the Forgotten Planet. I shall record it in full:

"We came to rest upon the surface of this, the fourth of the planets visited during the first trip of the *Edorn*, eighteen spaces before the height of the sun. We found ourselves surrounded immediately by vast numbers of creatures very different from ourselves, and from their expressions and gestures, we gathered that they were both curious and unfriendly.

"Careful analysis of the atmosphere proved it to be sufficiently similar to our own to make it possible for us to again stretch our legs outside the rather cramped quarters of the *Edorn*, and tread the soil of still another world.

"No sooner had we emerged, however, than we were angrily beset by the people of this unfriendly planet, and rather than do them injury, we retired immediately, and concluded our brief observations through our ports.

"The topography of this planet is similar to our own, save that there are no mountains, and the flora is highly colored almost without exception, and apparently quite largely parasitical in nature. The

people are rather short in stature, with hairless heads and high foreheads. Instead of being round or oval, however, the heads of these people rise to a rounded ridge which runs back from a point between and just above the eyes, nearly to the nape of the neck behind. They give evidence of a fair order of intelligence, but are suspicious and unfriendly. From the number and size of the cities we saw, this planet is evidently thickly populated.

"We left about sixteen spaces before the height of the sun, and continued towards the fifth and last planet before our return to Zenia."

This report, quite naturally, caused other explorers in space to hesitate. There were so many friendly, eager worlds to visit, during the years that relations between the planets were being established, that an unfriendly people were ignored.

However, from time to time, as space-ships became perfected and more common, parties from many of the more progressive planets did call. Each of them met with the same hostile reception, and at last,

shortly after the second War of the Planets, the victorious Alliance sent a fleet of the small but terrible Deuber Spheres, convoyed by four of the largest of the disintegrator ray-ships, to subjugate the Forgotten Planet.

Five great cities were destroyed, and the Control City, the seat of the government, was menaced before the surly inhabitants conceded allegiance to the Alliance. Parties of scientists, fabricators, and workmen were then landed, and a dictator was appointed.

From all the worlds of the Alliance, instruments and equipment were brought to the Forgotten Planet. A great educational system was planned and executed, the benign and kindly influence of the Alliance made every effort to improve the conditions existing on the Forgotten Planet, and to win the friendship and allegiance of these people.

For two centuries the work went on. Two centuries of bloodshed, strife, hate and disturbance. No where else within the known Universe was there ill feeling. The second awful War of the Planets had at last

succeeded in teaching the lesson of peace.

Two centuries of effort—wasted effort. It was near the end of the second century that my own story begins.

Commander at that time of the super-cruiser *Tamon*, a Special Patrol ship of the Alliance, I was not at all surprised to receive orders from the Central Council to report at emergency speed. Special Patrol work in those days, before the advent of the present decentralized system, was a succession of false starts, hurried recalls, and urgent, emergency orders.

I obeyed at once. In the Special Patrol service, there is no questioning orders. The planet Earth, from which I sprang, is and always has been proud of the fact that from the very beginning, her men have been picked to command the ships of the Special Patrol. No matter how dangerous, how forlorn and hopeless the mission given to a commander of a Special Patrol ship, history has never recorded that any commander has ever hesitated. That is why our uniform of blue and silver commands the respect that it does even in this day and age of softening and decadence, when

men—but again an old man digresses. And perhaps it is not for me to judge.

I pointed the blunt nose of the *Tamon* at Zenia, seat of the Central Council, and in four hours, Earth time, the great craft swept over the gleaming city of the Central Council and settled swiftly to the court before the mighty, columned Hall of the Planets.

Four pages of the Council, in their white and scarlet livery, met me and conducted me instantly to a little anteroom behind the great council chamber.

There were three men awaiting me there; three men whose faces, at that time, were familiar to every person in the known Universe.

Kellen, the oldest of the three, and the spokesman, rose as I entered the room. The others did likewise, as the pages closed the heavy doors behind me.

"You are prompt, and that is good," thought Kellen. "I welcome you. Remove now thy menore."

I glanced up at him swiftly. This must surely be an important matter, that I was asked to remove my menore band.

It will, of course, be understood that at that time we had but a bulky and clumsy instrument to enable us to convey and receive thought; a device consisting of a heavy band of metal, in which were imbedded the necessary instruments and a tiny atomic energy generator, the whole being worn as a circlet or crown upon the head.

Wonderingly, I removed my menore, placed it upon the long, dark table around which the three men were standing, and bowed. Each of the three, in turn, lifted their gleaming circlets from their heads, and placed them likewise upon the table before them.

"You wonder," said Kellen, speaking of course, in the soft and liquid universal language, which is, I understand, still disseminated in our schools, as it should be. "I shall explain as quickly and as briefly as

possible.

"We have called you here on a dangerous mission. A mission that will require tact and quickness of mind as well as bravery. We have selected you, have called you, because we are agreed that you possess the qualities required. Is it not so?" He glanced at his two companions, and they nodded gravely, solemnly, without speaking.

"You are a young man, John Hanson," continued Kellen, "but your record in your service is one of which you can be proud. We trust you—with knowledge that is so secret, so precious, that we must revert to speech in order to convey it; we dare not trust it, even in this protected and guarded place, to the minore's quicker but less discreet communication."

He paused for a moment, frowning thoughtfully as though dreading to begin. I waited silently, and at last he spoke again.

"There is a world"—and he named a name which I

shall not repeat, the name of the Forgotten Planet —"that is a festering sore upon the body of the Universe. As you know, for two centuries we have tried to pass on to these people an understanding of peace and friendship. I believe that nothing has been left undone. The Council and the forces behind it have done everything within their power. And now—"

He stopped again, and there was an expression of deepest pain written upon his wise and kindly face. The pause was for but an instant.

"And now," he went on firmly, "it is at an end. Our work has been undone. Two centuries of effort—undone. They have risen in revolt, they have killed all those sent by the Alliance of which this Council is the governing body and the mouthpiece, and they have sent us an ultimatum—a threat of war!"

"*What?*"

Kellen nodded his magnificent old head gravely.

"I do not wonder that you start," he said heavily.
"War! It must not be. It cannot be! And yet, war is what they threaten."

"But, sir!" I put in eagerly. I was young and rash in those days. "Who are they, to make war against a united Universe?"

"I have visited your planet, Earth," said Kellen, smiling very faintly. "You have a tiny winged insect you call *bee*. Is it not so?"

"Yes."

"The bee is a tiny thing, of little strength. A man, a little child, might crush one to death between a thumb and finger. But the bee may sting before he is crushed, and the sting may linger on for days, a painful and unpleasant thing. Is that not so?"

"I see, sir," I replied, somewhat abashed before the tolerant, kindly wisdom of this great man. "They cannot hope to wage successful war, but they may bring much suffering to others."

"Much suffering," nodded Kellen, still gently smiling. "And we are determined that this thing shall not be. Not"—and his face grew gray with a terrible and bitter resolve—"not if we have to bring to bear upon that dark and unwilling world the disintegrating rays of every ship of the Alliance, so that the very shell of the planet shall disappear, and no life ever again shall move upon its surface.

"But this," and he seemed to shudder at the thought, "is a terrible and a ruthless thing to even contemplate. We must first try once again to point out to them the folly of their ways. It is with this mission that we would burden you, John Hanson."

"It is no burden, but an honor, sir," I said quietly.

"Youth! Youth!" Kellen chided me gently. "Foolish, yet rather glorious. Let me tell you the rest, and then we shall ask for your reply again.

"The news came to us by a small scout ship attached

to that unhappy world. It barely made the journey to Jaron, the nearest planet, and crashed so badly, from lack of power, that all save one man were killed.

"He, luckily, tore off his menore, and insisted in speech that he be brought here. He was obeyed, and, in a dying condition, was brought to this very chamber." Kellen glanced swiftly, sadly, around the room, as though he could still visualize that scene.

"Every agent of the Alliance upon that hateful planet was set upon and killed, following the working out of some gigantic and perfectly executed plan—all save the crew of this one tiny scout ship, which was spared to act as a messenger.

"'Tell your great Council,' was the message these people sent to us, 'that here is rebellion. We do not want, nor will we tolerate, your peace. We have learned now that upon other worlds than ours there are great riches. These we shall take. If there is resistance, we have a new and a terrible death to deal. A death that your great scientists will be helpless against; a horrible and irresistible death that

will make desolate and devoid of intelligent life any world where we are forced to sow the seeds of ultimate disaster.

"We are not yet ready. If we were, we would not move, for we prefer that your Council have time to think about what is surely to come. If you doubt that we have the power to do what we have threatened to do, send one ship, commanded by a man whose word you will trust, and we will prove to him that these are no empty words."

"That, as nearly as I can remember it," concluded Kellen, "is the message. The man who brought it died almost before he had finished.

"That is the message. You are the man we have picked to accept their challenge. Remember, though, that there are but the four of us in this room. There are but four of us who know these things. If you for any reason do not wish to accept this mission, there will be none to judge you, least of all, any one of us, who

know best of all the perils."

"You say, sir," I said quietly, although my heart was pounding in my throat, and roaring in my ears, "that there would be none to judge me.

"Sir, there would be myself. There could be no more merciless judge. I am honored that I have been selected for this task, and I accept the responsibility willingly, gladly. When is it your wish that we should start?"

The three presiding members of the Council glanced at each other, faintly smiling, as though they would say, as Kellen had said a short time before: "Youth! Youth!" Yet I believe they were glad and somewhat proud that I had replied as I did.

"You may start," said Kellen, "as soon as you can complete the necessary preparations. Detailed instructions will be given you later."

He bowed to me, and the others did likewise. Then Kellen picked up his menore and adjusted it.

The interview was over.

"What do you make it?" I asked the observer. He glanced up from his instrument.

"Jaron, sir. Three degrees to port; elevation between five and six degrees. Approximate only, of course, sir."

"Good enough. Please ask Mr. Barry to hold to his present course. We shall not stop at Jaron."

The observer glanced at me curiously, but he was too well disciplined to hesitate or ask questions.

"Yes, sir!" he said crisply, and spoke into the microphone beside him.

None of us wore menores when on duty, for several reasons. Our instruments were not nearly as perfect as those in use to-day, and verbal orders were clearer and carried more authority than mental instructions. The delicate and powerful electrical and atomic mechanism of our ship interfered with the functioning of the menores, and at that time the old habit of

speech was far more firmly entrenched, due to hereditary influence, than it is now.

I nodded to the man, and made my way to my own quarters. I wished most heartily that I could talk over my plans with someone, but this had been expressly forbidden.

"I realize that you trust your men, and more particularly your officers," Kellen had told me during the course of his parting conversation with me. "I trust them also—yet we must remember that the peace of mind of the Universe is concerned. If news, even a rumor, of this threatened disaster should become known, it is impossible to predict the disturbance it might create.

"Say nothing to anyone. It is your problem. You alone should leave the ship when you land; you alone shall hear or see the evidence they have to present, and you alone shall bring word of it to us. That is the wish of the Council."

"Then it is my wish," I had said, and so it had been

settled.

Aft, in the crew's quarters, a gong sounded sharply: the signal for changing watches, and the beginning of a sleep period. I glanced at the remote control dials that glowed behind their glass panel on one side of my room. From the registered attraction of Jaron, at our present speed, we should be passing her within, according to Earth time, about two hours. That meant that their outer patrols might be seeking our business, and I touched Barry's attention button, and spoke into the microphone beside my bunk.

"Mr. Barry? I am turning in for a little sleep. Before you turn over the watch to Eitel, will you see that the nose rays are set for the Special Patrol code signal for this enar. We shall be close to Jaron shortly."

"Yes, sir! Any other orders?"

"No. Keep her on her present course. I shall take the watch from Mr. Eitel."

Since there have been changes since those days, and

will undoubtedly be others in the future, it might be well to make clear, in a document such is this, that at this period, all ships of the Special Patrol Service identified themselves by means of invisible rays flashed in certain sequences, from the two nose, or forward, projectors. These code signals were changed every enar, a period of time arbitrarily set by the Council; about eighteen days, as time is measured on the Earth, and divided into ten periods, as at present, known as enarens. These were further divided into enaros, thus giving us a time-reckoning system for use in space, corresponding roughly to the months, days and hours of the Earth.

I retired, but not to sleep. Sleep would not come. I knew, of course, that if curious outer patrol ships from Jaron did investigate us, they would be able to detect our invisible ray code signal, and thus satisfy themselves that we were on the Council's business. There would be no difficulty on that score. But what I should do after landing upon the rebellious sphere, I had not the slightest idea.

"

Be stern, indifferent to their threats," Kellen, had counseled me, "but do everything within your power to make them see the folly of their attitude. Do not threaten them, for they are a surly people and you might precipitate matters. Swallow your pride if you must; remember that yours is a gigantic responsibility, and upon the information you bring us may depend the salvation of millions. I am convinced that they are not—you have a word in your language that fits exactly. Not pretending ... what is the word?"

"Bluffing?" I had supplied in English, smiling.

"Right! Bluffing. It is a very descriptive word. I am sure they are not bluffing."

I was sure of it also. They knew the power of the Alliance; they had been made to feel it more than once. A bluff would have been a foolish thing, and these people were not fools. In some lines of research they were extraordinarily brilliant.

But what could their new, terrible weapon be? Rays we had; at least half a dozen rays of destruction; the terrible dehydrating ray of the Deuber Spheres, the disintegrating ray that dated back before Ame Baove and his first voyage into space, the concentrated ultra-violet ray that struck men down in fiery torment.... No, it could hardly be a new ray that was their boasted weapon.

What, then? Electricity had even then been exhausted of its possibilities. Atomic energy had been released, harnessed, and directed. Yet it would take fabulous time and expense to make these machines of destruction do what they claimed they would do.

Still pondering the problem, I did fall at last into a fitful travesty of sleep.

I was glad when the soft clamor of the bell aft announced the next change of watch. I rose, cleared the cobwebs from my brain with an icy shower, and made my way directly to the navigating room.

"Everything tidy, sir," said Eitel, my second officer,

and a Zenian. He was thin and very dark, like all Zenians, and had the high, effeminate voice of that people. But he was cool and fearless and had the uncanny cerebration of his kind; I trusted him as completely as I trusted Barry, my first officer, who, like myself, was a native of Earth. "Will you take over?"

"Yes," I nodded, glancing at the twin charts beneath the ground glass top of the control table. "Get what sleep you can the next few enaros. Presently I shall want every man on duty and at his station."

He glanced at me curiously, as the observer had done, but saluted and left with only a brief, "Yes, sir!" I returned the salute and turned my attention again to the charts.

The navigating room of an interplanetary ship is without doubt unfamiliar ground to most, so it might be well for me to say that such ships have, for the most part, twin charts, showing progress in two dimensions; to use land terms, lateral and vertical. These charts are really no more than large sheets of

ground glass, ruled in both directions with fine black lines, representing all relatively close heavenly bodies by green lights of varying sizes. The ship itself is represented by a red spark and the whole is, of course, entirely automatic in action, the instruments comprising the chart being operated by super-radio reflexes.

Jaron, the charts showed me at a glance, was now far behind. Almost directly above—it is necessary to resort to these unscientific terms to make my meaning clear—was the tiny world Elon, home of the friendly but impossibly dull winged people, the only ones in the known Universe. I was there but once, and found them almost laughably like our common dragon-flies on Earth; dragon-flies that grow some seven feet long, and with gauzy wings of amazing strength.

Directly ahead, on both charts, was a brilliantly glowing sphere of green—our destination. I made some rapid mental calculations, studying the few fine black lines between the red spark that was our ship, and the nearest edge of the great green sphere. I

glanced at our speed indicator and the attraction meter. The little red slide that moved around the rim of the attraction meter was squarely at the top, showing that the attraction was from straight ahead; the great black hand was nearly a third of the way around the face.

We were very close; two hours would bring us into the atmospheric envelope. In less than two hours and a half, we would be in the Control City of what is now called the Forgotten Planet!

I glanced forward, through the thick glass partitions, into the operating room. Three men stood there, watching intently; they too, were wondering why we visited the unfriendly world.

The planet itself loomed up straight ahead, a great half-circle, its curved rim sharp and bright against the empty blackness of space; the chord ragged and blurred. In two hours ... I turned away and began a restless pacing.

An hour went by; an hour and a half. I pressed the

attention button to the operating room, and gave orders to reduce our speed by half. We were very close to the outer fringe of the atmospheric envelope. Then, keeping my eye on the big surface-temperature gauge, with its stubby red hand, I resumed my nervous pacing.

Slowly the thick red hand of the surface-temperature gauge began to move; slowly, and then more rapidly, until the eyes could catch its creeping.

"Reduce to atmospheric speed," I ordered curtly, and glanced down through a side port at one end of the long navigating room.

We were, at the moment, directly above the twilight belt. To my right, as I looked down, I could see a portion of the glistening antarctic ice cap. Here and there were the great flat lakes, almost seas, of the planet.

Our geographies of the Universe to-day do not show the topography of the Forgotten Planet: I might say, therefore, that the entire sphere was land area, with

numerous great lakes embedded in its surface, together with many broad, very crooked rivers. As Ame Baove had reported, there were no mountains, and no high land.

"Altitude constant," I ordered. "Port three degrees. Stand by for further orders."

The earth seemed to whirl slowly beneath us. Great cities drifted astern, and I compared the scene below me with the great maps I took from our chart-case. The Control City should be just beyond the visible rim; well in the daylight area.

"Port five degrees," I said, and pressed the attention button to Barry's quarters.

"Mr. Barry, please call all men to quarters, including the off-duty watch, and then report to the navigating room. Mr. Eitel will be under my direct orders. We shall descend within the next few minutes."

"Very well, sir."

I pressed the attention button to Eitel's room.

"Mr. Eitel, please pick ten of your best men and have them report at the forward exit. Await me, with the men, at that place. I shall be with you as soon as I turn the command over to Mr. Barry. We are descending immediately."

"Right, sir!" said Eitel.

I turned from the microphone to find that Barry had just entered the navigating room.

"We will descend into the Great Court of the Control City, Mr. Barry," I said. "I have a mission here. I am sorry, but these are the only instructions I can leave you."

"I do not know how long I shall be gone from the ship, but if I do not return within three hours, depart without me, and report directly to Kellen of the Council. To him, and no other. Tell him, verbally, what took place. Should there be any concerted action against the *Tamon*, use your own judgment as to the

action to be taken, remembering that the safety of the ship and its crew, and the report of the Council, are infinitely more important than my personal welfare. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. Too damned clear."

I smiled and shook my head.

"Don't worry," I said lightly. "I'll be back well within the appointed time."

"I hope so. But there's something wrong as hell here. I'm talking now as man to man; not to my commanding officer. I've been watching below, and I have seen at least two spots where large numbers of our ships have been destroyed. The remaining ships bear their own damned emblem where the crest of the Alliance should be—and was. What does it mean?"

"It means," I said slowly, "that I shall have to rely upon every man and officer to forget himself and myself, and obey orders without hesitation and without flinching. The orders are not mine, but direct

from the Council itself." I held out my hand to him—an ancient Earth gesture of greeting, good-will and farewell—and he shook it vigorously.

"God go with you," he said softly, and with a little nod of thanks I turned and quickly left the room.

Eitel, with his ten men, were waiting for me at the forward exit. The men fell back a few paces and came to attention; Eitel saluted smartly.

"We are ready, sir. What are your orders?"

"You are to guard this opening. Under no circumstances is anyone to enter save myself. I shall be gone not longer than three hours; if I am not back within that time, Mr. Barry has his orders. The exit will be sealed, and the *Tamon* will depart immediately, without me."

"Yes, sir. You will pardon me, but I gather that your mission is a dangerous one. May I not accompany you?"

I shook my head.

"I shall need you here."

"But, sir, they are very excited and angry; I have been watching them from the observation ports. And there is a vast crowd of them around the ship."

"I had expected that. I thank you for your concern, but I must go alone. Those are the orders. Will you unseal the exit?"

His "Yes, sir!" was brisk and efficient, but there was a worried frown on his features as he unlocked and released the switch that opened the exit.

The huge plug of metal, some ten feet in diameter, revolved swiftly and noiselessly, backing slowly in its fine threads into the interior of the ship, gripped by the ponderous gimbals which, as the last threads disengaged, swung the mighty disc to one side, like the door of some great safe.

"Remember your orders," I smiled, and with a little

gesture to convey an assurance which I certainly did not feel, I strode through the circular opening out into the crowd. The heavy glass secondary door shot down behind me, and I was in the hands of the enemy.

The first thing I observed was that my menore, which I had picked up on my way to the exit, was not functioning. Not a person in all that vast multitude wore a menore; the five black-robed dignitaries who marched to meet me wore none.

Nothing could have showed more clearly that I was in for trouble. To invite a visitor, as Kellen had done, to remove his menore first, was, of course, a polite and courteous thing to do if one wished to communicate by speech; to remove the menore before greeting a visitor wearing one, was a tacit admission of rank enmity; a confession that one's thoughts were to be concealed.

My first impulse was to snatch off my own instrument and fling it in the solemn, ugly faces of the nearest of the five dignitaries; I remembered Kellen's warning just in time. Quietly, I removed the metal circlet and

tucked it under my arm, bowing slightly to the committee of five as I did so.

"I am Ja Ben," said the first of the five, with an evil grin. "You are the representative of the Council that we commanded to appear?"

"I am John Hanson, commander of the ship *Tamon* of the Special Patrol Service. I am here to represent the Central Council," I replied with dignity.

"As we commanded," grinned Ja Ben. "That is good. Follow us and you shall have the evidence you were promised."

Ja Ben led the way with two of his black-robed followers. The other two fell in behind me. A virtual prisoner, I marched between them, through the vast crowd that made way grudgingly to let us pass.

I have seen the people of most of the planets of the known Universe. Many of them, to Earth notions, are odd. But these people, so much like us in many respects, were strangely repulsive.

Their heads, as Ame Baove had recorded, were not round like ours, but possessed a high bony crest that ran from between their lashless, browless eyes, down to the very nape of their necks. Their skin, even that covering their hairless heads, was a dull and papery white, like parchment, and their eyes were abnormally small, and nearly round. A hateful, ugly people, perpetually scowling, snarling; their very voices resembled more the growl of wild beasts than the speech of intelligent beings.

Ja Ben led the way straight to the low but vast building of dun-colored stone that I knew was the administration building of the Control City. We marched up the broad, crowded steps, through the muttering, jeering multitude into the building itself. The guards at the doors stood aside to let us through and the crowd at last was left behind.

A swift, cylindrical elevator shot us upward, into a great glass-walled laboratory, built like a sort of penthouse on the roof. Ja Ben walked quickly across the room towards a long, glass-topped table; the other four closed in on me silently but suggestively.

"That is unnecessary," I said quietly. "See, I am unarmed and completely in your power. I am here as an ambassador of the Central Council, not as a warrior."

"Which is as well for you," grinned Ja Ben. "What I have to show you, you can see quickly, and then depart."

From a great cabinet in one corner of the room he took a shining cylinder of dark red metal, and held it up before him, stroking its sleek sides with an affectionate hand.

"Here it is," he said, chuckling. "The secret of our power. In here, safely imprisoned now, but capable of being released at our command, is death for every living thing upon any planet we choose to destroy." He replaced the great cylinder in the cabinet, and picked up in its stead a tiny vial of the same metal, no larger than my little finger, and not so long. "Here," he said, turning again towards me, "is the means of proving our power to you. Come closer!"

With my bodyguard of four watching every move, I approached.

Ja Ben selected a large hollow hemisphere of crystal glass and placed it upon a smooth sheet of flat glass. Next he picked a few blossoms from a bowl that stood, incongruously enough, on the table, and threw them under the glass hemisphere.

"Flora," he grinned.

Hurrying to the other end of the room, he reached into a large flat metal cage and brought forth three small rodent like animals, natives of that world. These he also tossed carelessly under the glass.

"Fauna," he grunted, and picked up the tiny metal vial.

One end of the vial unscrewed. He turned the cap gently, carefully, a strained, anxious look upon his face. My four guards watched him breathlessly, fearfully.

The cap came loose at last, disclosing the end of the tube, sealed with a grayish substance that looked like wax. Very quickly Ja Ben rolled the little cylinder under the glass hemisphere, and picked up a beaker that had been bubbling gently on an electric plate close by. Swiftly he poured the thick contents of the beaker around the base of the glass bell. The stuff hardened almost instantly, forming an air-tight seal between the glass hemisphere and the flat plate of glass upon which it rested. Then, with an evil, triumphant smile, Ja Ben looked up.

"*Flora*," he repeated. "*Fauna*. And *death*. Watch! The little metal cylinder is plugged still, but in a moment that plug will disappear—simply a volatile solid, you understand. It is going rapidly ... rapidly ... it is almost gone now! Watch ... In an instant now ... *ah!*"

I saw the gray substance that stopped the entrance of the little metal vial disappear. The rodents ran around and over it, trying to find a crevice by which they might escape. The flowers, bright and beautiful, lay untidily on the bottom of the glass prison.

Then, just as the last vestige of the gray plug vanished; an amazing, a terrible thing happened. At the mouth of the tiny metal vial a greenish cloud appeared. I call it a cloud, but it was not that. It was solid, and it spread in every direction, sending out little needles that lashed about and ran together into a solid mass while millions of little needles reached out swiftly.

One of these little needles touched a scurrying animal. Instantly the tiny brute stiffened, and from his entire body the greenish needles spread swiftly. One of the flowers turned suddenly thick and pulpy with the soft green mass, then another, another of the rodents ... *God!*

In the space of two heart beats, the entire hemisphere was filled with the green mass, that still moved and writhed and seemed to press against the glass sides as though the urge to expand was insistent, imperative....

"What is it?" I whispered, still staring at the thing.

"*Death!*" grunted Ja Ben, thrusting his hateful face close to mine, his tiny round eyes, with their lashless lids glinting. "Death, my friend. Go and tell your great Council of this death that we have created for every planet that will not obey us.

"We have gone back into the history of dealing death and have come back with a death such as the Universe has never known before!

"Here is a rapacious, deadly fungus we have been two centuries in developing. The spores contained in that tiny metal tube would be invisible to the naked eye—and yet given but a little time to grow, with air and vegetation and flesh to feed upon, and even that small capsule would wipe out a world. And in the cabinet,"—he pointed grinning triumphantly—"we have, ready for instant use, enough of the spores of this deadly fungus to wipe out all the worlds of your great Alliance.

"To wipe them out utterly!" he repeated, his voice shaking with a sort of frenzy now. "Every living thing upon their faces, wrapped in that thin, hungry green

stuff you see there under that glass. All life wiped out; made uninhabitable so long as the Universe shall endure. And we—we shall be rulers, unquestioned, of that Universe. Tell your doddering Council *that!*" He leaned back against the table, panting with hate.

"I shall tell them all I have seen; all you have said," I nodded.

"You believe we have the power to do all this?"

"I do—God help me, and the Universe," I said solemnly.

There was no doubt in my mind. I could see all too clearly how well their plans had been laid; how quickly this hellish growth would strangle all life, once its spores began to develop.

The only possible chance was to get back to the Council and make my report, with all possible speed, so that every available armed ship of the universe might concentrate here, and wipe out these people before they had time to—

"I know what you are thinking, my friend," broke in Ja Ben mockingly. "You might as well have worn the menore! You would have the ships of the Alliance destroy us before we have time to act. We had foreseen that, and have provided for the possibility.

"As soon as you leave here, ships, provided with many tubes like the one just used for our little demonstration, will be dispersed in every direction. We shall be in constant communication with those ships, and at the least sign of hostility, they will be ordered to depart and spread their death upon every world they can reach. Some of them you may be able to locate and eliminate; a number of them are certain to elude capture in infinite space—and if only one, one lone ship, should escape, the doom of the Alliance and millions upon millions of people will be pronounced.

"I warn you, it will be better, much better, to bow to our wishes, and pay us the tribute we shall demand. Any attempt at resistance will precipitate certain disaster for your Council and all the worlds the Council governs."

"At least, we would wipe you out first," I said hoarsely.

"True," nodded Ja Ben. "But the vengeance of our ships would be a terrible thing! You would not dare to take the chance!"

I stood there, staring at him in a sort of daze. What he had said was so true; terribly, damnably true.

If only—

There was but one chance I could see, and desperate as it was, I took it. Whirling the heavy metal ring of my menore in my hand, I sprang towards the table.

If I could break the sealed glass hemisphere, and loose the fungus upon its creators; deal to them the doom they had planned for the universe, then perhaps all might yet be well.

Ja Ben understood instantly what was in my mind. He and his four aides leaped between me and the table, their tiny round eyes blazing with anger. I struck one of the four viciously with the menore, and with a gasp

he fell back and slumped to the floor.

Before I could break through the opening, however, Ja Ben struck me full in the face with his mighty fist; a blow that sent me, dazed and reeling, into a corner of the room. I brought up with a crash against the cabinet there, groped wildly in an effort to steady myself, and fell to the floor. Almost before I struck, all four of them were upon me.

They hammered me viciously, shouted at me, cursed me in the universal tongue, but I paid no heed. I pretended to be unconscious, but my heart was beating high with sudden, glorious hope, and in my brain a terrible, merciless plan was forming.

When I had groped against the cabinet in an effort to regain my balance, my fingers had closed upon one of the little metal vials. As I fell, I covered that hand with my body and hastily hid the tiny tube in a deep pocket of my blue and silver Service uniform.

Slowly, after a few seconds, I opened my eyes and looked up at them, helplessly.

"Go, now!" snarled Ja Ben, dragging me to my feet. "Go, and tell your Council we are more than a match for you—and for them." He thrust me, reeling, towards his three assistants. "Take him to his ship, and send aid for Ife Rance, here." He glanced at the still unconscious figure of the victim of my menore, and then turned to me with a last warning.

"Remember, one thing more, my friend: you have disintegrator ray equipment upon your ship. You have the little atomic bombs that won for the Alliance the Second War of the Planets. I know that. But if you make the slightest effort to use them, I shall dispatch a supply of the green death to our ships, and they will depart upon their missions at once. You would take upon yourself a terrible responsibility by making the smallest hostile move.

"Go, now—and when you return, bring with you members of your great Council who will have the power to hear our demands, and see that they are obeyed. And do not keep us waiting over long, for we are an impatient race." He bowed, mockingly, and passed his left hand swiftly before his face, his

people's sign of parting.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak, and, hemmed in by my three black-robed conductors, was hurried down the elevator and back through the jeering mob to my ship.

The glass secondary door shot up to permit me to enter, and Eitel gripped my shoulder anxiously, his eyes smoldering angrily.

"You're hurt, sir!" he said in his odd, high-pitched voice, staring into my bruised face. "What—"

"It's nothing," I assured him. "Close the exit immediately; we depart at once."

"Yes, sir!" He closed the switch, and the great threaded plug swung gently on its gimbals and began to revolve, swiftly and silently. A little bell sounded sharply, and the great door ceased its motion. Eitel locked the switch and returned the key to his pocket.

"Good. All men are at their stations?" I asked briskly.

"Yes, sir! All except these ten, detailed to guard the exit."

"Have them report to their regular stations. Issue orders to the ray operators that they are to instantly, and without further orders, destroy any ship that may leave the surface of this planet. Have every atomic bomb crew ready for an instant and concentrated offensive directed at the Control City, but command them not to act under any circumstances unless I give the order. Is that clear, Mr. Eitel?"

"Yes, sir!"

I nodded, and turned away, making my way immediately to the navigating room.

"Mr. Barry," I said quickly and gravely, "I believe that the fate of the known Universe depends upon us at this moment. We will ascend vertically, at once—slowly—until we are just outside the envelope, maintaining only sufficient horizontal motion to keep us directly over the Control City. Will you give the necessary orders?"

"Immediately, sir!" He pressed the attention button to the operating room and spoke swiftly into the microphone; before he completed the order I had left.

We were already ascending when I reached the port forward atomic bomb station. The man in charge, a Zenian, saluted with automatic precision and awaited orders.

"You have a bomb in readiness?" I asked, returning the salute.

"Those were my orders, sir."

"Correct. Remove it, please."

I waited impatiently while the crew removed the bomb from the releasing trap. It was withdrawn at last; a fish-shaped affair, very much like the ancient airplane bombs save that it was no larger than my two fists, placed one upon the other, and that it had four silvery wires running along its sides, from

rounded nose to pointed tail, held at a distance from the body by a series of insulating struts.

"Now," I said, "how quickly can you put another object in the trap, re-seal the opening, and release the object?"

"While the Commander counts ten with reasonable speed," said the Zenian with pride. "We won first honors in the Special Patrol Service contests at the last Examination, the Commander may remember."

"I do remember. That is why I selected you for this duty."

With hands that trembled a little, I think, I drew forth the little vial of gleaming red metal, while the bombing crew watched me curiously.

"I shall unscrew the cap from this little vial," I explained, "and drop it immediately into the releasing trap. Re-seal the trap and release this object as quickly as it is possible to do so. If you can better the time you made to win the honors at the Examination—

in God's name, do so!"

"Yes, sir!" replied the Zenian. He gave brisk orders to his crew, and each of the three men sprang alertly into position.

As quickly as I could, I turned off the cap of the little metal vial and dropped it into the trap. The heavy plug, a tiny duplicate of the exit door, clicked shut upon it and spun, whining gently, into the opening. Something clicked sharply, and one of the crew dropped a bar into place. As it shot home, the Zenian in command of the crew pulled the release plunger.

"Done, sir!" he said proudly.

I did not reply. My eye fixed upon the observation tube that was following the tiny missile to the ground.

The Control City was directly below us. I lost sight of the vial almost instantly, but the indicating cross-hairs showed me exactly where the vial would strike; at a point approximately half way between the edge of the city and the great squat pile of the administering

building, with its gleaming glass penthouse—the laboratory in which, only a few minutes before, I had witnessed the demonstration of the death which awaited the Universe.

"Excellent!" I exclaimed. "Smartly done, men!" I turned and hurried to the navigating room, where the most powerful of our television discs was located.

The disc was not as perfect as those we have to-day; it was hooded to keep out exterior light, which is not necessary with the later instruments, and it was more unwieldy. However, it did its work, and did it well, in the hands of an experienced operator.

With only a nod to Barry, I turned the range band to maximum, and brought it swiftly to bear upon that portion of the city in which the little vial had fallen. As I drew the focusing lever towards me, the scene leaped at me through the clear, glowing glass disc.

Froth! Green, billowing froth that grew and boiled

and spread unceasingly. In places it reached high into the air, and it moved with an eager, inner life that was somehow terrible and revolting. I moved the range hand back, and the view seemed to drop away from me swiftly.

I could see the whole city now. All one side of it was covered with the spreading green stain that moved and flowed so swiftly. Thousands of tiny black figures were running in the streets, crowding away from the awful danger that menaced them.

The green patch spread more swiftly always. When I had first seen it, the edges were advancing as rapidly as a man could run; now they were fairly racing, and the speed grew constantly.

A ship, two of them, three of them came darting from somewhere, towards the administration building, with its glass cupola. I held my breath as the deep, sudden humming from the *Tamon* told me that our rays were busy. Would they—

One of the enemy ships disappeared suddenly in a

little cloud of dirty, heavy dust that settled swiftly. Another ... and the third. Three little streaks of dust, falling, falling....

A fourth ship, and a fifth came rushing up, their sides faintly glowing from the speed they had made. The green flood, thick and insistent, was racing up and over the administration building now. It reached the roof, ran swiftly....

The fourth ship shattered into dust. The fifth settled swiftly—and then that ship also disappeared, together with a corner of the building. Then the thick green stuff flowed over the whole building and there was nothing to be seen there but a mound of soft, flowing, gray-green stuff that rushed on now with the swiftness of the wind.

I looked up, into Barry's face.

"You're ill!" he said quickly. "Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"Yes," I said, forming the words with difficulty. "Give

orders to ascend at emergency speed!"

For once my first officer hesitated. He glanced at the attraction meter and then turned to me again, wondering.

"At this height, sir, emergency speed will mean dangerous heating of the surface; perhaps—"

"I want it white hot, Mr. Barry. She is built to stand it. Emergency speed, please—immediately!"

"Right, sir!" he said briskly, and gave the order.

I felt my weight increase as the order was obeyed; gradually the familiar, uncomfortable feeling left me. Silently, Barry and I watched the big surface temperature gauge as it started to move. The heat inside became uncomfortable, grew intense. The sweat poured from us. In the operating room forward, I could see the men casting quick, wondering glances up at us through the heavy glass partition that lay between.

The thick, stubby red hand of the surface temperature gauge moved slowly but steadily towards the heavy red line that marked the temperature at which the outer shell of our hull would become incandescent. The hand was within three or four degrees of that mark when I gave Barry the order to arrest our motion.

When he had given the order, I turned to him and motioned towards the television disc.

"Look," I said.

He looked, and when at last he tore his face away from the hood, he seemed ten years older.

"What is it?" he asked in a choked whisper. "Why—they're being wiped out; the whole of that world—"

"True. And some of the seeds of that terrible death might have drifted upward, and found a lodging place upon the surface of our ship. That is why I ordered the emergency speed while we were still within the atmospheric envelope, Barry. To burn away that

contamination, if it existed. Now we are safe, unless —"

I pressed the attention button to the station of the chief of the ray operators.

"Your report," I ordered.

"Nine ships disintegrated, sir," he replied instantly.

"Five before the city was destroyed, four later."

"You are certain that none escaped?"

"Positive, sir."

"Very good."

I turned to Barry, smiling.

"Point her nose for Zenia, Mr. Barry," I said. "As soon as it is feasible, resume emergency speed. There are some very anxious gentlemen there awaiting our report, and I dare not convey it except in person."

"Yes, sir!" said Barry crisply.

This, then, is the history of the Forgotten Planet. On the charts of the Universe it appears as an unnamed world. No ship is permitted to pass close enough to it so that its attraction is greater than that of the nearest other mass. A permanent outpost of fixed-station ships, with headquarters upon Jaron, the closest world, is maintained by the Council.

There are millions of people who might be greatly disturbed if they knew of this potential menace that lurks in the midst of our Universe, but they do not know. The wisdom of the Council made certain of that.

But, in order that in the ages to come there might be a record of this matter, I have been asked to prepare this document for the sealed archives of the Alliance. It has been a pleasant task; I have relived, for a little time, a part of my youth.

The work is done, now, and that is well. I am an old man, and weary. Sometimes I wish I might live to see the wonders that the next generation or so will witness, but my years are heavy upon me.

My work is done.

#40 The Power And The Glory, By Charles Willard Diffin:

Sadly, sternly, the old professor reveals to his brilliant pupil the greater path to glory.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing a young man sitting in a chair in front of a table of scientific equipment, his head in one hand in despair, while an older man stands above him with his hand on the younger man's shoulder consolingly, his other wrist held across his chest, showing he is missing that hand. Image description end.]

There were papers on the desk, a litter of papers scrawled over, in the careless writing of indifferent students, with the symbols of chemistry and long mathematical computations. The man at the desk pushed them aside to rest his lean, lined face on one

thin hand. The other arm, ending at the wrist, was on the desk before him.

Students of a great university had long since ceased to speculate about the missing hand. The result of an experiment, they knew—a hand that was a mass of lifeless cells, amputated quickly that the living arm might be saved—but that was some several years ago, ancient history to those who came and went through Professor Eddinger's class room.

And now Professor Eddinger was weary—weary and old, he told himself—as he closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the interminable papers and the stubby wrist that had ended forever his experiments and the delicate manipulations which only he could do.

He reached slowly for a buzzing phone, but his eyes brightened at the voice that came to him.

"I've got it—I've got it!" The words were almost incoherent. "This is Avery, Professor—Avery! You must come at once. You will share in it; I owe it all to you ... you will be the first to see ... I am sending a taxi for

you—”

Professor Eddinger’s tired eyes crinkled to a smile. Enthusiasm like this was rare among his youngsters. But Avery—with the face of a poet, a dreamer’s eyes and the mind of a scientist—good boy, Avery!—a long time since he had seen him—had him in his own laboratory for two years....

“What’s this all about?” he asked.

“No—no!” said a voice; “I can’t tell you—it is too big—greater than the induction motor—greater than the electric light—it is the greatest thing in the world. The taxi should be there now—you must come—”

A knock at the office door where a voice said, “Car for Professor Eddinger,” confirmed the excited words.

“I’ll come,” said the Professor, “right away.”

He pondered, as the car whirled him across the city, on what this greatest thing in the world might be. And he hoped with gentle skepticism that the enthusiasm

was warranted. A young man opened the car door as they stopped. His face was flushed, Eddinger noted, hair pushed back in disarray, his shirt torn open at the throat.

“Wait here,” he told the driver and took the Professor by the arm to hurry him into a dilapidated building.

“Not much of a laboratory,” he said, “but we’ll have better, you and I; we’ll have better—”

The room seemed bare with its meager equipment, but it was neat, as became the best student of Professor Eddinger. Rows of reagent bottles stood on the shelves, but the tables were a litter of misplaced instruments and broken glassware where trembling hands had fumbled in heedless excitement.

“Glad to see you again, Avery.” The gentle voice of Professor Eddinger had lost its tired tone. “It’s been two years you’ve been working, I judge. Now what is this great discovery, boy? What have you found?”

The younger man, in whose face the color came and

went, and whose eyes were shining from dark hollows that marked long days and sleepless nights, still clung to the other's arm.

"It's real," he said; "it's great! It means fortune and fame, and you're in on that, Professor. The old master," he said and clapped a hand affectionately upon a thin shoulder; "I owe it all to you. And now I have—I have learned.... No, you shall see for yourself. Wait—"

He crossed quickly to a table. On it was an apparatus; the eyes of the older man widened as he saw it. It was intricate—a maze of tubing. There was a glass bulb above—the generator of a cathode ray, obviously—and electro-magnets below and on each side. Beneath was a crude sphere of heavy lead—a retort, it might be—and from this there passed two massive, insulated cables. The understanding eyes of the Professor followed them, one to a terminal on a great insulating block upon the floor, the other to a similarly protected terminal of carbon some feet above it in the air.

The trembling fingers of the young man made some

few adjustments, then he left the instrument to take his place by an electric switch. “Stand back,” he warned, and closed the switch.

There was a gentle hissing from within glass tubes, the faint glow of a blue-green light. And that was all, until—with a crash like the ripping crackle of lightning, a white flame arced between the terminals of the heavy cables. It hissed ceaselessly through the air where now the tang of ozone was apparent. The carbon blocks glowed with a brilliant incandescence when the flame ceased with the motion of a hand where Avery pulled a switch.

The man’s voice was quiet now. “You do not know, yet, what you have seen, but there was a tremendous potential there—an amperage I can’t measure with my limited facilities.” He waved a deprecating hand about the ill-furnished laboratory. “But you have seen —” His voice trembled and failed at the forming of the words.

“—The disintegration of the atom,” said Professor Eddinger quietly, “and the release of power unlimited.

Did you use thorium?" he inquired.

The other looked at him in amazement. Then: "I should have known you would understand," he said humbly. "And you know what it means"—again his voice rose—"power without end to do the work of the world—great vessels driven a lifetime on a mere ounce of matter—a revolution in transportation—in living...." He paused. "The liberation of mankind," he added, and his voice was reverent. "This will do the work of the world: it will make a new heaven and a new earth! Oh, I have dreamed dreams," he exclaimed, "I have seen visions. And it has been given to me—me!—to liberate man from the curse of Adam ... the sweat of his brow.... I can't realize it even yet. I—I am not worthy...."

He raised his eyes slowly in the silence to gaze in wondering astonishment at the older man. There was no answering light, no exaltation on the lined face. Only sadness in the tired eyes that looked at him and through him as if focused upon something in a dim future—or past.

“Don’t you see?” asked the wondering man. “The freedom of men—the liberation of a race. No more poverty, no endless, grinding labor.” His young eyes, too, were looking into the future, a future of blinding light. “Culture,” he said, “instead of heart-breaking toil, a chance to grow mentally, spiritually; it is another world, a new life—” And again he asked: “Surely, you see?”

“I see,” said the other; “I see—plainly.”

“The new world,” said Avery. “It—it dazzles me; it rings like music in my ears.”

“I see no new world,” was the slow response.

The young face was plainly perplexed. “Don’t you believe?” he stammered. “After you have seen ... I thought you would have the vision, would help me emancipate the world, save it—” His voice failed.

“Men have a way of crucifying their saviors,” said the tired voice.

The inventor was suddenly indignant. “You are blind,” he said harshly; “it is too big for you. And I would have had you stand beside me in the great work.... I shall announce it alone.... There will be laboratories—enormous!—and factories. My invention will be perfected, simplified, compressed. A generator will be made—thousands of horsepower to do the work of a city, free thousands of men—made so small you can hold it in one hand.”

The sensitive face was proudly alight, proud and a trifle arrogant. The exaltation of his coming power was strong upon him.

“Yes,” said Professor Eddinger, “in one hand.” And he raised his right arm that he might see where the end of a sleeve was empty.

“I am sorry,” said the inventor abruptly; “I didn’t mean ... but you will excuse me now; there is so much to be done—” But the thin figure of Professor Eddinger had crossed to the far table to examine the apparatus there.

“Crude,” he said beneath his breath, “crude—but efficient!”

In the silence a rat had appeared in the distant corner. The Professor nodded as he saw it. The animal stopped as the man’s eyes came upon it; then sat squirrellike on one of the shelves as it ate a crumb of food. Some morsel from a hurried lunch of Avery’s, the Professor reflected—poor Avery! Yes, there was much to be done.

He spoke as much to himself as to the man who was now beside him. “It enters here,” he said and peered downward toward the lead bulb. He placed a finger on the side of the metal. “About here, I should think.... Have you a drill? And a bit of quartz?”

The inventor’s eyes were puzzled, but the assurance of his old instructor claimed obedience. He produced a small drill and a fragment like broken glass. And he started visibly as the one hand worked awkwardly to make a small hole in the side of the lead. But he withdrew his own restraining hand, and he watched in mystified silence while the quartz was fitted to

make a tiny window and the thin figure stooped to sight as if aiming the opening toward a far corner where a brown rat sat upright in earnest munching of a dry crust.

The Professor drew Avery with him as he retreated noiselessly from the instrument. “Will you close the switch,” he whispered.

The young man hesitated, bewildered, at this unexpected demonstration, and the Professor himself reached with his one hand for the black lever. Again the arc crashed into life, to hold for a brief instant until Professor Eddinger opened the switch.

“Well,” demanded Avery, “what’s all the show? Do you think you are teaching me anything—about my own instrument?” There was hurt pride and jealous resentment in his voice.

“See,” said Professor Eddinger quietly. And his one thin hand pointed to a far shelf, where, in the shadow, was a huddle of brown fur and a bit of crust. It fell as they watched, and the “plop” of the soft body upon

the floor sounded loud in the silent room.

“The law of compensation,” said Professor Eddinger.
“Two sides to the medal! Darkness and light—good
and evil—life ... and death!”

The young man was stammering. “What do you mean?
—a death ray evolved?” And: “What of it?” he
demanded; “what of it? What’s that got to do with it?”

“A death ray,” the other agreed. “You have dreamed,
Avery—one must in order to create—but it is only a
dream. You dreamed of life—a fuller life—for the
world, but you would have given them, as you have
just seen, death.”

The face of Avery was white as wax; his eyes glared
savagely from dark hollows.

“A rat!” he protested. “You have killed a rat ... and
you say—you say—” He raised one trembling hand to
his lips to hold them from forming the unspeakable
words.

"A rat," said the Professor—"or a man ... or a million men."

"We will control it."

"All men will have it—the best and the worst ... and there is no defence."

"It will free the world—"

"It will destroy it."

"No!"—and the white-faced man was shouting now—"you don't understand—you can't see—"

The lean figure of the scientist straightened to its full height. His eyes met those of the younger man, silent now before him, but Avery knew the eyes never saw him; they were looking far off, following the wings of thought. In the stillness the man's words came harsh and commanding—

"Do you see the cities," he said, "crumbling to ruins under the cold stars? The fields? They are rank with

wild growth, torn and gullied by the waters; a desolate land where animals prowl. And the people—the people!—wandering bands, lower, as the years drag on, than the beasts themselves; the children dying, forgotten, in the forgotten lands; a people to whom the progress of our civilization is one with the ages past, for whom there is again the slow, toiling road toward the light.

"And somewhere, perhaps, a conquering race, the most brutal and callous of mankind, rioting in their sense of power and dragging themselves down to oblivion...."

His gaze came slowly back to the room and the figure of the man still fighting for his dream.

"They would not," said Avery hoarsely; "they'd use it for good."

"Would they?" asked Professor Eddinger. He spoke simply as one stating simple facts. "I love my fellow men," he said, "and I killed them in thousands in the last war—I, and my science, and my poison gas."

The figure of Avery slumped suddenly upon a chair; his face was buried in his hands. "And I would have been," he groaned, "the greatest man in the world."

"You shall be greater," said the Professor, "though only we shall know it—you and I.... You will save the world—from itself."

The figure, bowed and sunken in the chair, made no move; the man was heedless of the kindly hand upon his shoulder. His voice, when he spoke, was that of one afar off, speaking out of a great loneliness. "You don't understand," he said dully; "you can't—"

But Professor Eddinger, a cog in the wheels of a great educational machine, glanced at the watch on his wrist. Again his thin shoulders were stooped, his voice tired. "My classes," he said. "I must be going...."

In the gathering dusk Professor Eddinger locked carefully the door of his office. He crossed beyond his desk and fumbled with his one hand for his keys.

There was a cabinet to be opened, and he stared long in the dim light at the object he withdrew. He looked approvingly at the exquisite workmanship of an instrument where a generator of the cathode ray and an intricate maze of tubing surmounted electromagnets and a round lead bulb. There were terminals for attaching heavy cables; it was a beautiful thing.... His useless arm moved to bring an imaginary hand before the window of quartz in the lead sphere.

“Power,” he whispered and repeated Avery’s words; “power, to build a city—or destroy a civilization ... and I hold it in one hand.”

He replaced the apparatus in the safety of its case. “The saviors of mankind!” he said, and his tone was harsh and bitter.

But a smile, whimsical, kindly, crinkled his tired eyes as he turned to his desk and its usual litter of examination papers.

“It is something, Avery,” he whispered to that distant man, “to belong in so distinguished a group.”

August 1930

#41 The Planet Of Dread, By Roman Frederick Starzl:

A stupid blunder—and Mark Forepaugh faces a lifetime of castaway loneliness in the savage welter of the planet Inra's monster-ridden jungles.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

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There was no use hiding from the truth. Somebody had blundered—a fatal blunder—and they were going to pay for it! Mark Forepaugh kicked the pile of hydrogen cylinders. Only a moment ago he had broken the seals—the mendacious seals that certified to the world that the flasks were fully charged. And the flasks were empty! The supply of this precious power gas, which in an emergency should have been sufficient for six years, simply did not exist.

He walked over to the integrating machine, which as early as the year 2031 had begun to replace the older atomic processes, due to the shortage of the radium series metals. It was bulky and heavy compared to the atomic disintegrators, but it was much more economical and very dependable. Dependable—provided some thick-headed stock clerk at a terrestrial supply station did not check in empty hydrogen cylinders instead of full ones. Forepaugh's unwonted curses brought a smile to the stupid, good-natured face of his servant, Gunga—he who had been banished for life from his native Mars for his impiety in closing his single round eye during the sacred Ceremony of the Wells.

The Earth man was at this steaming hot, unhealthful trading station under the very shadow of the South Pole of the minor planet Inra for an entirely different reason. One of the most popular of his set on the Earth, an athletic hero, he had fallen in love, and the devoutly wished-for marriage was only prevented by lack of funds. The opportunity to take charge of this richly paid, though dangerous, outpost of civilization

had been no sooner offered than taken. In another week or two the relief ship was due to take him and his valuable collection of exotic Inranian orchids back to the Earth, back to a fat bonus, Constance, and an assured future.

It was a different young man who now stood tragically before the useless power plant. His slim body was bowed, and his clean features were drawn. Grimly he raked the cooling dust that had been forced in the integrating chamber by the electronic rearrangement of the original hydrogen atoms—finely powdered iron and silicon—the "ashes" of the last tank of hydrogen.

Gunga chuckled.

"What's the matter?" Forepaugh barked. "Going crazy already?"

"Me, haw! Me, haw! Me thinkin'," Gunga rumbled.

"Haw! We got, haw! plenty hydr'gen." He pointed to the low metal roof of the trading station. Though it was well insulated against sound, the place continually vibrated to the low murmur of the

Inranian rains that fell interminably through the perpetual polar day. It was a rain such as is never seen on Earth, even in the tropics. It came in drops as large as a man's fist. It came in streams. It came in large, shattering masses that broke before they fell and filled the air with spray. There was little wind, but the steady green downpour of water and the brilliant continuous flashing of lightning shamed the dull soggy twilight produced by the large, hot, but hidden sun.

"*Your* idea of a joke!" Forepaugh growled in disgust. He understood what Gunga's grim pleasantry referred to. There was indeed an incalculable quantity of hydrogen at hand. If some means could be found to separate the hydrogen atoms from the oxygen in the world of water around them they would not lack for fuel. He thought of electrolysis, and relaxed with a sigh. There was no power. The generators were dead, the air drier and cooler had ceased its rhythmic pulsing nearly an hour ago. Their lights were gone, and the automatic radio utterly useless.

"This is what comes of putting all your eggs in one

basket," he thought, and let his mind dwell vindictively on the engineers who had designed the equipment on which his life depended.

An exclamation from Gunga startled him. The Martian was pointing to the ventilator opening, the only part of this strange building that was not hermetically sealed against the hostile life of Inra. A dark rim had appeared at its margin, a loathsome, black-green rim that was moving, spreading out. It crept over the metal walls like the low-lying smoke of a fire, yet it was a solid. From it emanated a strong, miasmatic odor.

"The giant mold!" Forepaugh cried. He rushed to his desk and took out his flash pistol, quickly set the localizer so as to cover a large area. When he turned he saw, to his horror, Gunga about to smash into the mold with his ax. He sent the man spinning with a blow to the ear.

"Want to scatter it and start it growing in a half-dozen places?" he snapped. "Here!"

He pulled the trigger. There was a light, spiteful "ping" and for an instant a cone of white light stood out in the dim room like a solid thing. Then it was gone, and with it was gone the black mold, leaving a circular area of blistered paint on the wall and an acrid odor in the air. Forepaugh leaped to the ventilating louver and closed it tightly.

"It's going to be like this from now on," he remarked to the shaken Gunga. "All these things wouldn't bother us as long as the machinery kept the building dry and cool. They couldn't live in here. But it's getting damp and hot. Look at the moisture condensing on the ceiling!"

Gunga gave a guttural cry of despair. "It knows, Boss; look!"

Through one of the round, heavily framed ports it could be seen, the lower part of its large, shapeless body half-floating in the lashing water that covered their rocky shelf to a depth of several feet, the upper part spectral and gray. It was a giant amoeba, fully six feet in diameter in its present spheroid form, but

capable of assuming any shape that would be useful. It had an envelope of tough, transparent matter, and was filled with a fluid that was now cloudy and then clear. Near the center there was a mass of darker matter, and this was undoubtedly the seat of its intelligence.

The Earth man recoiled in horror! A single cell with a brain! It was unthinkable. It was a biological nightmare. Never before had he seen one—had, in fact, dismissed the stories of the Inranian natives as a bit of primitive superstition, had laughed at these gentle, stupid amphibians with whom he traded when they, in their imperfect language, tried to tell him of it.

They had called it the Ul-lul. Well, let it be so. It was an amoeba, and it was watching him. It floated in the downpour and watched him. With what? It had no eyes. No matter, it was watching him. And then it suddenly flowed outward until it became a disc rocking on the waves. Again its fluid form changed, and by a series of elongations and contractions it flowed through the water at an incredible speed. It

came straight for the window, struck the thick, unbreakable glass with a shock that could be felt by the men inside. It flowed over the glass and over the building. It was trying to eat them, building and all! The part of its body over the port became so thin that it was almost invisible. At last, its absolute limit reached, it dropped away, baffled, vanishing amid the glare of the lightning and the frothing waters like the shadows of a nightmare.

The heat was intolerable and the air was bad.

"Haw, we have to open vent'lator, Boss!" gasped the Martian.

Forepaugh nodded grimly. It wouldn't do to smother either. Though to open the ventilator would be to invite another invasion by the black mold, not to mention the amoebae and other fabulous monsters that had up to now been kept at a safe distance by the repeller zone, a simple adaptation of a very old discovery. A zone of mechanical vibrations, of a

frequency of 500,000 cycles per second, was created by a large quartz crystal in the water, which was electrically operated. Without power, the protective zone had vanished.

"We watch?" asked Gunga.

"You bet we watch. Every minute of the 'day' and 'night.'"

He examined the two chronometers, assuring himself that they were well wound, and congratulated himself that they were not dependent on the defunct power plant for energy. They were his only means of measuring the passage of time. The sun, which theoretically would seem to travel round and round the horizon, rarely succeeded in making its exact location known, but appeared to shift strangely from side to side at the whim of the fog and water.

"Th' fellas," Gunga remarked, coming out of a study.

"Why not come?" He referred to the Inranians.

"Probably know something's wrong. They can tell the

quartz oscillator is stopped. Afraid of the Ul-lul, I suppose."

"Squeer," demurred the Martian. "Ul-lul not bother fellas."

"You mean it doesn't follow them into the underbrush. But it would find tough going there. Not enough water; trees there, four hundred feet high with thorny roots and rough bark—they wouldn't like that. Oh no, these natives ought to be pretty snug in their dens. Why, they're as hard to catch as a muskrat! Don't know what a muskrat is, huh? Well, it's the same as the Inranians, only different, and not so ugly."

For the next six days they existed in their straitened quarters, one guarding while the other slept, but such alarms as they experienced were of a minor nature, easily disposed of by their flash pistol. It had not been intended for continuous service, and under the frequent drains it showed an alarming loss of power. Forepaugh repeatedly warned Gunga to be more sparing in its use, but that worthy persisted in his practice of using it against every trifling invasion of

the poisonous Inranian cave moss that threatened them, or the warm, soggy water-spiders that hopefully explored the ventilator shaft in search of living food.

"Bash 'em with a broom, or something! Never mind if it isn't nice. Save our flash gun for something bigger."

Gunga only looked distressed.

On the seventh day their position became untenable. Some kind of sea creature, hidden under the ever-replenished storm waters, had found the concrete emplacements of their trading post to its liking. Just how it was done was never learned. It is doubtful that the creatures could gnaw away the solid stone—more likely the process was chemical, but none the less it was effective. The foundations crumbled; the metal shell subsided, rolled half over so that silty water leaked in through the straining seams, and threatened at any moment to be buffeted and urged away on the surface of the flood toward that distant vast sea which covers nine-tenths of the area of Inra.

"Time to mush for the mountains," Forepaugh decided.

Gunga grinned. The Mountains of Perdition were, to his point of view, the only part of Inra even remotely inhabitable. They were sometimes fairly cool, and though perpetually pelted with rain, blazing with lightning and reverberating with thunder, they had caves that were fairly dry and too cool for the black mold. Sometimes, under favorable circumstances on their rugged peaks, one could get the full benefit of the enormous hot sun for whose actinic rays the Martian's starved system yearned.

"Better pack a few cans of the food tablets," the white man ordered. "Take a couple of waterproof sleeping bags for us, and a few hundred fire pellets. You can have the flash pistol; it may have a few more charges in it."

Forepaugh broke the glass case marked "Emergency Only" and removed two more flash pistols. Well he knew that he would need them after passing beyond the trading area—perhaps sooner. His eyes fell on his

personal chest, and he opened it for a brief examination. None of the contents seemed of any value, and he was about to pass when he dragged out a long, heavy, .45 caliber six-shooter in a holster, and a cartridge belt filled with shells. The Martian stared.

"Know what it is?" his master asked, handing him the weapon.

"Gunga not know." He took it and examined it curiously. It was a fine museum piece in an excellent state of preservation, the metal overlaid with the patina of age, but free from rust and corrosion.

"It's a weapon of the Ancients," Forepaugh explained. "It was a sort of family heirloom and is over 300 years old. One of my grandfathers used it in the famous Northwest Mounted Police. Wonder if it'll still shoot."

He leveled the weapon at a fat, sightless wriggler that came squirming through a seam, squinting unaccustomed eyes along the barrel. There was a violent explosion, and the wriggler disappeared in a smear of dirty green. Gunga nearly fell over backward

in fright, and even Forepaugh was shaken. He was surprised that the ancient cartridge had exploded at all, though he knew powder making had reached a high level of perfection before explosive chemical weapons had yielded to the newer, lighter, and infinitely more powerful ray weapons. The gun would impede their progress. It would be of very little use against the giant Carnivora of Inra. Yet something—perhaps a sentimental attachment, perhaps what his ancestors would have called a "hunch"—compelled him to strap it around his waist. He carefully packed a few essentials in his knapsack, together with one chronometer and a tiny gyroscopic compass. So equipped, they could travel with a fair degree of precision toward the mountains some hundred miles on the other side of a steaming forest, a-crawl with feral life, and hot with blood-lust.

Man and master descended into the warm waters and, without a backward glance, left the trading post to its fate. There was not even any use in leaving a note. Their relief ship, soon due, would never find the station without radio direction.

The current was strong, but the water gradually became shallower as they ascended the sloping rock. After half an hour they saw ahead of them the loom of the forest, and with some trepidation they entered the gloom cast by the towering, fernlike trees, whose tops disappeared in murky fog. Tangled vines impeded their progress. Quagmires lay in wait for them, and tough weeds tripped them, sometimes throwing one or another into the mud among squirming small reptiles that lashed at them with spiked, poisonous feet and then fell to pieces, each piece to lie in the bubbling ooze until it grew again into a whole animal.

Several times they almost walked under the bodies of great, spheroidal creatures with massive short legs, whose tremendously long, sinuous necks disappeared in the leafy murk above, swaying gently like long-stalked lilies in a terrestrial pond. These were azornacks, mild-tempered vegetarians whose only defense lay in their thick, blubbery hides. Filled with parasites, stinking and rancid, their decaying covering of fat effectively concealed the tender flesh underneath, protecting them from fangs and rending

claws.

Deeper in the forest the battering of the rain was mitigated. Giant neo-palm leaves formed a roof that shut out not only most of the weak daylight, but also the fury of the downpour. The water collected in cataracts, ran down the boles of the trees, and roared through the semi-circular canals of the snake trees, so named by early explorers for their waving, rubbery tentacles, multiplied a millionfold, that performed the duties of leaves. Water gurgled and chuckled everywhere, spread in vast dim ponds and lakes writhing with tormented roots, up-heaved by unseen, uncatalogued leviathans, rippled by translucent discs of loathsome, luminescent jelly that quivered from place to place in pursuit of microscopic prey.

Yet the impression was one of calm and quiet, and the waifs from other worlds felt a surcease of nervous tension. Unconsciously they relaxed. Taking their bearings, they changed their course slightly for the nesting place of the nearest tribe of Inranians where they hoped to get food and at least partial shelter; for their food tablets had mysteriously turned to an

unpleasant viscous liquid, and their sleeping bags were alive with giant bacteria easily visible to the eye.

They were doomed to disappointment. After nearly twelve hours of desperate struggling through the morass, through gloomy aisles, and countless narrow escapes from prowling beasts of prey in which only the speed and tremendous power of their flash pistols saved them from instant death, they reached a rocky outcropping which led to the comparatively dry rise of land on which a tribe of Inranians made its home. Their faces were covered with welts made by the hanging filaments of blood-sucking trees as fine as spider webs, and their senses reeled with the oppressive stench of the abysmal jungle. If the pampered ladies of the Inner Planets only knew where their thousand-dollar orchids sprang from!

Converging runways showed the opening of one of the underground dens, almost hidden from view by a bewildering maze of roots, rendered more formidable by long, sharp stakes made from the iron-hard thigh-bones of the flying kabo.

Forepaugh cupped his hands over his mouth and gave the call.

"Ouf! Ouf! Ouf! Ouf! Ouf!"

He repeated it over and over, the jungle giving back his voice in a muffled echo, while Gunga held a spare flash pistol and kept a sharp lookout for a carnivore intent on getting an unwary Inranian.

There was no answer. These timid creatures, who are often rated the most intelligent life native to primitive Inra, had sensed disaster and had fled.

Forepaugh and Gunga slept in one of the foul, poorly ventilated dens, ate of the hard, woody tubers that had not been worth taking along, and wished they had a certain stock clerk at that place at that time. They were awakened out of deep slumber by the threshing of an evil looking creature which had become entangled among the sharpened spikes. Its tremendous maw, splitting it almost in half, was opened in roars of pain that showed great yellow fangs eight inches in length. Its heavy flippers

battered the stout roots and lacerated themselves in the beast's insensate rage. It was quickly dispatched with a flash pistol and Gunga cooked himself some of the meat, using a fire pellet; but despite his hunger Forepaugh did not dare eat any of it, knowing that this species, strange to him, might easily be one of the many on Inra that are poisonous to terrestrials.

They resumed their march toward the distant invisible mountains, and were fortunate in finding somewhat better footing than they had on their previous march. They covered about 25 miles on that "day," without untoward incident. Their ray pistols gave them an insuperable advantage over the largest and most ferocious beasts they could expect to meet, so that they became more and more confident, despite the knowledge that they were rapidly using up the energy stored in their weapons. The first one had long ago been discarded, and the charge indicators of the other two were approaching zero at a disquieting rate. Forepaugh took them both, and from that time on he was careful never to waste a discharge except in case of a direct and unavoidable

attack. This often entailed long waits or stealthy detours through sucking mud, and came near to ending both their lives.

The Earth man was in the lead when it happened. Seeking an uncertain footing through a tangle of low-growing, thick, ghastly white vegetation, he placed a foot on what seemed to be a broad, flat rock projecting slightly above the ooze. Instantly there was a violent upheaval of mud; the seeming rock flew up like a trap-door, disclosing a cavernous mouth some seven feet across, and a thick, triangular tentacle flew up from its concealment in the mud in a vicious arc. Forepaugh leaped back barely in time to escape being swept in and engulfed. The end of the tentacle struck him a heavy blow on the chest, throwing him back with such force as to bowl Gunga over, and whirling the pistols out of his hands into a slimy, bulbous growth nearby, where they stuck in the phosphorescent cavities the force of their impact had made.

There was no time to recover the weapons. With a bellow of rage the beast was out of its bed and rushing at them. Nothing stayed its progress. Tough, heavily scaled trees thicker than a man's body shuddered and fell as its bulk brushed by them. But it was momentarily confused, and its first rush carried it past its dodging quarry. This momentary respite saved their lives.

Rearing its plumed head to awesome heights, its knobby bark running with brown rivulets of water, a giant tree, even for that world of giants, offered refuge. The men scrambled up the rough trunk easily, finding plenty of hand and footholds. They came to rest on one of the shelflike circumvoluting rings, some twenty-five feet above the ground. Soon the blunt brown tentacles slithered in search of them, but failed to reach their refuge by inches.

And now began the most terrible siege that interlopers in that primitive world can endure. From that cavernous, distended throat came a tremendous, world-shaking noise.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

Forepaugh put his hand to his head. It made him dizzy. He had not believed that such noise could be. He knew that no creature could long live amidst it. He tore strips from his shredded clothing and stuffed his ears, but felt no relief.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

It throbbed in his brain.

Gunga lay a-sprawl, staring with fascinated eye into the pulsating scarlet gullet that was blasting the world with sound. Slowly, slowly he was slipping. His master hauled him back. The Martian grinned at him stupidly, slid again to the edge.

Once more Forepaugh pulled him back. The Martian seemed to acquiesce. His single eye closed to a mere slit. He moved to a position between Forepaugh and the tree trunk, braced his feet.

"No you don't!" The Earth man laughed uproariously.

The din was making him light-headed. It was so funny! Just in time he had caught that cunning expression and prepared for the outlashing of feet designed to plunge him into the red cavern below and to stop that hellish racket.

"And now—"

He swung his fist heavily, slamming the Martian against the tree. The red eye closed wearily. He was unconscious, and lucky.

Hungrily the Earth man stared at his distant flash pistols, plainly visible in the luminescence of their fungus bedding. He began a slow, cautious creep along the top of a vine some eight inches thick. If he could reach them....

Crash! He was almost knocked to the ground by the thud of a frantic tentacle against the vine. His movement had been seen. Again the tentacle struck with crushing force. The great vine swayed. He managed to reach the shelf again in the very nick of time.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

A bolt of lightning struck a giant fern some distance away. The crash of thunder was hardly noticeable. Forepaugh wondered if his tree would be struck. Perhaps it might even start a fire, giving him a flaming brand with which to torment his tormentor. Vain hope! The wood was saturated with moisture. Even the fire pellets could not make it burn.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!
HOOM!"

The six-shooter! He had forgotten it. He jerked it from its holster and pointed it at the red throat, emptied all the chambers. He saw the flash of yellow flame, felt the recoil, but the sound of the discharges was drowned in the Brobdignagian tumult. He drew back his arm to throw the useless toy from him. But again that unexplainable, senseless "hunch" restrained him. He reloaded the gun and returned it to its holster.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

A thought had been struggling to reach his consciousness against the pressure of the unbearable noise. The fire pellets! Couldn't they be used in some way? These small chemical spheres, no larger than the end of his little finger, had long ago supplanted actual fire along the frontiers, where electricity was not available for cooking. In contact with moisture they emitted terrific heat, a radiant heat which penetrated meat, bone, and even metal. One such pellet would cook a meal in ten minutes, with no sign of scorching or burning. And they had several hundred in one of the standard moisture-proof containers.

As fast as his fingers could work the trigger of the dispenser Forepaugh dropped the potent little pellets down the bellowing throat. He managed to release about thirty before the bellowing stopped. A veritable tornado of energy broke loose at the foot of the tree. The giant maw was closed, and the shocking silence was broken only by the thrashing of a giant body in its death agonies. The radiant heat, penetrating through and through the beast's body, withered nearby

vegetation and could be easily felt on the perch up the tree.

Gunga was slowly recovering. His iron constitution helped him to rally from the powerful blow he had received, and by the time the jungle was still he was sitting up mumbling apologies.

"Never mind," said his master. "Shin down there and cut us off a good helping of roast tongue, if it has a tongue, before something else comes along and beats us out of a feast."

"Him poison, maybe," Gunga demurred. They had killed a specimen new to zoologists.

"Might as well die of poison as starvation," Forepaugh countered.

Without more ado the Martian descended, cut out some large, juicy chunks as his fancy dictated, and brought his loot back up the tree. The meat was delicious and apparently wholesome. They gorged themselves and threw away what they could not eat,

for food spoils very quickly in the Inranian jungles and uneaten meat would only serve to attract hordes of the gauzy-winged, glutinous Inranian swamp flies. As they sank into slumber they could hear the beginning of a bedlam of snarling and fighting as the lesser Carnivora fed on the body of the fallen giant.

When they awoke the chronometer recorded the passing of twelve hours, and they had to tear a network of strong fibers with which the tree had invested them preparatory to absorbing their bodies as food. For so keen is the competition for life on Inra that practically all vegetation is capable of absorbing animal food directly. Many an Inranian explorer can tell tales of narrow escapes from some of the more specialized flesh-eating plants; but they are now so well known that they are easily avoided.

A clean-picked framework of crushed and broken giant bones was all that was left of the late bellowing monster. Six-legged water dogs were polishing them hopefully, or delving into them with their long, sinuous snouts for the marrow. The Earth man fired a few shots with his six-shooter, and they scattered,

dragging the bodies of their fallen companions to a safe distance to be eaten.

Only one of the flash pistols was in working order. The other had been trampled by heavy hoofs and was useless. A heavy handicap under which to traverse fifty miles of abysmal jungle. They started with nothing for breakfast except water, of which they had plenty.

Fortunately the outcroppings of rocks and gravel washes were becoming more and more frequent, and they were able to travel at much better speed. As they left the low-lying jungle land they entered a zone which was faintly reminiscent of a terrestrial jungle. It was still hot, soggy, and fetid, but gradually the most primitive aspects of the scene were modified. The over-arching trees were less closely packed, and they came across occasional rock clearings which were bare of vegetation except for a dense carpet of brown, lichenlike vegetation that secreted an astonishing amount of juice. They slipped and slobbered through this, rousing swarms of odd, toothed birds, which darted angrily around their heads and slashed at

them with the razor-sharp saw edges on the back of their legs. Annoying as they were, they could be kept away with branches torn from trees, and their presence connoted an absence of the deadly jungle flesh-eaters, permitting a temporary relaxation of vigilance and saving the resources of the last flash gun.

They camped that "night" on the edge of one of these rock clearings. For the first time in weeks it had stopped raining, although the sun was still obscured. Dimly on the horizon could be seen the first of the foothills. Here they gathered some of the giant, oblong fungus that early explorers had taken for blocks of porous stone because of their size and weight, and, by dint of the plentiful application of fire pellets, managed to set it ablaze. The heat added nothing to their comfort, but it dried them out and allowed them to sleep unmolested.

An unwary winged eel served as their breakfast, and soon they were on their way to those beckoning hills. It had started to rain again, but the worst part of their journey was over. If they could reach the top of one of

the mountains there was a good chance that they would be seen and rescued by their relief ship, provided they did not starve first. The flyer would use the mountains as a base from which to search for the trading station, and it was conceivable that the skipper might actually have anticipated their desperate adventure and would look for them in the Mountains of Perdition.

They had crossed several ranges of the foothills and were beginning to congratulate themselves when the diffused light from above was suddenly blotted out. It was raining again, and above the echo-augmented thunder they heard a shrill screeching.

"A web serpent!" Gunga cried, throwing himself flat on the ground.

Forepaugh eased into a rock cleft at his side. Just in time. A great grotesque head bore down upon him, many-fanged as a medieval dragon. Between obsidian eyes was a fissure whence emanated a wailing and a foul odor. Hundreds of short, clawed legs slithered on the rocks under a long sinuous body. Then it seemed

to leap into the air again. Webs grew taut between the legs, strumming as they caught a strong uphill wind. Again it turned to the attack, and missed them. This time Forepaugh was ready for it. He shot at it with his flash pistol.



[ID: A black and white illustration

Nothing happened. The fog made accurate shooting impossible, and the gun lacked its former power. The web serpent continued to course back and forth over their heads.

"Guess we'd better run for it," Forepaugh murmured.

"Go 'head!"

They cautiously left their places of concealment. Instantly the serpent was down again, persistent if inaccurate. It struck the place of their first concealment and missed them.

"Run!"

They extended their weary muscles to the utmost, but it was soon apparent that they could not escape long. A rock wall in their path saved them.

"Hole!" the Martian gasped.

Forepaugh followed him into the rocky cleft. There was a strong draft of dry air, and it would have been next to impossible to hold the Martian back, so Forepaugh allowed him to lead on toward the source of the draft. As long as it led into the mountains he didn't care.

The natural passageway was untenanted. Evidently its coolness and dryness made it untenable for most of

Inra's humidity and heat loving life. Yet the floor was so smooth that it must have been artificially leveled. Faint illumination was provided by the rocks themselves. They appeared to be covered by some microscopic phosphorescent vegetation.

After hundreds of twists and turns and interminable straight galleries the cleft turned more sharply upward, and they had a period of stiff climbing. They must have gone several miles and climbed at least 20,000 feet. The air became noticeably thin, which only exhilarated Gunga, but slowed the Earth man down. But at last they came to the end of the cleft. They could go no further, but above them, at least 500 feet higher, they saw a round patch of sky, miraculously bright blue sky!

"A pipe!" Forepaugh cried.

He had often heard of these mysterious, almost fabulous structures sometimes reported by passing travelers. Straight and true, smooth as glass and apparently immune to the elements, they had been occasionally seen standing on the very tops of the

highest mountains—seen for a few moments only before they were hidden again by the clouds. Were they observatories of some ancient race, placed thus to pierce the mysteries of outer space? They would find out.

The inside of the pipe had zigzagging rings of metal, conveniently spaced for easy climbing. With Gunga leading, they soon reached the top. But not quite.

"Eh?" said Forepaugh.

"Uh?" said Gunga.

There had not been a sound, but a distinct, definite command had registered on their minds.

"Stop!"

They tried to climb higher, but could not unclasp their hands. They tried to descend, but could not lower their feet.

The light was by now relatively bright, and as by

command their eyes sought the opposite wall. What they saw gave their jaded nerves an unpleasant thrill—a mass of doughy matter of a blue-green color about three feet in diameter, with something that resembled a cyst filled with transparent liquid near its center.

And this thing began to flow along the rods, much as tar flows. From the mass extended a pseudopod; touched Gunga on the arm. Instantly the arm was raw and bleeding. Terrified, immovable, he writhed in agony. The pseudopod returned to the main mass, disappearing into its interior with the strip of bloody skin.

Its attention was centered so much on the luckless Martian that its control slipped from Forepaugh. Seizing his flash pistol, he set the localized for a small area and aimed it at the thing, intent on burning it into nothingness. But again his hand was stayed. Against the utmost of his will-power his fingers opened, letting the pistol drop. The liquid in the cyst danced and bubbled. Was it laughing at him? It had read his mind—thwarted his will again.

Again a pseudopod stretched out and a strip of raw, red flesh adhered to it and was consumed. Mad rage convulsed the Earth man. Should he throw himself tooth and nail on the monster? And be engulfed?

He thought of the six-shooter. It thrilled him.

But wouldn't it make him drop that too?

A flash of atavistic cunning came to him.

He began to reiterate in his mind a certain thought.

"This thing is so I can see you better—this thing is so I can see you better."

He said it over and over, with all the passion and devotion of a celibate's prayer over a uranium fountain.

"This thing is harmless—but it will make me see you better!"

Slowly he drew the six-shooter. In some occult way he

knew it was watching him.

"Oh, this is harmless! This is an instrument to aid my weak eyes! It will help me realize your mastery! This will enable me to know your true greatness. This will enable me to know you as a god."

Was it complacency or suspicion that stirred the liquid in the cyst so smoothly? Was it susceptible to flattery? He sighted along the barrel.

"In another moment your great intelligence will overwhelm me," proclaimed his surface mind desperately, while the subconscious tensed the trigger. And at that the clear liquid burst into a turmoil of alarm. Too late. Forepaugh went limp, but not before he had loosed a steel-jacketed bullet that shattered the mind cyst of the pipe denizen. A horrible pain coursed through his every fibre and nerve. He was safe in the arms of Gunga, being carried to the top of the pipe to the clean dry air, and the blessed, blistering sun.

The pipe denizen was dying. A viscous, inert mass, it

dropped lower and lower, lost contact at last, shattered into slime at the bottom.

Miraculous sun! For a luxurious fifteen minutes they roasted there on the top of the pipe, the only solid thing in a sea of clouds as far as the eye could reach. But no! That was a circular spot against the brilliant white of the clouds, and it was rapidly coming closer. In a few minutes it resolved itself into the *Comet*, fast relief ship of the Terrestrial, Inranian, Genidian, and Zydian Lines, Inc. With a low buzz of her repulsion motors she drew alongside. Hooks were attached and ports opened. A petty officer and a crew of roustabouts made her fast.

"What the hell's going on here?" asked the cocky little terrestrial who was skipper, stepping out and surveying the castaways. "We've been looking for you ever since your directional wave failed. But come on in—come on in!"

He led the way to his stateroom, while the ship's surgeon took Gunga in charge. Closing the door carefully, he delved into the bottom of his locker and

brought out a flask.

"Can't be too careful," he remarked, filling a small tumbler for himself and another for his guest. "Always apt to be some snooper to report me. But say—you're wanted in the radio room."

"Radio room nothing! When do we eat?"

"Right away, but you'd better see him. Fellow from the Interplanetary News Agency wants you to broadcast a copyrighted story. Good for about three years' salary, old boy."

"All right. I'll see him"—with a happy sigh—"just as soon as I put through a personal message."

#42 The Lord Of Space, By Victor Rousseau Emanuel:

A black Caesar had arisen on Eros—and all Earth trembled at his distant menace.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -



[IDHERE]

A Black Caesar had arisen on Eros—and all Earth trembled at his distant menace.

“On the day of the next full moon every living thing on earth will be wiped out of existence—unless you succeed in your mission, Lee.”

Nathaniel Lee looked into the face of Silas Stark, President of the United States of the World, and nodded grimly. "I'll do my best, Sir," he answered.

"You have the facts. We know who this self-styled Black Caesar is, who has declared war upon humanity. He is a Dane named Axelson, whose father, condemned to life imprisonment for resisting the new world-order, succeeded in obtaining possession of an interplanetary liner.

"He filled it with the gang of desperate men who had been associated with him in his successful escape from the penitentiary. Together they sailed into Space. They disappeared. It was supposed that they had somehow met their death in the ether, beyond the

range of human ken.

"Thirty years passed, and then this son of Axelson, born, according to his own story, of a woman whom the father had persuaded to accompany him into Space, began to radio us. We thought at first it was some practical joker who was cutting in.

It was like struggling with some vampire creatures in a hideous dream.

"When our electricians demonstrated beyond doubt that the voice came from outer space, it was supposed that some one in our Moon Colony had acquired a transmitting machine. Then the ships we sent to the Moon Colony for gold failed to return. As you know, for seven weeks there has been no communication with the Moon. And at the last full moon the—blow—fell.

"The world depends upon you, Lee. The invisible rays that destroyed every living thing from China to Australia—one-fifth of the human race—will fall upon the eastern seaboard of America when the moon is

full again. That has been the gist of Axelson's repeated communications.

"We shall look to you to return, either with the arch-enemy of the human race as your prisoner, or with the good news that mankind has been set free from the menace that overhangs it.

"God bless you, my boy!" The President of the United States of the World gripped Nat's hand and stepped down the ladder that led from the landing-stage of the great interplanetary space-ship.

The immense landing-field reserved for the ships of the Interplanetary Line was situated a thousand feet above the heart of New York City, in Westchester County. It was a flat space set on the top of five great towers, strewn with electrified sand, whose glow had the property of dispersing the sea fogs. There, at rest upon what resembled nothing so much as iron claws, the long gray shape of the vacuum flyer bulked.

Nat sneezed as he watched the operations of his men, for the common cold, or coryza, seemed likely to be

the last of the germ diseases that would yield to medical science, and he had caught a bad one in the Capitol, while listening to the debate in the Senate upon the threat to humanity. And it was cold on the landing-stage, in contrast to the perpetual summer of the glass-roofed city below.

But Nat forgot the cold as he watched the preparations for the ship's departure. Neon and nitrogen gas were being pumped under pressure into the outer shell, where a minute charge of leucon, the newly discovered element that helped to counteract gravitation, combined with them to provide the power that would lift the vessel above the regions of the stratosphere.

In the low roof-buildings that surrounded the stage was a scene of tremendous activity. The selenium discs were flashing signals, and the radio receivers were shouting the late news; on the great power boards dials and light signals stood out in the glow of the amylite tubes. On a rotary stage a thousand feet above the ship a giant searchlight, visible for a thousand miles, moved its shaft of dazzling luminosity

across the heavens.

Now the spar-aluminite outer skin of the ship grew bright with the red neon glare. Another ship, from China, dropped slowly to its stage near by, and the unloaders swarmed about the pneumatic tubes to receive the mail. The teleradio was shouting news of a failure of the Manchurian wheat crop. Nat's chief officer, a short cockney named Brent, came up to him.

"Ready to start, Sir," he said.

Nat turned to him. "Your orders are clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Send Benson here."

"I'm here, Sir." Benson, the ray-gunner in charge of the battery that comprised the vessel's armament, a lean Yankee from Connecticut, stepped forward.

"You know your orders, Benson? Axelson has seized the Moon and the gold-mines there. He's planning to

obliterate the Earth. We've got to go in like mad dogs and shoot to kill. No matter if we kill every living thing there, even our own people who are inmates of the Moon's penal settlement, we've got to account for Axelson."

"Yes, Sir."

"We can't guess how he got those gold-ships that returned with neon and argon for the Moon colonists. But he mustn't get us. Let the men understand that. That's all."

"Very good, Sir."

The teleradio suddenly began to splutter: A-A-A, it called. And instantly every sound ceased about the landing-stage. For that was the call of Axelson, somewhere upon the Moon.

"Axelson speaking. At the next full moon all the American Province of the World Federation will be annihilated, as the Chinese Province was at the last. There's no hope for you, good people. Send out your

vacuum liners. I can use a few more of them. Within six months your world will be depopulated, unless you flash me the signal of surrender."

Would the proud old Earth have to come to that? Daily those ominous threats had been repeated, until popular fears had become frenzy. And Nat was being sent out as a last hope. If he failed, there would be nothing but surrender to this man, armed with a super-force that enabled him to lay waste the Earth from the Moon.

Within one hour, those invisible, death-dealing rays had destroyed everything that inhaled oxygen and exhaled carbon. The ray with which the liner was equipped was a mere toy in comparison. It would kill at no more than 500 miles, and its action was quite different.

As a prelude to Earth's surrender, Axelson demanded that World President Stark and a score of other dignitaries should depart for the Moon as hostages. Every ray fortress in the world was to be dismantled, every treasury was to send its gold to be piled up in a

great pyramid on the New York landing-stage. The Earth was to acknowledge Axelson as its supreme master.

The iron claws were turning with a screwlike motion, extending themselves, and slowly raising the interplanetary vessel until she looked like a great metal fish with metal legs ending with suckerlike disks. But already she was floating free as the softly purring engines held her in equipoise. Nat climbed the short ladder that led to her deck. Brent came up to him again.

"That teleradio message from Axelson—" he began.

"Yes?" Nat snapped out.

"I don't believe it came from the Moon at all."

"You don't? You think it's somebody playing a hoax on Earth? You think that wiping out of China was just an Earth-joke?"

"No, Sir." Brent stood steady under his superior's

sarcasm. "But I was chief teleradio operator at Greenwich before being promoted to the Province of America. And what they don't know at Greenwich they don't know anywhere."

Brent spoke with that self-assurance of the born cockney that even the centuries had failed to remove, though they had removed the cockney accent.

"Well, Brent?"

"I was with the chief electrician in the receiving station when Axelson was radioing last week. And I noticed that the waves of sound were under a slight Doppler effect. With the immense magnification necessary for transmitting from the Moon, such deflection might be construed as a mere fan-like extension. But there was ten times the magnification one would expect from the Moon; and I calculated that those sound-waves were shifted somewhere."

"Then what's your theory, Brent?"

"Those sounds come from another planet. Somewhere

on the Moon there's an intercepting and re-transmitting plant. Axelson is deflecting his rays to give the impression that he's on the Moon, and to lure our ships there."

"What do you advise?" asked Nat.

"I don't know, Sir."

"Neither do I. Set your course Moonward, and tell Mr. Benson to keep his eyes peeled."

The Moon Colony, discovered in 1976, when Kramer, of Baltimore, first proved the practicability of mixing neon with the inert new gas, leucon, and so conquering gravitation, had proved to be just what it had been suspected of being—a desiccated, airless desolation. Nevertheless, within the depths of the craters a certain amount of the Moon's ancient atmosphere still lingered, sufficient to sustain life for the queer troglodytes, with enormous lung-boxes, who survived there, browsing like beasts upon the stunted, aloe-like vegetation.

Half man, half ape, and very much unlike either, these vestiges of a species on a ruined globe had proved tractable and amenable to discipline. They had become the laborers of the convict settlement that had sprung up on the Moon.

Thither all those who had opposed the establishment of the World Federation, together with all persons convicted for the fourth time of a felony, had been transported, to superintend the efforts of these dumb, unhuman Moon dwellers. For it had been discovered that the Moon craters were extraordinarily rich in gold, and gold was still the medium of exchange on Earth.

To supplement the vestigial atmosphere, huge stations had been set up, which extracted the oxygen from the subterranean waters five miles below the Moon's crust, and recombined it with the nitrogen with which the surface layer was impregnated, thus creating an atmosphere which was pumped to the workers.

Then a curious discovery had been made. It was

impossible for human beings to exist without the addition of those elements existing in the air in minute quantities—neon, krypton, and argon. And the ships that brought the gold bars back from the Moon had conveyed these gaseous elements there.

The droning of the sixteen atomic motors grew louder, and mingled with the hum of gyroscopes. The ladder was drawn up and the port hole sealed. On the enclosed bridge Nat threw the switch of durobronze that released the non-conducting shutter which gave play to the sixteen great magnets. Swiftly the great ship shot forward into the air. The droning of the motors became a shrill whine, and then, growing too shrill for human ears to follow it, gave place to silence.

Nat set the speed lever to five hundred miles an hour, the utmost that had been found possible in passing through the earth's atmosphere, owing to the resistance, which tended to heat the vessel and damage the delicate atomic engines. As soon as the ether was reached, the speed would be increased to ten or twelve thousand. That meant a twenty-two

hour run to the Moon Colony—about the time usually taken.

He pressed a lever, which set bells ringing in all parts of the ship. By means of a complicated mechanism, the air was exhausted from each compartment in turn, and then replaced, and as the bells rang, the men at work trooped out of these compartments consecutively. This had been originated for the purpose of destroying any life dangerous to man that might unwittingly have been imported from the Moon, but on one occasion it had resulted in the discovery of a stowaway.

Then Nat descended the bridge to the upper deck. Here, on a platform, were the two batteries of three ray-guns apiece, mounted on swivels, and firing in any direction on the port and starboard sides respectively. The guns were enclosed in a thin sheath of osmium, through which the lethal rays penetrated unchanged; about them, thick shields of lead protected the gunners.

He talked with Benson for a while. "Don't let Axelson

get the jump on you," he said. "Be on the alert every moment." The gunners, keen-looking men, graduates from the Annapolis gunnery school, grinned and nodded. They were proud of their trade and its traditions; Nat felt that the vessel was safe in their hands.

The chief mate appeared at the head of the companion, accompanied by a girl. "Stowaway, Sir," he reported laconically. "She tumbled out of the repair shop annex when we let out the air!"

Nat stared at her in consternation, and the girl stared back at him. She was a very pretty girl, hardly more than twenty-two or three, attired in a businesslike costume consisting of a leather jacket, knickers, and the black spiral puttees that had come into style in the past decade. She came forward unabashed.

"Well, who are you?" snapped Nat.

"Madge Dawes, of the Universal News Syndicate," she answered, laughing.

"The devil!" muttered Nat. "You people think you run the World Federation since you got President Stark elected."

"We certainly do," replied the girl, still laughing.

"Well, you don't run this ship," said Nat. "How would you like a long parachute drop back to Earth?"

"Don't be foolish, my dear man," said Madge. "Don't you know you'll get wrinkles if you scowl like that? Smile! Ah, that's better. Now, honestly, Cap we just had to get the jump on everybody else in interviewing Axelson. It means such a lot to me."

Pouts succeeded smiles. "You're not going to be cross about it, are you?" she pleaded.

"Do you realize the risk you're running, young woman?" Nat demanded. "Are you aware that our chances of ever getting back to Earth are smaller than you ought to have dreamed of taking?"

"Oh, that's all right," the girl responded. "And now

that we're friends again, would you mind asking the steward to get me something to eat? I've been cooped up in that room downstairs for fifteen hours, and I'm simply starving."

Nat shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. He turned to the chief mate. "Take Miss Dawes down to the saloon and see that Wang Ling supplies her with a good meal," he ordered. "And put her in the Admiral's cabin. That good enough for you?" he asked satirically.

"Oh that'll be fine," answered the girl enthusiastically. "And I shall rely on you to keep me posted about everything that's going on. And a little later I'm going to take X-ray photographs of you and all these men." She smiled at the grinning gunners. "That's the new fad, you know, and we're going to offer prizes for the best developed skeletons in the American Province, and pick a King and Queen of Beauty!"

"A radio, Sir!"

Nat, who had snatched a brief interval of sleep,

started up as the man on duty handed him the message. The vessel had been constantly in communication with Earth during her voyage, now nearing completion, but the dreaded A-A-A that prefaced this message told Nat that it came from Axelson.

"Congratulations on your attempt," the message ran, "I have watched your career with the greatest interest, Lee, through the medium of such scraps of information as I have been able to pick up on the Moon. When you are my guest to-morrow I shall hope to be able to offer you a high post in the new World Government that I am planning to establish. I need good men. Fraternally, the Black Caesar."

Nat whirled about. Madge Dawes was standing behind him, trying to read the message over his shoulder.

"Spying, eh?" said Nat bitterly.

"My dear man, isn't that my business?"

"Well, read this, then," said Nat, handing her the message. "You're likely to repent this crazy trick of yours before we get much farther."

And he pointed to the cosmic-ray skiagraph of the Moon on the curved glass dome overhead. They were approaching the satellite rapidly. It filled the whole dome, the craters great black hollows, the mountains standing out clearly. Beneath the dome were the radium apparatus that emitted the rays by which the satellite was photographed cinematographically, and the gyroscope steering apparatus by which the ship's course was directed.

Suddenly a buzzer sounded a warning. Nat sprang to the tube.

"Gravitational interference X40, gyroscopic aberrancy one minute 29," he called. "Discharge static electricity from hull. Mr. Benson, stand by."

"What does that mean?" asked Madge.

"It means I shall be obliged if you'll abstain from

speaking to the man at the controls," snapped Nat.

"And what's that?" cried Madge in a shriller voice, pointing upward.

Across the patterned surface of the Moon, shown on the skiagraph, a black, cigar-shaped form was passing. It looked like one of the old-fashioned dirigibles, and the speed with which it moved was evident from the fact that it was perceptibly traversing the Moon's surface. Perhaps it was travelling at the rate of fifty thousand miles an hour.

Brent, the chief officer, burst up the companion. His face was livid.

"Black ship approaching us from the Moon, Sir," he stammered. "Benson's training his guns, but it must be twenty thousands miles away."

"Yes, even our ray-guns won't shoot that distance," answered Nat. "Tell Benson to keep his guns trained as well as he can, and open fire at five hundred."

Brent disappeared. Madge and Nat were alone on the bridge. Nat was shouting incomprehensible orders down the tube. He stopped and looked up. The shadow of the approaching ship had crossed the Moon's disk and disappeared.

"Well, young lady, I think your goose is cooked," said Nat. "If I'm not mistaken, that ship is Axelson's, and he's on his way to knock us galley-west. And now oblige me by leaving the bridge."

"I think he's a perfectly delightful character, to judge from that message he sent you," answered Madge, "and—"

Brent appeared again. "Triangulation shows ten thousand miles, Sir," he informed Nat.

"Take control," said Nat. "Keep on the gyroscopic course, allowing for aberrancy, and make for the Crater of Pytho. I'll take command of the guns." He hurried down the companion, with Madge at his heels.

The gunners stood by the ray-guns, three at each. Benson perched on a revolving stool above the batteries. He was watching a periscopic instrument that connected with the bridge dome by means of a tube, a flat mirror in front of him showing all points of the compass. At one edge the shadow of the black ship was creeping slowly forward.

"Eight thousand miles, Sir," he told Nat. "One thousand is our extreme range. And it looks as if she's making for our blind spot overhead."

Nat stepped to the speaking-tube. "Try to ram her," he called up to Brent. "We'll open with all guns, pointing forward."

"Very good, Sir," the Cockney called back.

The black shadow was now nearly in the centre of the mirror. It moved upward, vanished. Suddenly the atomic motors began wheezing again. The wheeze became a whine, a drone.

"We've dropped to two thousand miles an hour, Sir,"

called Brent.

Nat leaped for the companion. As he reached the top he could hear the teleradio apparatus in the wireless room overhead begin to chatter:

"A-A-A. Don't try to interfere. Am taking you to the Crater of Pytho. Shall renew my offer there. Any resistance will be fatal. Axelson."

And suddenly the droning of the motors became a whine again, then silence. Nat stared at the instrument-board and uttered a cry.

"What's the matter?" demanded Madge.

Nat swung upon her. "The matter?" he bawled. "He's neutralized our engines by some infernal means of his own, and he's towing us to the Moon!"

The huge sphere of the Moon had long since covered the entire dome. The huge Crater of Pytho now filled it, a black hollow fifty miles across, into which they were gradually settling. And, as they settled, the pale

Earth light, white as that of the Moon on Earth, showed the gaunt masses of bare rock, on which nothing grew, and the long stalactites of glassy lava that hung from them.

Then out of the depths beneath emerged the shadowy shape of the landing-stage.

"You are about to land," chattered the radio. "Don't try any tricks; they will be useless. Above all, don't try to use your puny ray. You are helpless."

The ship was almost stationary. Little figures could be seen swarming upon the landing-stage, ready to adjust the iron claws to clamp the hull. With a gesture of helplessness, Nat left the bridge and went down to the main deck where, in obedience to his orders, the crew had all assembled.

"Men, I'm putting it up to you," he said. "Axelson, the Black Caesar, advises us not to attempt to use the Ray-guns. I won't order you to. I'll leave the decision with you."

"We tried it fifteen minutes ago, Sir," answered Benson. "I told Larrigan to fire off the stern starboard gun to see if it was in working order, and it wasn't!"

At that moment the vessel settled with a slight jar into the clamps. Once more the teleradio began to scream:

"Open the port hold and file out slowly. Resistance is useless. I should turn my ray upon you and obliterate you immediately. Assemble on the landing-stage and wait for me!"

"You'd best obey," Nat told his men. "We've got a passenger to consider." He glared at Madge as he spoke, and Madge's smile was a little more tremulous than it had been before.

"This is the most thrilling experience of my life, Captain Lee," she said. "And I'll never rest until I've got an X-Ray photograph of Mr. Axelson's skeleton for the Universal News Syndicate."

One by one, Nat last, the crew filed down the ladder onto the landing-stage, gasping and choking in the

rarefied air that lay like a blanket at the bottom of the crater. And the reason for this was only too apparent to Nat as soon as he was on the level stage.

Overhead, at an altitude of about a mile, the black ship hung, and from its bow a stupendous searchlight played to and fro over the bottom of the crater, making it as light as day. And where had been the mining machinery, the great buildings that had housed convicts and Moon people, and the huge edifice that contained the pumping station, there was—nothing.

The devilish ray of Axelson had not merely destroyed them, it had obliterated all traces of them, and the crew of the liner were breathing the remnants of the atmosphere that still lay at the bottom of the Crater of Pytho.

But beside the twin landing-stages, constructed by the World Federation, another building arose, with an open front. And that front was a huge mirror, now scintillating under the searchlight from the black ship.

"That's it, Sir!" shouted Brent.

"That's what?" snapped Nat.

"The deflecting mirror I was speaking of. That's what deflected the ray that wiped out China. The ray didn't come from the Moon. And that's the mirror that deflects the teleradio waves, the super-Hertzian rays that carry the sound."

Nat did not answer. Sick at heart at the failure of his mission, he was watching the swarm of Moon men who were at work upon the landing-stage, turning the steel clamps and regulating the mechanism that controlled the apparatus. Dwarfed, apish creature, with tiny limbs, and chests that stood out like barrels, they bustled about, chattering in shrill voices that seemed like the piping of birds.

It was evident that Axelson, though he had wiped out the Moon convicts and the Moon people in the crater, had reserved a number of the latter for personal use.

The black ship was dropping into its position at the

second landing-stage, connected with the first by a short bridge. The starboard hold swung open, and a file of shrouded and hooded forms appeared, masked men, breathing in condensed air from receptacles upon their chests, and staring with goggle eyes at their captives. Each one held in his hand a lethal tube containing the ray, and, as if by command, they took up their stations about their prisoners.

Then, at a signal from their leader, they suddenly doffed their masks.

Nat looked at them in astonishment. He had not known whether these would be Earth denizens or inhabitants of some other planet. But they were Earth men. And they were old.

Men of sixty or seventy, years, with long, gray beards and wrinkled faces, and eyes that stared out from beneath penthouses of shaggy eyebrows. Faces on which were imprinted despair and hopelessness.

Then the first man took off his mask and Nat saw a man of different character.

A man in the prime of life, with a mass of jet black hair and a black beard that swept to his waist, a nose like a hawk's, and a pair of dark blue eyes that fixed themselves on Nat's with a look of Luciferian pride.

"Welcome, Nathaniel Lee," said the man, in deep tones that had a curious accent which Nat could not place. "I ought to know your name, since your teleradios on Earth have been shouting it for three days past as that of the man who is to save Earth from the threat of destruction. And you know me!"

"Axelson—the Black Caesar," Nat muttered. For the moment he was taken aback. He had anticipated any sort of person except this man, who stood, looked, and spoke like a Viking, this incarnation of pride and strength.

Axelson smiled—and then his eyes lit upon Madge Dawes. And for a moment he stood as if petrified into a block of massive granite.

"What—who is this?" he growled.

"Why, I'm Madge Dawes, of the Universal News Syndicate," answered the girl, smiling at Axelson in her irrepressible manner. "And I'm sure you're not nearly such a bold, bad pirate as people think, and you're going to let us all go free."

Instantly Axelson seemed to become transformed into a maniac. He turned to the old men and shouted in some incomprehensible language. Nat and Madge, Brent and Benson, and two others who wore the uniforms of officers were seized and dragged across the bridge to the landing-stage where the black ship was moored. The rest of the crew were ordered into a double line.

And then the slaughter began.

Before Nat could even struggle to break away from the gibbering Moon men to whom he and the other prisoners had been consigned, the aged crew of the Black Caesar had begun their work of almost instantaneous destruction.

Streams of red and purple light shot from the ray-pistols that they carried, and before them the crew of the ether-liner simply withered up and vanished. They became mere masses of human débris piled on the landing-stage, and upon these masses, too, the old men turned their implements, until only a few heaps of charred carbon remained on the landing-stage, impalpable as burned paper, and slowly rising in the low atmospheric pressure until they drifted over the crater.

Nat had cried out in horror at the sight, and tried to tear himself free from the grasp of the Moon dwarfs who held him. So had the rest. Never was struggle so futile. Despite their short arms and legs, the Moon dwarfs held them in an unshakable grip, chattering and squealing as they compressed them against their barrel-like chests until the breath was all but crushed out of their bodies.

"Devil!" cried Nat furiously, as Axelson came up to him. "Why don't you kill us, too?" And he hurled furious taunts and abuse at him, in the hope of goading him into making the same comparatively

merciless end of his prisoners.

Axelson looked at him calmly, but made no reply. He looked at Madge again, and his features were convulsed with some emotion that gave him the aspect of a fiend. And then only did Nat realize that it was Madge who was responsible for the Black Caesar's madness.

Axelson spoke again, and the prisoners were hustled up the ladder and on board the black vessel.

"The Kommandant-Kommissar will see you!" The door of their prison had opened, letting in a shaft of light, and disclosing one of the graybeards, who stood there, pointing at Nat.

"The—who?" Nat demanded.

"The Kommandant-Kommissar, Comrade Axelson," snarled the graybeard.

Nat knew what that strange jargon meant. He had read books about the political sect known as

Socialists who flourished in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, and, indeed, were even yet not everywhere extinct. And with that a flash of intuition explained the presence of these old men on board.

These were the men who had been imprisoned in their youth, with Axelson's father, and had escaped and made their way into space, and had been supposed dead long since. Somewhere they must have survived.

And here they were, speaking a jargon of past generations, and ignorant that the world had changed, relics of the past, dead as the dead Moon from which the black ship was winging away through the ether.

"Don't go, Captain," pleaded Madge. "Tell him we'll all go together."

Nat shook his head. "Maybe I'll be able to make terms with him," he answered, and stepped out upon the vessel's deck.

The graybeard slammed the door and laughed savagely. "You'll make no terms with the Black Caesar," he said. "This is the reign of the proletariat. The bourgeois must die! So Lenin decreed!"

But he stopped suddenly and passed his hand over his forehead like a man awakening from a dream.

"Surely the proletariat has already triumphed on earth?" he asked. "A long time has passed, and daily we expect the summons to return and establish the new world-order. What year is this? Is it not 2017? It is so hard to reckon on Eros."

"On Eros?" thought Nat. "This is the year 2044," he answered. "You've been dreaming, my friend. We've had our new world-order, and it's not in the least like the one you and your friends anticipated."

"Gott!" screamed the old man. "Gott, you're lying to me, bourgeois! You're lying, I tell you!"

So Eros was their destination! Eros, one of the asteroids, those tiny fragments of a broken planet, lying outside the orbit of Mars. Some of these little worlds, of which more than a thousand are known to exist, are no larger than a gentleman's country estate; some are mere rocks in space. Eros, Nat knew, was distinguished among them from the fact that it had an eccentric orbit, which brought it at times nearer Earth than any other heavenly body except the Moon.

Also that it had only been known for thirty years, and that it was supposed to be a double planet, having a dark companion.

That was in Nat's mind as he ascended the bridge to where Axelson was standing at the controls, with one of the graybeards beside him. The door of his stateroom was open, and suddenly there scuttled out of it one of the most bestial objects Nat had ever seen.

It was a Moon woman, a dwarfish figure, clothed in a shapeless garment of spun cellulose, and in her arms she held a heavy-headed Moon baby, whose huge

chest stood up like a pyramid, while the tiny arms and legs hung dangling down.

"Here is the bourgeois, Kommandant," said Nat's captor.

Axelson looked at Nat, eye meeting eye in a slow stare. Then he relinquished the controls to the graybeard beside him, and motioned Nat to precede him into the stateroom.

Nat entered. It was an ordinary room, much like that of the captain of the ether-liner now stranded on the Moon. There were a bunk, chairs, a desk and a radio receiver.

Axelson shut the door. He tried to speak and failed to master his emotion. At last he said:

"I am prepared to offer you terms, Nathaniel Lee, in accordance with my promise."

"I'll make no terms with murderers," replied Nat bitterly.

Axelson stood looking at him. His great chest rose and fell. Suddenly he put out one great hand and clapped Nat on the shoulder.

"Wise men," he said, "recognize facts. Within three weeks I shall be the undisputed ruler of Earth. Whether of a desert or of a cowed and submissive subject-population, rests with the Earth men. I have never been on Earth, for I was born on Eros. My mother died at my birth. I have never seen another human woman until to-day."

Nat looked at him, trying to follow what was in Axelson's mind.

"My father fled to Eros, a little planet seventeen miles in diameter, as we have found. He called it a heavenly paradise. It was his intention to found there a colony of those who were in rebellion against the tyrants of Earth.

"His followers journeyed to the Moon and brought back Moon women for wives. But there were no children of these unions. Later there were dissensions

and civil war. Three-fourths of the colony died in battle with one another.

"I was a young man. I seized the reins of power. The survivors—these old men—were disillusioned and docile. I made myself absolute. I brought Moon men and women to Eros to serve us as slaves. But in a few years the last of my father's old compatriots will have died, and thus it was I conceived of conquering Earth and having men to obey me. For fifteen years I have been experimenting and constructing apparatus, with which I now have Earth at my mercy.

"But I shall need assistance, intelligent men who will obey me and aid me in my plans. That is why I saved you and the other officers of your ether-lines. If you will join me, you shall have the highest post on Earth under me, Nathaniel Lee, and those others shall be under you."

Axelson paused, and, loathing the man though he did, Nat was conscious of a feeling of pity for him that he could not control. He saw his lonely life on Eros, surrounded by those phantom humans of the past,

and he understood his longing for Earth rule—he the planetary exile, the sole human being of all the planetary system outside Earth, perhaps, except for his dwindling company of aged men.

"To-day, Nathaniel Lee," Axelson went on, "my life was recast in a new mould when I saw the woman you have brought with you. I did not know before that women were beautiful to look on. I did not dream that creatures such as she existed. She must be mine, Nathaniel Lee.

"But that is immaterial. What is your answer to my offer?"

Nat was trying to think, though passion distorted the mental images as they arose in his brain. To Axelson it was evidently incomprehensible that there would be any objection to his taking Madge. Nat saw that he must temporize for Madge's sake.

"I'll have to consult my companions," he answered.

"Of course," answered Axelson. "That is reasonable.

Tell them that unless they agree to join me it will be necessary for them to die. Do Earth men mind death? We hate it on Eros, and the Moon men hate it, too, though they have a queer legend that something in the shape of an invisible man raises from their ashes. My father told me that that superstition existed on Earth in his time, too. Go and talk to your companions, Nathaniel Lee."

The Black Caesar's voice was almost friendly. He clapped Nat on the shoulder again, and called the graybeard to conduct him back to his prison.

"Oh, Captain Lee, I'm so glad you're back!" exclaimed Madge. "We've been afraid for you. Is he such a terrible man, this Black Caesar?"

Nat sneered, then grinned malevolently. "Well, he's not exactly the old-fashioned idea of a Sunday-school teacher," he answered. Of course he could not tell the girl about Axelson's proposal.

The little group of prisoners stood on the upper deck of the black ship and watched the Moon men

scurrying about the landing-stage as she hovered to her position.

Axelson's father had not erred when he had called the tiny planet, Eros, a heavenly paradise, for no other term could have described it.

They were in an atmosphere so similar to that of Earth that they could breathe with complete freedom, but there seemed to be a lightness and a vigor in their limbs that indicated that the air was supercharged with oxygen or ozone. The presence of this in large amounts was indicated by the intense blueness of the sky, across which fleecy clouds were drifting.

And in that sky what looked like threescore moons were circling with extraordinary swiftness. From thirty to forty full moons, of all sizes, from that of a sun to that of a brilliant planet, and riding black against the blue.

The sun, hardly smaller than when seen from Earth, shone in the zenith, and Earth and Mars hung in the east and north respectively, each like a blood-red sun.

The moons were some of the thousand other asteroids, weaving their lacy patterns in and out among each other. But, stupendous as the sight was, it was toward the terrestrial scene that the party turned their eyes as the black ship settled.

A sea of sapphire blue lapped sands of silver and broke into soft lines of foam. To the water's edge extended a lawn of brightest green, and behind this an arm of the sea extended into what looked like a tropical forest. Most of the trees were palmlike, but towered to immense heights, their foliage swaying in a gentle breeze. There were apparently no elevations, and yet, so small was the little sphere that the ascending curve gave the illusion of distant heights, while the horizon, instead of seeming to rise, lay apparently perfectly flat, producing an extraordinary feeling of insecurity.

Near the water's edge a palatial mansion, built of hewn logs and of a single story, stood in a garden of brilliant flowers. Nearer, beyond the high landing-stage, were the great shipbuilding works, and near them an immense and slightly concave mirror flashed

back the light of the sun.

"The death ray!" whispered Brent to Nat.

Axelson came up to the party as the ship settled down. "Welcome to Eros," he said cordially. "My father told me that in some Earth tongue that name meant 'love'."

Never, perhaps, was so strange a feast held as that with which Axelson entertained his guests that day. Dwarfish Moon men passed viands and a sort of palm wine in the great banquet-room, which singularly resembled one of those early twentieth century interiors shown in museums. Only the presence of a dozen of the aged guards, armed with ray-rods, lent a grimness to the scene.

Madge sat on Axelson's right, and Nat on his left. The girl's lightheartedness had left her; her face grew strained as Axelson's motives—which Nat had not dared disclose to her—disclosed themselves in his manner.

Once, when he laid his finger for a moment against her white throat, she started, and for a moment it seemed as if the gathering storm must break.

For Nat had talked with his men, and all had agreed that they would not turn traitor, though they intended to temporize as long as possible, in the hope of catching the Black Caesar unawares.

Then slowly a somber twilight began to fall, and Axelson rose.

"Let us walk in the gardens during the reign of Erebos," he said.

"Erebos?" asked Nat.

"The black world that overshadows us each sleeping period," answered Axelson.

Nat knew what he meant. The dark companion of Eros revolves around it every six hours; the day of Eros would therefore never be longer than six hours, this without reckoning the revolution of Eros around

the sun. But owing to its small size, it was probable that it was bathed in almost perpetual sunshine.

The sweet scent of the flowers, much stronger than of any flowers on earth, filled the air. They walked across the green lawn and entered a jungle path, with bamboos and creeping plants on either side, and huge palmlike trees. Behind them stalked the guards with their ray-rods.

A lake of deepest black disclosed itself. Suddenly Madge uttered a scream and clung to Nat. "Look, look!" she cried. "It's horrible!"

Suddenly Nat realized that the lake swarmed with monsters. They were of crocodilian form, but twice the size of the largest crocodile, and sprawled over one another in the shallows beside the margin. As the party drew near, an enormous monster began waddling on its clawed feet toward them.

A mouth half the length of the creature opened, disclosing a purplish tongue and hideous fangs. Madge screamed again.

"Ah, so fear exists on Earth, too?" asked Axelson blandly. "That makes my conquest sure. I suspected it, and yet I was not sure that science had not conquered it. But there is no cause for fear. A magnetic field protects us. See!"

For the waddling monster suddenly stopped short as if brought up sharply by the bars of a cage, and drew back.

Axelson turned and wheezed in the Moon language—if the gibbering of the dwarfs could be called speech—and one of the guards answered him.

"These primitive dwellers on Eros I have preserved," said Axelson, "as a means of discipline. The Moon animals are afraid of them. I keep a supply of those who have transgressed my laws to feed them. See!"

He turned and pointed. Two guards were bringing a gibbering, screeching, struggling Moon man with them. Despite his strength, he seemed incapable of making any resistance, but his whole body quivered, and his hideous face was contorted with agony of

terror.

At a distance of some fifty feet they turned aside into a little bypath through the jungle, reappearing close beside the Lake upon a raised platform. And what happened next happened so swiftly that Nat was unable to do anything to prevent it.

The guards disappeared; the Moon man, as if propelled by some invisible force, moved forward jerkily to the lake's edge. Instantly one of the saurians had seized him in its jaws, and another had wrenched half the body away, and the whole fighting, squirming mass vanished in the depths.

And from far away came the screeching chant of the Moon men, as if in invocation to some hideous deity.

And, moving perceptibly, the huge black orb of Eros's dark satellite crept over the sky, completely covering it.

Axelson stepped forward to where Nat stood, supporting Madge in his arms. The girl had fainted

with horror at the scene.

"Your answer Nathaniel Lee," he said softly. "I know you have been postponing the decision. Now I will take the girl, and you shall give me your answer. Will you and these men join me, or will you die as the Moon man died?" He spoke wheezily, as if he, like Nat, had a cold.

And he put his arm around Madge.

Next moment something happened to him that had never happened in his life before. The Black Caesar went down under a well-directed blow to the jaw.

He leaped to his feet trembling with fury and barked a command. Instantly the old guards had hurled themselves forward. And behind them a horde of Moon men came, ambling.

While the guards covered their prisoners with their ray-rods, two Moon men seized each of them, imprisoning him in their unbreakable grasp.

Axelson pointed upward. "When the reign of Erebos is past," he said, "you become food for the denizens of the lake, unless you have agreed to serve me."

And he raised Madge in his arms, laughing as the girl fought and struggled to resist him.

"Madge!" cried Nat, trying to run toward her.

So furious were his struggles that for a moment he succeeded in throwing off the Moon men's grasp. Then he was caught again, and, fighting desperately, was borne off by the dwarfs through the shadows.

They traversed the border of the lake until a small stone building disclosed itself. Nat and the others were thrust inside into pitch darkness. The door clanged; in vain they hurled themselves against it. It was of wood, but it was as solid as the stone itself, and it did not give an inch for all their struggles.

"Where is your Kommandant?" The whisper seemed in the stone hut itself. "Your Nathaniel Lee. I must speak to him. I am the guard who brought him to the

Black Caesar on board the ship."

"I'm here," said Nat. "Where are you?"

"I am in the house of the ray. I am on guard there. I am speaking into the telephone which runs only to where you are. You can speak anywhere in the hut, and I shall hear you."

"Well, what do you want?" asked Nat.

"You love the Earth woman. I remember, when I was a boy, we used to love. I had forgotten. There was a girl in Stamford.... Tell me, is it true that this is the year 2044 and that the proletariat has not yet triumphed?"

"It's true," said Nat. "Those dreams are finished, We're proud of the World Federation. Tell me about Madge Dawes—the Earth woman. Is she safe?"

"He has taken her to his house. I do not think she is harmed. He is ill. He is closely guarded. There are rumors afoot. I do not know."

"What do you want, then?"

"If the Black Caesar dies will you take me back to Earth again? I long so for the old Earth life. I will be your slave, if only I can set foot on Earth before I die."

"Can you rescue us?" Nat held his breath.

"The Moon men are on guard."

"They have no ray-guns and you have."

"The penalty would be terrible. I should be thrown to the monsters."

"Can you get us each a ray-gun? Will you risk it, to get back to Earth?" asked Nat.

A pause. Then, "My friend, I am coming."

Nat heard Benson hissing in his ear, "If we can surprise them, we can get possession of the black ship and return."

"We must get Madge Dawes."

"And smash the mirror," put in Brent.

After that there was nothing to do but wait.

The door clicked open. An indistinct form stood in the entrance. It was already growing light; the dark satellite that eclipsed Eros was passing.

"Hush! I have brought you ray-rods!" It was the old man with whom Nat had spoken on the boat. Under his arm he held five metallic rods, tipped with luminous glass. He handed one to each of the prisoners. "Do you know how to use them?" he asked.

Nat examined his. "It's an old-style rod that was used on earth fifty years ago," he told his men. "I've seen them in museums. It came into use in the Second World War of 1950 or thereabouts. You slip back the safety catch and press this button, taking aim as one did with the pistol. You fellows have seen pistols?"

"My father had an old one," said the chief mate, Barnes.

"How many times can they be fired without reloading?" Nat asked the old guard.

"Ten times; sometimes more; and they were all freshly loaded yesterday."

"Take us to where Axelson is."

"First you must destroy the guards. I sent the one on duty here away on some pretext. But the others may be here at any moment. Talk lower. Are you going to kill them?"

"We must," said Nat.

The old fellow began to sob. "We were companions together. They seized us and imprisoned us together, the capitalists, years ago. I thought the proletariat would have won, and you say it is all different. I am an old man, and life is sad and strange."

"Listen. Is Axelson in the house?" demanded Nat.

"He is in his secret room. I do not know the way. None

of us has ever entered it."

"And Madge?"

"She was with him. I do not know anything more." He sank down, groaning, broken.

Nat pushed his way past him. It was fast growing light now. A ray of sunshine shot from beneath the edge of the dark sphere overhead, which still filled almost all the heavens. At that moment the hideous face and squat body of one of the Moon men came into view at the end of the path. The creature stopped, gibbering with surprise, and then rushed forward, mewing like a cat.

Nat aimed his ray-rod and pressed the button. The streak of light, not quite aimed, in Nat's excitement, sheared off one side of the Moon man's face.

The creature rocked where it stood, raised its voice in a screech, and rushed forward again, arms flailing. And this time Nat got home. The streak passed right through the body of the monster, which collapsed into

a heap of calcined carbon.

But its screech had brought the other dwarfs running to the scene. In a moment the path was blocked by a score of the hideous monsters, which, taking in what was happening, came forward in a yelling bunch.

The ray-rods streaked their message of death into the thick of them. Yet so fierce was the rush that some parts got home. Arms, legs, and barrel chests, halves of men, covering the five with that impalpable black powder into which their bodies were dissolving. Nat remembered afterward the horror of a grinning face, apparently loose in the air, and a flailing arm that lashed his chest.

For fifteen seconds, perhaps, it was like struggling with some vampire creatures in a hideous dream. And then, just when it seemed to Nat that he was going mad, he found the path free, and the huddled remnants of the Moon men piled up about him on every side.

He emptied two more ray-shots into the writhing

mass, and saw it cease to quiver and then dissolve into the black powder. He turned and looked at his companions. They, too, showed the horror of the strain they had undergone.

"We must kill the guards now," Nat panted. "And then find Madge and save her."

"We're with you," answered Brent, and together the five rushed into the sunlight and the open.

There were no guards on duty at the entrance of the house, and the door stood wide open. Nat rushed through the door at the head of his men. A single guard was in the hall, but he only looked up as they came in. And it was evident that he was in no condition to resist, for he was in the grip of some terrible disease.

His features were swollen so that they were hardly recognizable, and hoarse, panting breaths came from his lungs. He was so far gone that he hardly registered surprise at the advent of the five.

"Where's Axelson?" demanded Nat.

The guard pointed toward the end of the corridor, then let his arm fall. Nat led his men along the half-dark passage.

At the end of the corridor two more guards were on duty, but one was collapsed upon the floor, apparently unconscious, and the other, making a feeble attempt to draw his ray-rod, crumbled into ashes as Brent fired. The five burst through the door.

They found themselves in the banquet-hall. The remnants of the meal were still upon the table, and three Moon men, looking as if they had been poisoned, were writhing on the floor. At the farther end of the hall was another door.

This gave upon a central hall, with a door in each of its four sides, and a blaze of sunlight coming through the crystal roof. The five stopped, baffled. Then of a sudden Axelson's voice broke the silence—his voice, yet changed almost beyond recognition, hoarse, broken, and gasping:

"Try the doors, Nathaniel Lee. Try each door in turn, and then go back. And know that in an instant I can blast you to nothingness where you stand!"

And suddenly there came Madge's voice, "He can't! He can't, Nat. He's dying, and he knows it. I won't let him, and he hasn't got the strength to move."

"Which door?" cried Nat in desperation.

"None of the doors. They're a trick," came Madge's voice. "Go forward and press the grooved panel upon the wall in front of you."

Nat stepped forward, found the panel, and pressed it. The wall swung open, like two folded doors, revealing another room within, perfectly circular.

It contained a quantity of pieces of apparatus, some glowing with light, some dark, and a radio transmitting set; it was evidently the secret lair of the Black Caesar. And there he was, trapped at last by the mortal illness that had overtaken him!

He was lying upon the couch, his great form stretched out, his features hideously swollen by the same disease that had attacked the guards.

Nat raised his ray-rod, but Axelson feebly put up his hand, and Nat lowered the weapon. And, as the five gathered about the dying man, again Nat felt that strange sense of pathos and pity for him.

He had never known Earth life, and he was not to be measured by the common standards applicable on Earth.

"Don't fire, Nat," said Madge in a shaky voice. She was seated beside Axelson, and—the wonder of it—she was sponging the foam from his lips and moistening his forehead. She raised a crystal that contained some fluid to his lips, and he drained it greedily.

"So—Earth wins, Nathaniel Lee," whispered Axelson hoarsely. "I am dying. I know it. It is the same dreaded disease that came to the Moon at the time of my father's landing there. Three-fourths of the Moon

animals died. It is mortal. The lungs burn away.

"My father told me that on Earth it is not mortal. He called it 'cold'—but I am burning hot."

Then only did Nat understand, and the irony of it made him catch his breath and grit his teeth to check his hysterical laughter. The Black Caesar, the terror of Earth, was dying of a common cold which he himself had given him.

The coryza germ, almost harmless on Earth, among a population habituated to it for countless generations, had assumed the potency of a plague here, where no colds had ever been known—among the Moon men, and even among the guards, after their lifetime in the germless climate of Eros.

"I've failed, Nathaniel Lee," came the Black Caesar's voice. "And yet that hardly troubles me. There is something more that I do not understand. She is a creature like ourselves—with will and reason. She is not like the Moon women. She told me that she did not wish to be queen of the Earth because she did not

love me. I do not understand. And so—I am glad to go."

A gasp came from Axelson's throat as he raised his head and tried to speak, but the death-rattle was already in his throat. A slight struggle, and the massive form upon the couch was nothing but inanimate clay.

Madge rose from beside him, and the tears were streaming down her face.

"He wasn't a bad man, Nat," she said. "He was—gentle with me. He didn't understand; that was all. When I refused to be his queen, he was overcome with bewilderment. Oh, Nat, I can never, never write this story for the Universal News Syndicate."

Nat led her, sobbing, from the room.

Soon he succeeded in getting into teleradio communication with Earth. He broadcast the news that the Black Caesar was dead, and that his power for evil was at an end forever.

Then, in the few hours of daylight that remained, he set his men to work to smash the ray outfit that had destroyed China. There was some principle involved which he did not altogether understand, though Brent professed to have a clue to it, but it was evident that, except for the ray, Axelson had possessed no knowledge superior to that of the Earth scientists.

Of the guards, a few were already recovering, principally those of comparatively younger age. Not a Moon man, on the other hand, had survived the epidemic. As soon as Nat had got the guards out of the house, he reduced it to ashes by the aid of an old-fashioned box of phosphoric matches.

As the dark satellite was again creeping over Eros, the black ship set sail.

But of the return journey to the Moon, where they transferred to their own ship, of their landing at New York, and of the triumphal reception that was accorded them, this is no place to speak. Nat's journey with Madge from the center of the city, in what was the old Borough of Westchester, to his home

in the suburb of Hartford, was a continual ovation.

Crowds lined the air-route, and every few miles, so thick was the air-traffic, he was forced to hover and address the cheering multitudes. Hartford itself was *en fete*, and across the main road the City Bosses had hung an old-fashioned banner, strung from house to house on either side, bearing the legend: For World President: NATHANIEL LEE!

Nat turned to Madge, who was seated beside him silently. "Ever hear of 'getting married?'" he asked.

"Of course I've heard of it," replied the girl indignantly. "Do you think I'm as dumb as that, Nat Lee? Why, those old-fashioned novels are part of the public schools' curriculum."

"Pity those days can't come back. You ought to be a World Presidentess, you know," said Nat. "I was thinking, if we registered as companionates, I could take you into the White House, and you'd have a swell time there taking X-rays on visiting days."

"Well," answered Madge slowly. "I never thought of that. It might be worth trying out."

#43 The Second Satellite, By Edmond Hamilton:

Earth-men war on frog-vampires for the emancipation of the human cows of Earth's second satellite.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -



the city of the frog men!

Norman and Hackett, bulky in their thick flying suits, seemed to fill the little office. Across the room Harding, the field superintendent, contemplated them. Two planes were curving up into the dawn together from the field outside, their motors thunderous as they roared over the building. When their clamor had receded, Harding spoke:

"I don't know which of you two is crazier," he said. "You, Norman, to propose a fool trip like this, or you, Hackett, to go with him."

Hackett grinned, but the long, lean face of Norman was earnest. "No doubt it all sounds a little insane," he said, "but I'm convinced I'm right."

The field superintendent shook his head. "Norman, you ought to be writing fiction instead of flying. A second satellite—and Fellows and the others on it—what the devil!"

"What other theory can account for their disappearance?" asked Norman calmly. "You know

that since the new X-type planes were introduced, hundreds of fliers all over Earth have been trying for altitude records in them. Twenty-five miles—thirty—thirty-five—the records have been broken every day. But out of the hundreds of fliers who have gone up to those immense heights, four have never come down nor been seen again!

"One vanished over northern Sweden, one over Australia, one over Lower California, and one, Fellows, himself, right here over Long Island. You saw the globe on which I marked those four spots, and you saw that when connected they formed a perfect circle around the Earth. The only explanation is that the four fliers when they reached a forty-mile height were caught up by some body moving round Earth in that circular orbit, some unknown moon circling Earth inside its atmosphere, a second satellite of Earth's whose existence has until now never been suspected!"

Harding shook his head again. "Norman, your theory would be all right if it were not for the cold fact that no such satellite has ever been glimpsed."

"Can you glimpse a bullet passing you?" Norman retorted. "The two fliers at Sweden and Lower California vanished within three hours of each other, on opposite sides of the Earth. That means that this second satellite, as I've computed, circles Earth once every six hours, and travelling at that terrific speed it is no more visible to us of Earth than a rifle bullet would be."

"Moving through Earth's atmosphere at such speed, indeed, one would expect it to burn up by its own friction with the air. But it does not, because its own gravitational power would draw to itself enough air to make a dense little atmosphere for itself that would cling to it and shield it as it speeds through Earth's upper air. No, I'm certain that this second satellite exists, Harding, and I'm as certain that it's responsible for the vanishing of those four fliers."

"And now you and Hackett have figured when it will be passing over here and are going up in an X-type yourselves to look for it," Harding said musingly.

"Look for it?" echoed Hackett. "We're not going to

climb forty miles just to get a look at the damn thing—we're going to try landing on it!"

"You're crazy sure!" the field superintendent exploded. "If Fellows and those others got caught by the thing and never came down again, why in the name of all that's holy would you two want—" He stopped suddenly. "Oh, I think I see," he said, awkwardly. "Fellows was rather a buddy of you two, wasn't he?"

"The best that ever flew a crippled Nieuport against three Fokkers to pull us out of a hole," said Norman softly. "Weeks he's been gone, and if it had been Hackett and I he'd be all over the sky looking for us—the damned lunatic. Well, we're not going to let him down."

"I see," Harding repeated. Then—"Well, here comes your mechanic, Norman, so your ship must be ready. I'll go with you. It's an event to see two Columbuses starting for another world."

The gray dawn-light over the flying field was flushing

to faint rose as the three strode out to where the long X-type stood, its strangely curved wings, enclosed cabin and flat, fan-like tail gleaming dully. Its motor was already roaring with power and the plane's stubby wheels strained against the chocks. In their great suits Norman and Hackett were like two immense ape-figures in the uncertain light, to the eyes of those about them.

"Well, all the luck," Harding told them. "You know I'm pulling for you, but—I suppose it's useless to say anything about being careful."

"I seem to have heard the words," Hackett grinned, as he and Norman shook the field superintendent's hand.

"It's all the craziest chance," Norman told the other. "And if we don't come down in a reasonable time—well, you'll know that our theory was right, and you can broadcast it or not as you please."

"I hope for your sake that you're dead wrong," smiled the official. "I've told you two to get off the Earth a lot of times, but I never meant it seriously."

Harding stepped back as the two clambered laboriously into the cramped cabin. Norman took the controls, the door slammed, and as the chocks were jerked back and the motor roared louder the long plane curved up at a dizzy angle from the field into the dawn. Hackett waved a thick arm down toward the diminishing figures on the field below; then turned from the window to peer ahead with his companion.

The plane flew in a narrow ascending spiral upward, at an angle that would have been impossible to any ship save an X-type. Norman's eyes roved steadily over the instrument as they rose, his ears unconsciously alert for each explosion of the motor. Earth receded swiftly into a great gray concave surface as they climbed higher and higher.

By the time the five-mile height was reached Earth's surface had changed definitely from concave to convex. The plane was ascending by then in a somewhat wider spiral, but its climb was as steady and sure as ever. Frost began to form quickly on the cabin's windows, creeping out from the edges.

Norman spoke a word over the motor's muffled thunder, and Hackett snicked on the electrical radiators. The frost crept back as their warm, clean heat flooded the cabin.

Ten miles—fifteen—they had reached already altitudes impossible but a few years before, though it was nothing to the X-types. As they passed the ten-mile mark, Hackett set the compact oxygen-generator going. A clean, tangy odor filled the cabin as it began functioning. Twenty miles—twenty-two—

After a time Norman pointed mutely to the clock on the instrument board, and Hackett nodded. They were well within their time schedule, having calculated to reach the forty-mile height at ten, the hour when, by its computed orbit, the second satellite should be passing overhead. "—26—27—28—" Hackett muttered the altimeter figures to himself as the needle crept over them.

Glancing obliquely down through the window he saw that Earth was now a huge gray ball beneath them, white cloud-oceans obscuring the drab details of its

surface here and there. "—31—32—" The plane was climbing more slowly, and at a lesser angle. Even the X-type had to struggle to rise in the attenuated air now about them. Only the super-light, super-powered plane could ever have reached the terrific height.

It was at the thirty-four mile level that the real battle for altitude began. Norman kept the plane curving steadily upward, handling it with surpassing skill in the rarefied air. Frost was on its windows now despite the heating mechanism. Slowly the altimeter needle crept to the forty mark. Norman kept the ship circling, its wings tilted slightly, but not climbing, Earth a great gray misty ball beneath.

"Can't keep this height long," he jerked. "If our second satellite doesn't show up in minutes we've had a trip for nothing."

"All seems mighty different up here," was Hackett's shouted comment. "Easy enough to talk down there about hopping onto the thing, but up here—hell, there's nothing but air and mighty little of that!"

Norman grinned. "There'll be more. If I'm right about this thing we won't need to hop it—its own atmosphere will pick us up."

Both looked anxious as the motor sputtered briefly. But in a moment it was again roaring steadily. Norman shook his head.

"Maybe a fool's errand after all. No—I'm still sure we're right! But it seems that we don't prove it this time."

"Going down?" asked Hackett.

"We'll have to, in minutes. Even with its own air-feed the motor can't stand this height for—"

Norman never finished the words. There was a sound, a keen rising, rushing sound of immense power that reached their ears over the motor's roar. Then in an instant the universe seemed to go mad about them: they saw the gray ball of Earth and the sun above skyrocketing around them as the plane whirled madly.

The rushing sound was in that moment thunderous, terrible, and as winds smashed and rocked the plane like giant hands, Hackett glimpsed another sphere that was not the sphere of Earth, a greenish globe that expanded with lightning speed in the firmament beside their spinning plane! The winds stilled; the green globe changed abruptly to a landscape of green land and sea toward which the plane was falling! Norman was fighting the controls—land and sea were gyrating up to them with dizzy speed—crash!

With that cracking crash the plane was motionless. Sunlight poured through its windows, and great green growths were all around it. Hackett, despite Norman's warning cry, forced the door open and was bursting outside, Norman after him. They staggered and fell, with curious lightness and slowness, on the ground outside, then clutched the plane for support and gazed stupefiedly around them.

The plane had crashed down into a thicket of giant green reeds that rose a yard over their heads, its pancake landing having apparently not damaged it. The ground beneath their feet was soft and soggy, the

air warm and balmy, and the giant reeds hid all the surrounding landscape from view.

In the sky the sun burned near one horizon with unusual brilliance. But it was dwarfed, in size, by the huge gray circle that filled half the heavens overhead. A giant gray sphere it was, screened here and there by floating white mists and clouds, that had yet plain on it the outlines of dark continents and gleaming seas. A quaking realization held the two as they stared up at it.

"Earth!" Norman was babbling. "It's Earth, Hackett—above us; my God, I can't believe even yet that we've done it!"

"Then we're on—the satellite—the second satellite!—" Hackett fought for reality. "Those winds that caught us—"

"They were the atmosphere of this world, of the second satellite! They caught us and carried us on inside this smaller world's atmosphere, Hackett. We're moving with it around Earth at terrific speed

now!"

"The second satellite, and we on it!" Hackett whispered, incredulously. "But these reeds—it can't all be like this—"

They stepped together away from the plane. The effort sent each of them sailing upward in a great, slow leap, to float down more than a score of feet from the plane. But unheeding in their eagerness this strange effect of the satellite's lesser gravitational power, they moved on, each step a giant, clumsy leap. Four such steps took them out of the towering reeds onto clear ground.

It was a gentle, grassy slope they were on, stretching away along a gray-green sea that extended out to the astoundingly near horizon on their right. To the left it rose into low hills covered with dense masses of green junglelike vegetation. Hackett and Norman, though, gazed neither at sea or hills for the moment, but at the half-score grotesque figures who had turned toward them as they emerged from the reeds. A sick sense of the unreal held them as they gazed,

frozen with horror. For the great figures returning their gaze a few yards from them were—frog-men!

Frog-men! Great mottled green shapes seven to eight feet in height, with bowed, powerful legs and arms that ended in webbed paws. The heads were bulbous ones in which wide, unwinking frog-eyes were set at the sides, the mouths white-lipped and white-lined. Three of the creatures held each a black metal tube-and-handle oddly like a target-pistol.

"Norman!" Hackett's voice was a crescendo of horror.
"*Norman!*"

"Back to the plane!" Norman cried thickly. "The plane —"

The two staggered back, but the frog-men, recovering from their own first surprise, were running forward with great hopping steps! The two fliers flung themselves back in a floating leap toward the reeds, but the green monsters were quick after them. A

croaking cry came from one and as another raised his tube-and-handle, something flicked from it that burst close beside Norman. There was no sound or light as it burst, but the reeds for a few feet around it vanished!

A hoarse cry from Hackett—the creatures had reached him, grasped him at the edge of the reeds! Norman swerved in his floating leap to strike the struggling flier and frog-men. The scene whirled around him as he fought them, great paws reaching for him. With a sick, frantic rage he felt his clenched fist drive against cold, green, billowy bodies. Croaking cries sounded in his ears; then, Hackett and he were jerked to their feet, held tightly by four of the creatures.

"My God, Norman," panted Hackett, helpless. "What are they—frog-things?—"

"Steady, Hackett. They're the people of the second satellite, it seems; wait!"

One of the armed frog-men approached and inspected

them, and then croaked an order in a deep voice. Then, still holding the two tightly, the party of monsters began to move along the slope, skirting the sea's edge. In a few minutes they reached two curious objects resting on the slope. They seemed long black metal boats, slender and with sharp prow and stern. A compact mechanism and control-board filled the prow, while at the stern and sides were long tubes mounted on swivels like machine-guns.

The frog-men motioned Norman and Hackett into one, fastening the two prisoners and themselves into their seats with metal straps provided for the purpose. Four had entered the one boat, the others that of the captives. One at the prow moved his paws over the control-board and with a purring of power the boat, followed by the other, rose smoothly into the air. It headed out over the gray-green sea, land dropping quickly from sight behind, the horizons water-bounded on all sides. From their nearness Norman guessed that this second satellite of Earth's was small indeed beside its mother planet. He had to look up to earth's great gray sphere overhead to attain a sense

of reality.

Hackett was whispering beside him, the frog-men watchful. "Norman, it's not real—it can't be real! These things—these boats—intelligent like men—"

The other sought to steady him. "It's a different world, Hackett. Gravitation different, light different, everything different, and evolution here has had a different course. On Earth men evolved to be the most intelligent life-forms, but here the frog-races, it seems."

"But where are they taking us? Could we ever find the plane again?"

"God knows. If we ever get away from these things we might. And we've got to find Fellows, too; I wonder where he is on this world."

For many minutes the two boats raced on at great speed over the endless waters before the watery skyline was broken far ahead by something dark and unmoving. Hackett and Norman peered with intense

interest toward it. It seemed at first a giant squat mountain rising from the sea, but as they shot nearer they saw that its outline was too regular, and that colossal as it was in size it was the work of intelligence. They gasped as they came nearer and got a better view of it.

For it was a gigantic dome of black metal rising sheer from the lonely sea, ten miles if anything in diameter, a third that in greatest height. There was no gate or window or opening of any kind in it. Just the colossal, smooth black dome rearing from the watery plain. Yet the two boats were flashing lower toward it.

"They can't be going inside!" Hackett conjectured. "There's no way in and what could be in there? The whole thing's mad—"

"There's some way," Norman said. "They're slowing—"

The flying-boats were indeed slowing as they dipped lower. They were very near the dome now, its curving wall a looming, sky-high barrier before them. Suddenly the boats dipped sharply downward toward

the green sea. Before the two fliers could comprehend their purpose, could do aught more than draw instinctive great breaths in preparation, the two craft had shot down into the waters and were arrowing down through the green depths.

Blinded, flung against his metal strap by the resistance of the waters they ripped through, Norman yet retained enough of consciousness to glimpse beams of light that stabbed ahead from the prows of their rushing boats, to see vaguely strange creatures of the deep blundering in and out of those beams as the boats hurtled forward. The water that forced its way between his lips was fresh, he was vaguely aware, and even as he fought to hold his breath was aware too that the frog-men seemed in no way incommoded by the sudden transition into the water, their amphibian nature allowing them to stay under it far longer than any human could do.

The boats ripped through the waters at terrific speed and in a few seconds there loomed before them the giant metal wall of the great dome, going down into the depths here. Norman glimpsed vaguely that the

whole colossal dome rested on a vast pedestal-like mountain of rock that rose from the sea's floor almost to the surface. Then a great round opening in the wall; the boats flashed into it and were hurtling along a water-filled tunnel. Norman felt his lungs near bursting—when the tunnel turned sharply upward and the boats whizzed up and abruptly out of the water-tunnel into air!

But it was not the open air again. They were beneath the gigantic dome! For as Norman and Hackett breathed deep, awe fell on their faces as they took in the scene. Far overhead stretched the dome's colossally curving roof, and far out on all sides. It was lit beneath that roof by a clear light that the two would have sworn was sunlight. The dome was in effect the roof of a gigantic, illuminated building, and upon its floor there stretched a mighty city.

The city of the frog-men! Their boats were rising up over it and Norman and Hackett saw it clear. Square mile upon square mile of structures stretched beneath the dome, black buildings often of immense size, varying in shape, but all of square, rectangular

proportions. Between them moved countless frog-hordes, swirling throngs in streets and squares, and over the roofs darted thick swarms of flying-boats. And at the city's center, in a great, circular, clear space, lay a wide, round, green pool—the opening of the water-tunnel up through which they had come.

Norman pointed down toward it. "That's your answer!" he cried. "The only entrance to this frog-city is from the sea, up through that water-tunnel!"

"Good God, an amphibian city!" Hackett was shaken, white-faced.

The two boats were driving quickly over the city, through the swarming craft. Norman glimpsed towering buildings that might have been palaces, temples, laboratories. They slowed and dipped toward one block-like building not far from the water-tunnel's opening. Armed frog-guards were on its roof, and other boats rested there. The two came to rest and the two captives were jerked out, the guards seizing them.

Half-dragged and half-floating they were led toward an opening in the roof from which a stair led downward. They passed down thus into the building's interior, lit by many windows. Norman glimpsed long halls ending in barred doors, guards here and there. Tube-lines ran along the walls and somewhere machines were throbbing dully. They came at last to a barred door whose guard opened it at the croaking order of the frog-men who held the two, and they were thrust inside, as the door clanged. They turned, and exclaimed in amazement. The room held fully a half-hundred men!

They were men such as the two fliers had never seen before, like humans except that their skins were a light green instead of the normal white and pink. They were dressed in dark short tunics, and kept talking to each other in a tongue quite unintelligible to Norman and Hackett. They came closer, flocking curiously around the two men, with a babel of voices quite meaningless to the two. Then one of the men uttered an exclamation, and all turned.

The barred door had swung open and a half-dozen

frog-guards entered, followed by two frog-men carrying a square little mechanism from which tubing led back out through the door.

"Norman—these men—" Hackett was whispering rapidly. "If there are men in this world too, it may be that—"

"Quiet, Hackett—look at what they're doing."

The two frog-men had set their mechanism in place and then croaked out a brief word or order. Slowly, reluctantly, one of the green men moved toward them. Quickly they removed a metal disk fastened to his arm, exposing a small orifice like an unhealed wound. Onto this they fastened a suckerlike object from which a transparent tube led back through the mechanism. The machine hummed and at once a red stream pulsed through the tube and back through the mechanism. The man to whom it was attached was growing rapidly pale!

Norman, sick with horror, clutched his companion. "Hackett—these frog-men are sucking his blood from

him!"

"Good God! And look—they're doing it with another!"

"All of these men—kept prisoners to furnish them with blood. It must be the damned creatures' food! And we here with the others—"

A common horror shook the two. It did not seem to affect the green men in the room, though, who advanced to the mechanism one by one with a reluctant air as of cows unwilling to be milked. Each was attached to the mechanism by the sucking disk on his arm, and out of each the blood poured through the tube. The metal disk was replaced on his arm then and he went back to the others. Norman saw that the frog-men took only from each an amount of blood that they could lose and yet live, since, though each came back pale and weak from the mechanism, they were able to walk.

"It must be their food—human blood!" Norman repeated. "They may have thousands on thousands of humans penned up like this, like so many herds of

cows, and perhaps they live entirely on the life-blood they milk from them. Human cows—God!"

"Norman—look—they're calling to us!"

The two stiffened. All the others in the room had taken their turn at the blood-sucking mechanism and now the frog-men croaked their order to the two fliers. They had forgotten their own predicament in the horror of the scene, but now it became real to them. They backed against the room's wall, quivering, dangerous.

The frog-guards came forward to drag them to the machine. A webbed paw was outstretched but Hackett with a wild blow drove the frog-man back and downward. The frog-guards leaped, and Norman and Hackett struck them back with all the greater strength the lesser gravitation gave them. The room was in an uproar, the green men shouting hoarsely and seeming on the point of rushing to their aid.

But the menacing force-pistols of the other frog-guards held back the shouting men and in moments

the two fliers were overpowered by sheer weight of frog-bodies. Norman felt himself dragged to the machine.

Pain needled his upper arm as an incision was made. He felt the sucking-disk attached; then the machine hummed, and a sickening nausea swept him as the blood drained from his body. Held tightly by the guards he went dizzy, weak, but at last felt the sucker removed and a metal disk fastened over the incision. He was jerked aside and Hackett, his face deathly white, was dragged into his place. In a moment some of the latter's blood had been pumped from him also.

The machine was withdrawn, Norman and Hackett were released, and the frog-men, with their black force-pistols watchfully raised, withdrew, the door clanging. The room settled back to quietness, the green men stretching in lassitude on the metal bunks around it. The two fliers crouched down near the door, shuddering nausea and weakness still holding them.

Norman found that Hackett was laughing weakly. "To

think that twenty-four hours ago I was in New York," he half-laughed, half-sobbed. "On Earth—Earth—"

The other gripped his arm. "It's horrible, Hackett, I know. But it isn't instant death, and we've still a chance to escape. Hell, can damn frog-men keep us here? Where's your nerve, man?"

A voice beside them made them turn in amazement. "You are men from Earth?" it asked, in queerly accented English. "From Earth?"

Astonishment held them as they saw who spoke. It was one of the green men in the room, who had settled down by their side. A tall figure with superb muscles and frank, clean countenance, his dark eyes afire with eagerness.

"English?" Norman exclaimed. "You know English—you understand me?"

The other showed his teeth in a smile. "I know, yes. I'm Sarja, and I learned to speak it from Fallas, in my city, before the Ralas caught me."

"Fallas—" Norman repeated, puzzled; then suddenly he flamed. "By God, he means Fellows!"

"Fallas, yes," said the other. "From the sky he fell into our city in a strange flying-boat that was smashed. He was hurt but we cared for him, and he taught me his speech, which I heard you talking now."

"Then Fellows is in your city now?" asked Hackett eagerly. "Where is that?"

"Across this sea—back in the hills," the other waved. "It is far from the sea but I was rash one day and came too near the water in my flying-boat. The Ralas were out raiding and they saw me, caught me, and brought me here. No escape now, until I die."

"The Ralas—you mean these frog-men?" Norman asked.

Sarja nodded. "Of course. They are the tyrants and oppressors of this world. Our little world is but a tenth or less the size of your great Earth which it circles, but it has its lands and rivers, and this one

great fresh-water sea into which the latter empty. In this sea long ago developed the Ralas, the great frog-men who acquired such intelligence and arts that they became lords of this world.

"Through the centuries, while on the land our races of green men have been struggling upward, the Ralas have oppressed them. Long ago the Ralas left all their other cities to build this one great amphibian city at the sea's center. Entrance to it is only by the water-tunnel from without, and being frog-people entrance thus is easy for them since they can move for many minutes under water, though they drown like any other breathing animal if kept under too long.

Humans dare not try to enter it thus by the water-tunnel, since, before they could find it and make their way up through it, they would have drowned.

"So the Ralas have ruled from this impregnable amphibian city. Its colossal metal dome is invulnerable to ordinary attack, and though solid and without openings it is always as light beneath the dome here as outside, since the Ralas' scientists contrived light-condensers and conductors that catch

light outside and bring it in to release inside. So when it is day outside the sunlight is as bright here, and when night comes the Earth-light shines here the same as without.

"From this city their raiding parties have gone out endlessly to swoop down on the cities of us green men. Since we learned to make flying-boats like theirs, with molecular-motors, and to make the guns like theirs that fire shells filled with annihilating force, we have resisted them stoutly but their raids have not ceased. And always they have brought their prisoners back in to this, their city.

"Tens of thousands of green men they have prisoned here like us, for the sole purpose of supplying them with blood. For the Ralas live on this blood alone, changing it chemically to fit their own bodies and then taking it into their bodies. It eliminates all necessity for food here for them. Every few days they drain blood from us, and since we are well fed and cared for to keep us good blood-producers, we will be here for a long time before we die."

"But haven't you made any attempt to get out of here—to escape?" Norman asked.

Sarja smiled. "Who could escape the city of the Ralas? In all recorded history it has never been done, for even if by some miracle you got a flying-boat, the opening of the water-tunnel that leads outward is guarded always."

"Guards or no guards, we're going to try it and not sit here to furnish blood for the Ralas," Norman declared. "Are you willing to help, to try to get to Fellows and your city?"

The green man considered. "It is hopeless," he said, "but as well to die beneath the force-shells of the Ralas as live out a lifetime here. Yes, I will help, though I cannot see how you expect to escape even from this room."

"I think we can manage that," Norman told him. "But first—not a word to these others. We can't hope to escape with them all, and there is no knowing what one might not betray us to the frog-men."

He went on then to outline to the other two the idea that had come to him. Both exclaimed at the simpleness of the idea, though Sarja remained somewhat doubtful. While Hackett slept, weak still from his loss of blood, Norman had the green man scratch on the metal floor as well as possible a crude map of the satellite's surface, and found that the city, where Fellows was, seemed some hundreds of miles back from the sea.

While they talked, the sunlight, apparently sourceless, that came through the heavily barred windows of the room faded rapidly, and dusk settled over the great amphibian city beneath the giant dome, kept from total darkness by a silvery pervading light that Norman reflected must be the light from Earth's great sphere. With the dusk's coming the activities in the frog-city lessened greatly.

With dusk, too, frog-guards entered the room bearing long metal troughs filled with a red jellylike substance, that they placed on racks along the wall. As the guards withdrew the men in the room rushed toward the troughs, elbowing each other aside and

striking each other to scoop up and eat as much of the red jelly as possible. It was for all the world like the feeding of farm-animals, and Hackett and Norman so sickened at the sight that they had no heart to try the food. Sarja, though, had no such scruples and seemed to make a hearty meal at one of the troughs.

After the meal the green men sought the bunks and soon were stretched in sonorous slumber. It was, Norman reflected, exactly the existence of domesticated animals—to eat and sleep and give food to their masters. A deeper horror of the frog-men shook him, and a deeper determination to escape them. He waited until all in the room were sleeping before beckoning to Sarja and Hackett.

"Quiet now," he whispered to them. "If these others wake they'll make such a clamor we won't have a chance in the world. Ready, Sarja?"

The green man nodded. "Yes, though I still think such a thing's impossible."

"Probably is," Norman admitted. "But it's the one

chance we've got, the immensely greater strength of our Earth-muscle that the frog-men must have forgotten when they put us in here."

They moved silently to the room's great barred door, outside which a frog-guard paced. They waited until he had passed the door and on down the hall, then Norman and Hackett and Sarja grasped together one of the door's vertical bars. It was an inch and a half in thickness, of solid metal, and it seemed ridiculous that any men could bend it by the sheer strength of their muscles.

Norman, though, was relying on the fact that on the second satellite, with its far lesser gravitational influence, their Earth-muscles gave them enormous strength. He grasped the bar, Hackett and Sarja gripping it below him, and then at a whispered word they pulled with all their force. The bar resisted and again, with sweat starting on their foreheads, they pulled. It gave a little.

They shrank back from it as the guard returned, moving past. Then grasping the bar again they bent

all their force once more upon it. Each effort saw it bending more, the opening in the door's bars widening. They gave a final great wrench and the bent bar squealed a little. They shrank back, appalled, but the guard had not heard or noticed. He moved past it on his return along the hall, and no sooner was past it than Norman squeezed through the opening and leaped silently for the great frog-man's back.

It went down with a wild flurry of waving webbed paws and croaking cries, stilled almost instantly by Norman's terrific blows. There was silence then as Hackett and Sarja squeezed out after him, the momentary clamor of the battle having aroused no one.

The three leaped together toward the stairs. In two great floating leaps they were on the floor above, Hackett and Norman dragging Sarja between them. They were not seen, were sailing in giant steps up another stair, hopes rising high. The last stair—the roof-opening above; and then from beneath a great croaking cry swelled instantly into chorus of a alarmed shouts.

"They've found the door—the guard!" panted Hackett.

They were bursting out onto the roof. Frog-guards were on it who came in a hopping rush toward them, force-pistols raised. But a giant leap took Hackett among them, to amaze them for a moment with great flailing blows. Sarja had leaped for the nearest flying-boat resting on the roof, and was calling in a frantic voice to Norman and Hackett. Norman was turning toward Hackett, the center of a wild combat, but the latter emerged from it for a brief second to motion him frantically back.

"No use, Norman—get away—get away!" he cried hoarsely, frenziedly.

"Hackett—for God's sake—!" Norman half-leaped to the other, but an arm caught him, pulled him desperately onto the boat's surface. It was Sarja, the long craft flying over the roof beneath his control.

"They come!" he panted. "Too late now—" Frog-men were pouring up onto the roof from below. Sarja sent the craft rocketing upward, as Hackett gestured them

away for a last frantic time before going down beneath the frog-men's onslaught.

The roof and the combat on it dropped back and beneath them like a stone as their craft ripped across the silvery dusk over the mighty frog-city. They were shooting toward the city's center, toward the green pool that was the entrance to the water-tunnel, while behind and beneath an increasing clamor of alarm spread swiftly. Norman raged futilely.

"Hackett—Hackett! We can't leave him—"

"Too late!" Sarja cried. "We cannot help him but only be captured again. We escape now and come back—come back—"

The truth of it pierced Norman's brain even in the wild moment. Hackett had fought and held back the frog-guards only that they might escape. He shouted suddenly.

"Sarja—the water-tunnel!" A half-dozen boats with frog-guards on them were rising round it in answer to

the alarm!

"The force-gun!" cried the green man. "Beside you—!"

Norman whirled, glimpsed the long tube on its swivel beside him, trained it on the boats rising ahead as they rocketed nearer. He fumbled frantically at a catch at the gun's rear, then felt a stream of shells flicking out of it. Two of the boats ahead vanished as the shells released their annihilating force, another sagged and fell. From the remaining three invisible force-shells flicked around them, but in an instant Sarja had whirled the boat through them and down into the water-tunnel!

Norman clung desperately to his seat as the boat flashed down through the waters, and then, as Sarja sent it flying out through the great tunnel's waters, glimpsed, close behind, the beams of the three Rala boats as they pursued them through the tunnel, overtaking them. Could the force-shells be fired under water? Norman did not know, but desperately he swung the force-gun back as they rushed through the waters, and pressed the catch. An instant later beams

and boats behind them in the tunnel vanished.

His lungs were afire; it seemed that he must open them to the strangling water. The boat was ripping the waters at such tremendous speed that he felt himself being torn from his hold on it. Pain seemed poured like molten metal through his chest—he could hold out no longer; and then the boat stabbed up from the waters into clear air!

Norman panted, sobbed. Behind them rose the colossal metal dome of the frog-city, gleaming dully in the silvery light that flooded the far-stretching seas. That light poured down from a stupendous silver crescent in the night skies. Norman saw dully the dark outlines on it before he remembered. Earth! He laughed a little hysterically. Sarja was driving the flying-boat out over the sea and away from the frog-city at enormous speed. At last he glanced back. Far behind them lay the great dome and up around it gleaming lights were pouring, lights of pursuing Rala boats.

"We escape," Sarja cried, "the city of the Ralas, from

which none ever before escaped!"

Remembrance smote Norman. "Hackett! Held off those frog-men so we could get away—we'll come back for him, by God!"

"We come back!" said Sarja. "We come back with all the green men of this world to the Ralas' city, yes! I know what Fallas has planned."

"Can you find your way to him—to your city?" Norman asked.

Sarja nodded, looking upward. "Before the next sun has come and gone we can reach it."

The boat flew onward, and the great dome and the searching lights around it dropped beneath the horizon. Norman felt the warm wind drying his drenched garments as they rushed onward. Crouched on the boat he gazed up toward the silver crescent of Earth sinking toward the horizon ahead. That meant, he told himself, that the satellite turned slowly on its axis as it whirled around Earth. It came to him that its

night and day periods must be highly irregular.

When the sun climbed from the waters behind them they were flying still over a boundless waste of waters, but soon they sighted on the horizon ahead the thin green line of land. Sarja slowed as they reached it, took his bearings, and sent the craft flying onward.

They passed over a green coastal plain and then over low hills joined in long chains and mantled by dense and mighty jungles, towering green growths of unfamiliar appearance to Norman. He thought he glimpsed, more than once, huge beastlike forms moving in them. He did see twice in the jungles great clearings where were fair-sized cities of bright-green buildings, a metal tower rising from each. But when he pointed to them Sarja shook his head.

At last, as they passed over another range of hills and came into sight of a third green city with its looming tower, the other pointed, his face alight.

"My city," he said. "Fallas there."

Fellows! Norman's heart beat faster.

They shot closer and lower and he saw that the buildings were obviously green to lend them a certain protective coloration similar to that of the green jungles around them. The tower with its surmounting cage puzzled him though, but before he could ask Sarja concerning it his answer came in a different way. A long metal tube poked slowly out of the cage on the tower's top and sent a hail of force-shells flicking around them.

"They're firing on us!" Norman cried. "This can't be your city!"

"They see our black boat!" Sarja exclaimed. "They think we're Rala raiders and unless we let them know they'll shoot us out of the air! Stand up—wave to them—!"

Both Norman and Sarja sprang to their feet and waved wildly to those in the tower-cage, their flying-boat drifting slowly forward. Instantly the force-shells ceased to hail toward them, and as they moved nearer

a sirenlike signal broke from the cage. At once scores of flying-boats like their own, but glittering metal instead of black, shot up from the city where they had lain until now, and surrounded them.

As Sarja called in his own tongue to them the green men on the surrounding boats broke into resounding cries. They shot down toward the city, Norman gazing tensely. Great crowds of green men in their dark tunics had swarmed out into its streets with the passing of the alarm, and their craft and the others came to rest in an open square that was the juncture of several streets.

The green men that crowded excitedly about Norman and Sarja gave way to a half-dozen hurrying into the square from the greatest of the buildings facing on it. All but one were green men like the others. But that one—the laughing-eyed tanned face—the worn brown clothing, the curious huge steps with which he came—Norman's heart leapt.

"Fellows!"

"Great God—Norman!" The other's face was thunderstruck. "Norman—how by all that's holy did you get here?"

Norman, mind and body strained to the breaking point, was incoherent. "We guessed how you'd gone—the second satellite, Fellows—Hackett and I came after you—taken to that frog-city—"

As Norman choked the tale, Fellows' face was a study. And when it was finished he swallowed, and gripped Norman's hand viselike.

"And you and Hackett figured it out and came after me—took that risk? Crazy, both of you. Crazy—"

"Fellows, Hackett's still there, if he's alive! In the Rala city!"

Fellows' voice was grim, quick. "We'll have him out. Norman, if he still lives. And living or dead, the Ralas will pay soon for this and for all they've done upon this world in ages. Their time nears—yes."

He led Norman, excited throngs of the green men about them, into the great building from which he had emerged. There were big rooms inside, workshops and laboratories that Norman but vaguely glimpsed in passing. The room to which the other led him was one with a long metal couch. Norman stretched protestingly upon it at the other's bidding, drifted off almost at once into sleep.

He woke to find the sunlight that had filled the room gone and replaced by the silvery Earth-light. From the window he saw that the silver-lit city outside now held tremendous activity, immense hordes of green men surging through it with masses of weapons and equipment, flying-boats pouring down out of the night from all directions. He turned as the door of the room clicked open behind him. It was his old friend Fellows.

"I thought you'd be awake by now, Norman. Feeling fit?"

"As though I'd slept a week," Norman said, and the other laughed his old care-free laugh.

"You almost have, at that. Two days and nights you've slept, but it all adds up to hardly more than a dozen hours."

"This world!" Norman's voice held all his incredulity. "To think that we should be on it—a second satellite of Earth's—it seems almost beyond belief."

"Sometimes it seems so to me, too," Fellows said thoughtfully. "But it's not a bad world—not the human part of it, at least. When this satellite's atmosphere caught me and pitchforked me down among these green men, smashing the plane and almost myself, they took care of me. You say three others vanished as I did? I never heard of them here; they must have crashed into the sea or jungles. Of course, I'd have got back to Earth on one of these flying-boats if I'd been able, but their molecular power won't take them far from this world's surface, so I couldn't."

"As it was, the green men cared for me, and when I found how those frog-men have dominated this world for ages, how that city of the Ralas has spread endless terror among the humans here, I resolved to

smash those monsters whatever I did. I taught some of the green men like Sarja my own speech, later learning theirs, and in the weeks I've been here I've been working out a way to smash the Ralas.

"You know that amphibian city is almost impregnable because humans can hardly live long enough under the water to get into it, let alone fight under water as the frog-men can. To meet them on even terms the green men needed diving-helmets with an oxygen supply. They'd never heard of such an idea, too afraid of the sea ever to experiment in it, but I convinced them and they've made enough helmets for all their forces. In them they can meet the Ralas under water on equal terms.

"And there's a chance we can destroy that whole Rala city with their help. It's built on a giant pedestal of rock rising from the sea's floor, as you saw, and I've had some of the green men make huge force-shells or force-bombs that ought to be powerful enough to split that pedestal beneath the city. If we can get a chance to place those bombs it may smash the frog-men forever on this world. But one thing is sure: we're

going to get Hackett out if he still lives!"

"Then you're, going to attack the Rala city now?"

Norman cried.

Fellows nodded grimly. "While you have slept all the forces of the green men on this world have been gathering. Your coming has only precipitated our plans, Norman—the whole soul of the green races has been set upon this attack for weeks!"

Norman, half bewildered at the swiftness with which events rushed upon him, found himself striding with Fellows in great steps out through the building into the great square. It was shadowed now by mass on mass of flying-boats, crowded with green men, that hung over it and over the streets. One boat, Sarja at its controls, waited on the ground and as they entered and buckled themselves into the seats the craft drove up to hang with the others.

A shattering cheer greeted them. Norman saw that in the silvery light of Earth's great crescent there stretched over the city and surrounding jungle now a

veritable plain of flying-boats. On each were green men and each bristled with force-guns, and had as many great goggled helmets fastened to it as it had occupants. He glimpsed larger boats loaded with huge metal cylinders—the force-bombs Fellows had mentioned.

Fellows rose and spoke briefly in a clear voice to the assembled green men on their craft, and another great shout roared from them, and from these who watched in the city below. Then as he spoke a word, Sarja sent their craft flying out over the city, and the great mass of boats, fully a thousand in number, were hurtling in a compact column after them.

Fellows leaned to Norman as the great column of purring craft shot on over the silver-lit jungles. "We'll make straight for the Rala city and try setting into it before they understand what's happening."

"Won't they have guards out?"

"Probably, but we can beat them back into the city before their whole forces can come out on us. That's

the only way in which we can get inside and reach Hackett. And while we're attacking the force-bombs can be placed, though I don't rely too much on them."

"If the attack only succeeds in getting us inside," Norman said, grim-lipped, "we'll have a chance—"

"It's on the knees of the gods. These green men are doing an unprecedented thing in attacking the Ralas, the masters of this world, remember. But they've got ages of oppression to avenge; they'll fight."

The fleet flew on, hills and rivers a silver-lit panorama unreeling beneath them. Earth's crescent sank behind them, and by the time they flashed out over the great fresh-water sea, the sun was rising like a flaming eye from behind it. Land sank from sight behind and the green men were silent, tense, as they saw stretching beneath only the gray waters that for ages had been the base of the dread frog-men. But still the fleet's column raced on.

At last the column slowed. Far ahead the merest bulge broke the level line where sky and waters met.

The amphibian city of the Ralas! At Fellows' order-the flying-boats sank downward until they moved just above the waters. Another order made the green hosts don the grotesque helmets. Norman found that while cumbersome their oxygen supply was unfailing. They shot on again at highest speed, but as the gigantic black dome of the frog-city grew in their vision there darted up from around it suddenly a far-flung swarm of black spots.

"Rala boats!"

The muffled exclamation was Fellows'. There needed now no order on his part, though. Like hawks, leaping for prey, the fleet of the green men sprang through the air. Norman, clutching the force-gun between his knees, had time only to see that the Rala craft were a few hundred in number and that, contemptuous of the greater odds that favored these humans they had so long oppressed, they were flying straight to meet them. Then the two fleets met—and were spinning side by side above the waters.

Norman saw the thing only as a wild whirl of Rala

boats toward and beside them, great green frog-men crowding the craft, their force-guns hailing shells. Automatically, with the old air-fighting instinct, his fingers had pressed the catch of the gun between his knees and as its shells flicked toward the rushing boats he saw areas of nothingness opening suddenly in their mass, shells striking and exploding in annihilating invisibility there and in their own fleet.

The two fleets mingled and merged momentarily, the battle becoming a thing of madness, a huge whirl of black and glittering flying-boats together, striking shells exploding nothingness about them. The Ralas were fighting like demons.

The merged, terrific combat lasted but moments; could last but moments. Norman, his gun's magazine empty, seemed to see the mass of struggling ships splintering, diverging; then saw that the black craft were dropping, plummeting downward toward the waves! The Ralas, stunned by that minute of terrific combat, were fleeing. Muffled cries and cheers came from about him as the glittering flying-boats of the green men shot after them. They crashed down into

the waters and curved deeply into their green-depths, toward the gigantic dome.

Ahead the Rala boats were in flight toward their city, and now their pursuers were like sharks striking after them. There in the depths the force-guns of black and glittering boats alike were spitting, and giant waves and underwater convulsions rocked pursued and pursuers as the exploding shells annihilated boats and water about them. The tunnel! Its round opening yawned in the looming wall ahead, and Norman saw the Rala craft, reduced to scores in number, hurtling into it, to rouse all the forces of the great amphibian city. Their own boats were flashing into the opening after them. He glimpsed as he glanced back for a moment the larger craft with the great force-bombs veering aside behind them.

It was nightmare in the water-tunnel. Flashing beams of the craft ahead and waters that rocked and smashed around them as in flight the Ralas still rained back force-shells toward them in a chaos of action. Once the frog-men turned to hold them back in the tunnel, but by sheer weight the rushing ships of

the green men crashed them onward. Boats were going into nothingness all around them. A part of Norman's brain wondered calmly why they survived even while another part kept his gun again working, with refilled magazine. Fellows and Sarja were grotesque shapes beside him. Abruptly the tunnel curved upward and as they flashed up after the remaining Rala craft their boats ripped up into clear air! They were beneath the giant dome!

The frog-men chased inward spread out in all directions over their mighty, swarming city and across it a terrific clamor of alarm ran instantly as the green men emerged after them! Norman saw flying-boats beginning to rise across all the city and realized that moments would see all the immense force of the Ralas, the thousands of craft they could muster, pouring upon them. He pointed out over the city to a block-like building, and shouted madly through his helmet to Fellows and Sarja:

"Hackett!"

But already Sarja had sent their craft whirling across

the city toward the structure, half their fleet behind it, with part still emerging from the water-tunnel. Rala boats rose before them, but nothing could stop them now, their force-shells raining ahead to clear a path for their meteor-flight. They shot down toward the block-structure, and Norman, half-crazed by now, saw that to descend and enter was suicide in the face of the frog-forces rising now over all the city. He cried to Fellows, and with two of the guns as they swooped lower they sprayed force-shells along the building's side.

The shells struck and whiffed away the whole side, exposing the level on the building's interior. Out from it rushed swarms of crazed green men, sweeping aside the frog-men guards, while far over the city the invading craft were loosing shells on the block-like buildings that held the prisoners, tens of thousands of them swarming forth. In the throng below as they raced madly forth Norman saw one, and shouted wildly. The one brown garbed figure looked up, saw their boat swooping lower, and leaped for it in a tremendous forty-foot spring that brought his fingers

to its edge. Norman pulled him frenziedly up.

"Norman!" he babbled. "In God's name—Fellows—!"

"That helmet, Hackett!" Fellows flung at him. "My God, look at those prisoners—Norman!"

The countless thousands of green men released from the buildings whose walls had vanished under the shells of the invaders had poured forth to make the amphibian city a chaos of madness. Oblivious to all else they were throwing themselves upon the city's crowding frog-men in a battle whose ferocity was beyond belief, disregarding all else in this supreme chance to wreak vengeance on the monstrous beings who had fed upon their blood. In the incredible insanity of that raging fury the craft of the green men hanging over the city were all but forgotten.

Suddenly the city and the mighty dome over it quivered violently, and then again. There came from beneath a dull, vast, grinding roar.

"The great force-bombs!" Fellows screamed. "They've

set them off—the city's sinking—out of here, for the love of God!"

The boat whirled beneath Sarja's hands toward the pool of the water-tunnel, all their fleet rushing with them. The grinding roar was louder, terrible; dome and city were shaking violently now; but in the insensate fury of their struggle the frog-men and their released prisoners were hardly aware of it. The whole great dome seemed sinking upon them and the city falling beneath it as Sarja's craft ripped down into the tunnel's waters, and then out, at awful speed, as the great tunnel's walls swayed and sank around them! They shot out into the green depths from it to hear a dull, colossal crashing through the waters from behind as the great pedestal of rock on which the city had stood, shattered by the huge force-bombs, collapsed. And as their boats flashed up into the open air they saw that the huge dome of the city of the Ralas was gone.

Beneath them was only a titanic whirlpool of foaming waters in which only the curved top of the settling dome was visible for a moment as it sank slowly and

ponderously downward, with a roar as of the roar of falling worlds. Buckling, collapsing, sinking, it vanished in the foam-wild sea with all the frog-men who for ages had ruled the second satellite, and with all those prisoners who had at the last dragged them down with them to death! Ripping off their helmets, with all the green men shouting crazily about them, Norman and Fellows and Hackett stared down at the colossal maelstrom in the waters that was the tomb of the masters of a world.

Then the depression's sides collapsed, the waters rushing together ... and beneath them was but troubled, tossing sea....

Earth's great gray ball was overhead again and the sun was sinking again to the horizon when the three soared upward in the long, gleaming plane, its motor roaring. Norman, with Hackett and Fellows crowding the narrow cabin beside him, waved with them through its windows. For all around them were rising the flying-boats of the green men.

They were waving wildly, shouting their farewells,

Sarja's tall figure erect at the prow of one. Insistent they had been that the three should stay, the three through whom the monstrous age-old tyranny of the frog-men had been lifted, but Earth-sickness was on them, and they had flown to where the plane lay still unharmed among the reeds, a hundred willing hands dragging it forth for the take-off.

The plane soared higher, motor thundering, and they saw the flying-boats sinking back from around them. They caught the wave of Sarja's hand still from the highest, and then that, too, was gone.

Upward they flew toward the great gray sphere, their eyes on the dark outlines of its continents and on one continent. Higher—higher—green land and gray tea receding beneath them; Hackett and Fellows intent and eager as Norman kept the plane rising. The satellite lay, a greenish globe, under them. And as they went higher still a rushing sound came louder to their ears.

"The edge of the satellite's atmosphere?" Fellows asked, as Norman nodded.

"We're almost to it—here we go!"

As he shot the plane higher, great forces smote it, gray Earth and green satellite and yellow sun gyrating round it as it reeled and plunged. Then suddenly it was falling steadily, gray Earth and its dark continent now beneath, while with a dwindling rushing roar its second satellite whirled away above them, passing and vanishing. Passing as though, to Norman it seemed, all their strange sojourn on it were passing; the frog-men and their mighty city, Sarja and their mad flight, the green men and the last terrific battle; all whirling away—whirling away.

#44 Silver Dome, By Harold Vincent Schoepflin:

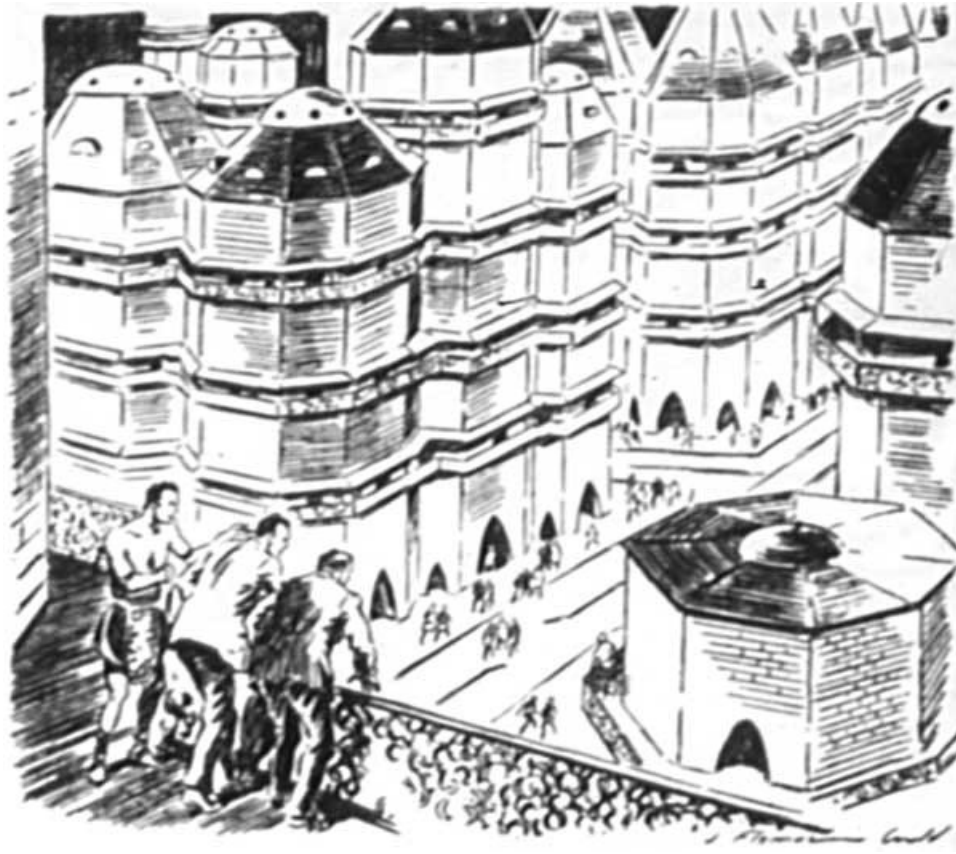
In her deep-buried kingdom of Theros, Phaestra reveals the amazing secret of the silver dome.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -



orris led the way

In a secluded spot among the hills of northern New Jersey stood the old DeBost mansion, a rambling frame structure of many wings and gables that was well-nigh hidden from the road by the half-mile or more of second-growth timber which intervened. High on the hill it stood, and it was only by virtue of its altitude that an occasional glimpse might be obtained of weatherbeaten gable or partly tumbled-down chimney. The place was reputed to be haunted since the death of old DeBost, some seven years previously,

and the path which had once been a winding driveway was now seldom trod by human foot.

It was now two years since Edwin Leland bought the estate for a song and took up his residence in the gloomy old house. And it had then been vacant for five years since DeBost shot himself in the northeast bedroom. Leland's associates were sure he would repent of his bargain in a very short time, but he stayed on and on in the place, with no company save that of his man-servant, an aged hunch-back who was known to outsiders only as Thomas.

Leland was a scientist of note before he buried himself in the DeBost place, and had been employed in the New York research laboratory of one of the large electrical manufacturers, where he was much admired and not a little envied by his fellow workers. These knew almost nothing of his habits or of his personal affairs, and were much surprised when he announced one day that he had come into a sizable fortune and was leaving the organization to go in for private research and study. Attempts to dissuade him were of no avail, and the purchase of the DeBost

property followed, after which Leland dropped from sight for nearly two years.

Then, on a blustery winter day, a strange telephone call was received at the laboratory where he had previously worked. It was from old Thomas, out there in the DeBost mansion, and his quavering voice asked for Frank Rowley, the genial young engineer whose work had been most closely associated with Leland's.

"Oh, Mr. Rowley," wailed the old man, when Frank responded to the call, "I wish you would come out here right away. The master has been acting very queerly of late, and to-day he has locked himself in his laboratory and will not answer my knocks."

"Why don't you break in the door?" asked Frank, looking through the window at the snow storm that still raged.

"I thought of that, Mr. Rowley, but it is of oak and very thick. Besides, it is bound with steel or iron straps and is beyond my powers."

"Why not call the police?" growled Frank. He did not relish the idea of a sixty or seventy mile drive in the blizzard.

"Oh—no—no—no!" Old Thomas was panicky at the suggestion. "The master told me he'd kill me if I ever did that."

Before Frank could formulate a reply, there came a sharp gasp from the other end of the line, a wailing cry and a thud as of a falling body; then silence. All efforts to raise Leland's number merely resulted in "busy" or "line out of order" reports.

Frank Rowley was genuinely concerned. Though he had never been a close friend of Leland's, the two had worked on many a knotty problem together and were in daily contact during the nearly ten years that the other man had worked in the same laboratory.

"Say, Tommy," said Frank, replacing the receiver and turning to his friend, Arnold Thompson, who sat at an adjoining desk, "something has happened out at Leland's place in Sussex County. Want to take a drive

out there with me?"

"What? On a day like this? Why not take the train?"

"Don't be foolish, Tommy," said Frank. "The place is eight miles from the nearest station, which is a flag stop out in the wilds. And, even if you could find a cab there—which you couldn't—there isn't a taxi driver in Jersey who'd take you up into those mountains on a day like this. No, we'll have to drive. It'll be okay. I've got chains on the rear and a heater in the old coupe, so it shouldn't be so bad. What do you say?"

So Tommy, who usually followed wherever Frank led, was prevailed upon to make the trip. He had no particular feeling for Leland, but he sensed an adventure, and, in Frank's company, he could ask for no more.

Frank was a careful driver, and three hours were required to make the sixty-mile journey. Consequently, it was late in the afternoon when they arrived at the old DeBost estate. It had stopped snowing, but the drifts were deep in spots, and Frank soon found that

the car could not be driven through the winding path from the road to the house. So they left it half buried in a drift and proceeded on foot.

It was a laborious task they had undertaken, and, by the time they set foot on the dilapidated porch, even Frank, husky and athletic as was his build, was puffing and snorting from his exertions. Little Tommy, who tipped the scales at less than a hundred and twenty, could hardly speak. They both were wet to the waist and in none too good humor.

"Holy smoke!" gasped Tommy, stamping the clinging snow from his sodden trouser legs and shoes, "if it snows any more, how in Sam Hill are we going to get out of this place?"

"Rotten trip I let you in for Tommy," growled Frank, "and I hope Leland's worth it. But, darn it all, I just had to come."

"It's all right with me, Frank. And maybe it'll be worth it yet. Look—the front door's open."

He pointed to the huge oaken door and Frank saw that it was ajar. The snow on the porch was not deep and they saw that footprints led from the open door to a corner of the porch. At that point the snow on the railing was disturbed, as if a hurrying man had clung to it a moment before jumping over and into the drifts below. But the tracks led no further, for the drifting snow had covered all excepting a hollow where some body had landed.

"Thomas!" exclaimed Frank. "And he was in a hustle, by the looks of the tracks. Bet he was frightened while at the telephone and beat it."

They entered the house and closed the door behind them. It was growing quite dark and Frank searched for the light switch. This was near the door, and, at pressure on the upper button, the spacious old hall with its open staircase was revealed dimly by the single remaining bulb in a cluster set in the center of the high ceiling. The hall was unfurnished, excepting for a telephone table and chair, the chair having fallen to the floor and the receiver of the telephone dangling from the edge of the table by its cord.

"You must have heard the chair fall," commented Tommy, "and it sure does look as if Thomas left in a hurry. Wonder what it was that frightened him?"

The house was eerily silent and the words echoed awesomely through the adjoining rooms which connected with the hall through large open doorways.

"Spooky place, isn't it?" returned Frank.

And then they were both startled into immobility by a rumble that seemed to shake the foundations of the house. Heavier and heavier became this vibration, as if some large machine was coming up to speed. Louder and louder grew the rumble until it seemed that the rickety old house must be shaken down about their ears. Then there came a whistling scream from the depths of the earth—from far underground it seemed to be—and this mounted in pitch until their eardrums tingled. Then abruptly the sounds ceased, the vibration stopped, and once more there was the eerie silence.

Rather white-faced, Tommy gazed at Frank.

"No wonder old Thomas beat it!" he said. "What on earth do you suppose that is?"

"Search me," replied Frank. "But whatever it is, I'll bet it has something to do with Leland's strange actions. And we're going to find out."

He had with him the large flashlamp from the car, and, by its light, the two made their way from room to room searching for the iron-bound door mentioned by Thomas.

They found all rooms on the first and second floors dusty and unused with the exception of two bedrooms, the kitchen and pantry, and the library. It was a gloomy and spooky old house. Floor boards creaked startingly and unexpectedly and the sound of their footsteps echoed dismally.

"Where in time is that laboratory of Leland's?" exclaimed Frank, his ruddy features showing impatient annoyance, exaggerated to an appearance of ferocity by the light of the flashlamp.

"How about the cellar?" suggested Tommy.

"Probably where it is," agreed Frank, "but I don't relish this job so much. I'd hate to find Leland stiff down there, if that's where he is."

"Me, too," said Tommy. "But we're here now, so let's finish the job and get back home. It's cold here, too."

"You said it. No steam in the pipes at all. He must have let the fire go out in his furnace, and that's probably in the cellar too—usually is."

While talking, Frank had opened each of the four doors that opened from the kitchen, and the fourth revealed a stairway that led into the blackness beneath. With the beam of his torch directed at the steps, he proceeded to descend, and Tommy followed carefully. There was no light button at the head of the stairs, where it would have been placed in a more modern house, and it was not until they had reached the furnace room that they located a light fixture with a pull cord. An ordinary cellar, with furnace, coal bin, and a conglomeration of dust-covered trunks and

discarded furniture, was revealed. And, at its far end, was the iron-bound door.

The door was locked and could not be shaken by the combined efforts of the two men.

"Have to have a battering ram," grunted Frank, casting about for a suitable implement.

"Here you are," called Tommy, after a moment's search. "Just the thing we are looking for."

He had come upon a pile of logs, and one of these, evidently a section of an old telephone pole, was of some ten or twelve inches diameter and about fifteen feet long. Frank pounced upon it eagerly, and, supporting most of the weight himself, led the attack on the heavy oak door with the iron bands.

No sound from within greeted the thunderous poundings. Clearly, if Leland was behind that door, he was either dead or unconscious.

Finally the double lock gave way and Tommy and

Frank were precipitated headlong into the brightly lighted room beyond. Recovering their balance, they took stock of their surroundings and were amazed at what they saw—a huge laboratory, fitted out with every modern appliance that money could buy. A completely equipped machine shop there was; bench after bench covered with the familiar paraphernalia of the chemical and physical laboratory; huge retorts and stills; complicated electrical equipments; dozens of cabinets holding crucibles, flasks, bottles, glass tubing, and what not.

"Good Lord!" gasped Tommy. "Here's a laboratory to more than match our own. Why, Leland's got a fortune invested here!"

"I should say so. And a lot of stuff that our company does not even have. Some of it I don't know even the use of. But where is Leland?"

There was no sign of the man they had come to help. He was not in the laboratory, though the door had been locked from within and the lights left burning throughout.

With painstaking care they searched every nook and cranny of the large single room and were about to give up in despair when Tommy happened to observe an ivory button set into the wall at the only point in the room where there were no machines or benches at hand. Experimentally he pressed the button, and, at the answering rumble from under his feet, jumped back in alarm. Slowly there opened in the paneled oak wall a rectangular door, a door of large enough size to admit a man. From the recess beyond there came a breath of air, foul with the musty odor of decayed vegetation, dank as the air of a tomb.

"Ah-h-h!" breathed Frank. "So that is where Ed Leland is hiding! The secret retreat of the gloomy scientist!"

He spoke half jestingly, yet when he squeezed his stalwart bulk through the opening and flashed the beam of his light into the darkness of a narrow passage ahead he was assailed with vague forebodings. Tommy followed close behind and spoke not a word.

The passage floor was thick with dust, but the marks of many footsteps going and returning gave mute evidence of the frequency of Leland's visits. The air was heavy and oppressive and the temperature and humidity increased as they progressed along the winding length of the rock-walled passageway. The floor sloped, ever downward and, in spots, was slippery with slimy seepage. It seemed that they turned back on their course on several occasions but were descending deeper and deeper into the heart of the mountain. Then, abruptly, the passage ended at the mouth of a shaft, which dropped vertically from almost beneath their feet.

"Whew!" exclaimed Frank. "Another step and I'd have dropped into it. That's probably what happened to Leland."

He knelt at the rim of the circular opening and looked into the depths of the pit, Tommy following suit. The feeble ray of the flashlight was lost in the blackness below.

"Say, Frank," whispered Tommy, "turn off the flash. I

think I saw a light down there."

And, with the snapping of the catch, there came darkness. But, miles below them, it seemed, there was a tiny pin-point of brilliance—an eery green light that was like a wavering phosphorescence of will-o'-the-wisp. For a moment it shone and was gone. Then came the dreadful vibration they had experienced in the hall of the house—the whistling scream that grew louder and louder until it seemed they must be deafened. The penetrating wail rose from the depths of the pit, and the vibration was all around them, in the damp rock floor on which they knelt, and in the very air of the cavern. Hastily Frank snapped on the light of his flash.

"Oh boy!" he whispered. "Leland is certainly up to something down there and no mistake! How're we going to get down?"

"Get down?" asked Tommy. "You don't want to go down there, do you?"

"Sure thing. We're this far now and, by George, we're

going to find out all there is to learn."

"How deep do you suppose it is?"

"Pretty deep, Tommy. But we can get an idea by dropping a stone and counting the seconds until it strikes."

He played the light of the flash over the floor and soon located a smooth round stone of the size of a baseball. This he tossed over the rim of the pit and awaited results.

"Good grief!" exclaimed Tommy. "It's not falling!"

What he said was true, for the stone poised lightly over the opening and drifted like a feather. Then slowly it moved, settling gradually into oblivion. Frank turned the flash downward and they watched in astonishment as the two-pound pebble floated deliberately down the center of the shaft at the rate of not more than one foot in each second.

"Well, I'll be doggoned," breathed Frank admiringly.

"Leland has done it. He has conquered gravity. For, in that pit at least, there is no gravity, or at any rate not enough to mention. It has been almost completely counteracted by some force he has discovered and now we know how to follow him down there. Come on Tommy, let's go!"

And, suiting action to his words, Frank jumped into the mouth of the pit where he bobbed about for a moment as if he had jumped into a pool of water. Then slowly he sank from view, and Tommy followed him.

It was a most unique experience, that drop into the heart of the mountain. Practically weightless, the two young men found it quite difficult to negotiate the passage. For the first hundred or more feet they continued to bump about in the narrow shaft and each sustained painful bruises before he learned that the best and simplest method of accommodating himself to the strange condition was to remain absolutely motionless and allow the greatly weakened gravity to take its course. Each movement of an arm or leg was accompanied by a change in direction of

movement, and contact with the hard stone walls followed. If they endeavored to push themselves from the contact the result was likely to be an even more serious bump on the opposite side of the shaft. So they continued the leisurely drop into the unknown depth of the pit.

Frank had turned off the flashlamp, for its battery was giving out and he wished to conserve its remaining energy for eventualities. Thus they were in Stygian darkness for nearly a half-hour, though the green luminosity far beneath them grew stronger with each passing minute. It now revealed itself as a clearly defined disc of light that flickered and sputtered continually, frequently lighting the lower end of the shaft with an unusual burst of brilliance. Remotely distant it seemed though, and unconscionably slow in drawing nearer.

"How far do you think we must drop?" called Tommy to Frank, who was probably fifty feet below him in the shaft.

"Well, I figure we have fallen about a thousand feet so

far," came the reply, "and my guess is that we are about one third of the way down."

"Then this shaft is over a half-mile deep, you think?"

"Yes, at least a thousand yards, I should say. And I hope his gravity neutralizing machinery doesn't quit all of a sudden and let us down."

"Me, too," called Tommy, who had not thought of that possibility.

This was no joke, this falling into an unknown region so far beneath the surface of good old mother earth, thought Tommy. And how they would ever return was another thing that was not so funny. Frank was always rushing into things like this without counting the possible cost and—well—this might be the last time.

Gradually the mysterious light became stronger and soon they could make out the conformation of the rock walls they were passing at such a snail's pace. Layers of vari-colored rock showed here and there,

and, at one point there was a stratum of gold-bearing or mica-filled rock that glistened with a million reflections and re-reflections. The air grew warmer and more humid as they neared the mysterious light source. They moved steadily, without acceleration, and Frank estimated the rate at about forty feet a minute. Then, with blinding suddenness, the light was immediately below and they drifted into a tremendous cavern that was illuminated by its glow.

Directly beneath the lower end of the shaft through which they had passed, there was a glowing disc of metal about fifteen feet in diameter. They drifted to its surface and sprawled awkwardly where they fell. Scrambling to gain a footing, they bounced and floated about like toy balloons before realizing that it would be necessary to creep slowly from the influence of that repelling force which had made the long drop possible without injury. Gravity met them at the disc's edge with what seemed to be unusual violence.

At first it seemed that their bodies weighed twice the normal amount, but this feeling soon passed and they looked about them with incredulous amazement. The

metal disc was quite evidently the medium through which the repelling force was set up in the shaft, and to this disc was connected a series of heavy cables that led to a pedestal nearby. On the pedestal was a controlling lever and this moved over a quadrant that was graduated in degrees, one end of the quadrant being labeled "Up" and the other "Down." The lever now stood at a point but a very few degrees from the center or "Zero" mark and on the down side. Frank pulled this lever over to the full "Down" position and they found that they could walk over the disc with normal gravity.

"I suppose," said Frank, "that if the lever is at the other end of the scale one would fall upward with full gravity acceleration—reversed. At zero, gravity is exactly neutralized, and the intermediate positions are useful in conveying materials or human beings up and down the shaft as desired. Very clever; but what is the reason for it all?"

In the precise center of the great cavern there was a dome or hemisphere of polished metal, and it was from this dome that the eery light emanated. At times,

when the light died down, this dome gleamed with dull flickerings that threatened to vanish entirely. Then suddenly it would resume full brilliance, and the sight was marvelous beyond description. A slight hissing sound came from the direction of the dome, and this varied in intensity as did the light.

"Gosh!" said Tommy. "That looks like silver to me. And, if it is, what a wealthy man our friend Leland has become. He has spent his fortune well, even if he used it all to get to this."

"Yes, but where is he?" commented Frank. Then: "Leland! Leland!" he called.

His voice echoed through the huge vault and re-echoed hollowly. But there was no reply save renewed flickerings from the dome.

Leaving the vicinity of the gravity disc, the two men advanced in the direction of the shining dome, which was about a quarter-mile from where they stood. Both perspired freely, for the air was very close and the temperature high. But the light of the dome was as

cold as the light of a firefly and they had no hesitancy in drawing near. It was a beautiful sight, this dome of silver with its flickering lights and perfect contour.

"By George, I believe it *is* silver," exclaimed Frank, when they were within a few feet of the dome. "No other metal has that precise color. And look! There is a wheelbarrow and some mining tools. Leland has been cutting away some of the material."

Sure enough, there was indisputable evidence of the truth of his statement. And the material was undoubtedly silver!

"Silver Dome," breathed Tommy, holding a lump of the metal in his hand. "A solid dome of pure silver—fifty feet high and a hundred in diameter. How much does that figure in dollars and cents, Frank?"

"Maybe it isn't solid," said Frank dryly, "though it's worth a sizeable fortune even if it is hollow. And we haven't found Leland."

They circled the dome twice and looked into every

corner of the great cavern, but there was no sign of the man for whom they searched. The wheelbarrow was half filled with lumps of the heavy metal, and maul and drill lay where they had been dropped by the lone miner. A cavity three feet across, and as many deep, appeared in the side of the dome to show that considerably more than one wheelbarrow load had been removed.

"Funny," grunted Tommy. "Seems almost like the old dome had swallowed him up."

At his words there came the terrific vibration. The light of the dome died out, leaving them in utter darkness, and from its interior there rose the mounting scream that had frightened old Thomas away. From so close by it was hideous, devastating; and the two men clung to each other in fright, expecting momentarily that the earth would give way beneath their feet and precipitate them into some terrible depth from which there could be no return.

Then the sound abruptly ceased and a gleam of light came from under the dome of silver. A crack appeared

between its lower edge and the rocky floor of the cavern, and through this crack there shone a light of dazzling brilliancy—a warm light of rosy hue. Wider grew the opening until there was a full three feet between the floor and the bottom of the dome.

Impelled by some irresistible force from within, the two men stumbled blindly to the opening, fell to the floor and rolled inside.

There was a heavy thud and the dome had returned to its normal position, with Frank and Tommy prisoners within its spacious hollow. The warm light bathed them with fearful intensity for a moment, then faded to a rosy glow that dulled their senses and quieted their nerves. Morpheus claimed them.

When Frank awoke he found himself between silken covers, and for a moment he gazed thoughtfully at a high arched ceiling that was entirely unfamiliar. Then, remembering, he sprang from the downy bed to his feet. The room, the furnishings, his silken robe, everything was strange. His bed, he saw, was a high one, and the frame was of the same gleaming silver as the dome under which they had been trapped. The

arched ceiling glowed softly with the same rosy hue as had the inner surface of the dome. A large pool of water invited him, the surface of the pool being no more than a foot below the point where it was built into the tile floor of the room. A large open doorway connected with a similar adjoining room, where he suspected Tommy had been taken. On his bare toes, he moved silently to the other room and saw that his guess had been correct. Tommy lay sleeping quietly beneath covers as soft as his own and amidst equal luxury of surroundings.

"Well," he whispered, "this doesn't look as though we would come to any harm. And I might as well take a dive in that pool."

Returning to his own room, he removed the silken garment with which he had been provided and was quietly immersed in the cool, invigorating water of the bath. His head cleared instantly.

"Hi there!" called Tommy from the doorway. "Why didn't you wake me up? Where are we, anyway?"

With dripping head and shoulders above the water, Frank was compelled to laugh at the sleepy-eyed, wondering expression on the blue-jowled face of his friend. "Thought you were dead to the world," he returned, "you old sleepy-head. And I don't know where we are, excepting that it is somewhere under the silver dome. What's more, I don't much care. You should get into this water. It's great!"

So saying, he dived to the bottom of the pool and stood on his hands, his feet waving ludicrously above the surface. Tommy sniffed once and then made a quick dash for the pool in his own room. He was not to be outdone by his more energetic partner.

A half-hour later, shaved and attired in their own garments, which had been cleaned and pressed and hung neatly in the closets, they settled themselves for a discussion of the situation. Having tried the doors of both rooms and found them locked from the outside, there was no other course open to them. They must await developments.

"Looks like Leland has quite an establishment down

here inside the mountain," ventured Tommy.

"Hm!" snorted Frank, "this place is none of Leland's work. He is probably a prisoner here, as are we. He just stumbled on to the silver dome and was captured by whatever race is living down here beneath it, the same as we were. Who the real inhabitants are, and what the purpose of all this is, remains to be seen."

"You think we are in friendly hands?"

"These quarters do not look much like prison cells, Tommy, but I must admit that we are locked in.

Anyhow, I'm not worrying, and we will soon learn our fate and have to be ready to meet it. The people who own this place must have everything they want, and they sure have some scientific knowledge that is not known to us on the surface."

"Wonder if they are humans?"

"Certainly they are. You never heard of wild beasts sleeping in beds like these, did you?"

Tommy laughed at he examined the exquisite hand-wrought figures on the silver bedstead. "No, I didn't," he admitted; "but where on earth did they come from, and what are they doing here?"

"You ask too many questions," replied Frank, shrugging his broad shoulders. "We must simply wait for the answers to reveal themselves."

There was a soft rap at the door of Frank's room, where the two men were talking.

"Come in," called Frank, chuckling at the idea of such consideration from their captors.

A key rattled in the lock and the door swung open to admit the handsomest man they had ever set eyes on. He was taller than Frank by several inches, standing no less than six feet five in his thin-soled sandals, and he carried himself with the air for an emperor. His marble-white body was uncovered with the exception of a loin cloth of silver hue, and lithe muscles rippled beneath his smooth skin as he advanced to meet the prisoners. His head, surmounted by curly hair of ebon

darkness, was large, and his forehead high. The features were classic and perfectly regular. The corners of his mouth drew upward in a benign smile.

"Greetings," he said, in perfect English and in a soft voice, "to the domain of Theros. You need fear no harm from our people and will be returned to the upper world when the time comes. We hope to make your stay with us enjoyable and instructive, and that you will carry back kind memories of us. The morning meal awaits you now."

So taken aback were the two young Americans that they stared foolishly agape for a space. Then a tinkling laugh from the tall stranger set them once more at ease.

"You will pardon us, I hope," apologized Frank, "but this is all so unexpected and so unbelievable that your words struck me speechless. And I know that my friend was similarly affected—We place ourselves in your hands."

The handsome giant nodded understanding. "No

offense was taken," he murmured, "since none was intended. And your feelings are not to be wondered at. You may call me Orrin."

He turned toward the open door and signified that they were to follow him. They fell in at his side with alacrity, both suddenly realizing that they were very hungry.

They followed in silent wonderment as Orrin led the way to a broad balcony that overlooked a great underground city—a city lighted by the soft glow from some vast lighting system incorporated in its vaulted ceiling high overhead. The balcony was many levels above the streets, which were alive with active beings of similar appearance to Orrin, these speeding hither and yon by means of the many lanes of traveling ways of which the streets were composed. The buildings—endless rows of them lining the orderly streets—were octagonal in shape and rose to the height of about twenty stories, as nearly as could be judged by earthly standards. There were no windows, but at about every fifth floor there was an outer silver-railed balcony similar to the one on which they walked. The

air was filled with bowl-shaped flying ships that sped over the roof tops in endless procession and without visible means of support or propulsion. Yet the general effect of the busy scene was one of precise orderliness, unmarred by confusion or distracting noises.

Orrin vouchsafed no explanations and they soon reentered the large building of which the balcony was a part. Here they were conducted to a sumptuously furnished dining room where their breakfast awaited them.

During the meal, which consisted of several courses of fruits and cereals entirely strange to Frank and Tommy, they were tended by Orrin with the utmost deference and most painstaking attention. He anticipated their every want and their thoughts as well. For, when Frank endeavored to ask one of the many questions with which his mind was filled, he was interrupted by a wave of the hand and a smile from their placid host.

"It is quite clear to me that you have many questions

to propound," said Orrin, "and this is not a matter of wonder. But it is not permitted that I enlighten you on the points you have in mind. You must first finish your meal. Then it is to be my privilege to conduct you to the presence of Phaestra, Empress of Theros, who will reveal all. May I ask that you be patient until then?"

So friendly was his smile and so polished his manner that they restrained their impatience and finished the excellent breakfast in polite silence.

And Orrin was as good as his word, for, no sooner had they finished when he led them from the room and showed the way to the elevator which conveyed them to the upper floor of the building.

From the silver-grilled cage of the lift they stepped into a room of such beauty and magnificence of decoration that they gazed about them in wondering admiration. The paneling and mouldings were of hammered silver that gleamed with polished splendor in the soft rose glow of the hidden lights. The hangings were of heavy plush of deep green hue and bore intricate designs of silver thread woven into the

material. At the opposite side of the room there was a pair of huge double doors of chased silver and on either side of this pretentious portal there stood an attendant attired as was Orrin, but bearing a silver scepter to denote his official capacity.

"Phaestra awaits the visitors from above," intoned one of the attendants. Both bowed stiffly from the waist when Orrin led the two young scientists through the great doors which had opened silently and majestically at their approach.

If the outer room was astonishing in its sumptuousness of decoration and furnishing, the one they now entered was positively breath-taking. On every side there were the exquisite green and silver hangings. Tables, divans, and rugs of priceless design and workmanship. But the beauty of the surroundings faded into insignificance when they saw the empress.

A canopied dais in the center of the room drew their attention and they saw that Phaestra had risen from her seat in a deeply cushioned divan and now stood at its side in an attitude of welcome. Nearly as tall as

Frank, she was a figure of commanding and imperious beauty. The whiteness of her body was accentuated by the silver embroidered and tightly fitted black vestments that covered yet did not conceal its charms. A halo of glorious golden hair surmounted a head that was poised expectantly alert above the perfectly rounded shoulders. The exquisite oval of her face was chiseled in features of transcendent loveliness. She spoke, and, at sound of her musical voice, Frank and Tommy were enslaved.

“Gentlemen of the upper world,” she said gently, “you are welcome to Theros. Your innermost thoughts have been recorded by our scientists and found good. With a definite purpose in mind, you learned of the existence of the silver dome of Theros, yet you came without greed or malice and we have taken you in to enlighten you on the many questions that are in your minds and to return you to mankind with a knowledge of Theros—which you must keep secret. You are about to delve into a mystery of the ages; to see and learn many things that are beyond the ken of your kind. It is a privilege never before accorded to beings from

above."

"We thank you, oh, Queen," spoke Frank humbly, his eyes rivetted to the gaze of those violet orbs that seemed to see into his very soul. Tommy mumbled some commonplace.

"Orrin—the sphere!" Phaestra, slightly embarrassed by Frank's stare, clapped her hands.

At her command, Orrin, who had stood quietly by, stepped to the wall and manipulated some mechanism that was hidden by the hangings. There was a musical purr from beneath the floor, and, through a circular opening which appeared as if by magic, there rose a crystal sphere of some four feet in diameter. Slowly it rose until it reached the level of their eyes and there it came to rest. The empress raised her hands as if in invocation and the soft glow of the lights died down, leaving them in momentary darkness. There came a slight murmur from the sphere, and it lighted with the eery green flickerings they had observed in the dome of silver.

Fascinated by the weaving lights within, they gazed into the depths of the crystal with awed expectancy. Phaestra spoke.

"Men from the surface," she said, "you, Frank Rowley, and you, Arnold Thompson, are about to witness the powers of that hemisphere of metal you were pleased to term 'Silver Dome.' As you rightly surmised, the dome is of silver—mostly. There are small percentages of platinum, iridium, and other elements, but it is more than nine-tenths pure silver. To you of the surface the alloy is highly valuable for its intrinsic worth by your own standards, but to us the value of the dome lies in its function in revealing to us the past and present events of our universe. The dome is the 'eye' of a complicated apparatus which enables us to see and hear any desired happening on the surface of the earth, beneath its surface, or on the many inhabited planets of the heavens. This is accomplished by means of extremely complex vibrations radiated from the hemisphere, these vibrations penetrating earth, metals, buildings, space itself, and returning to our viewing and sound

reproducing spheres to reveal the desired past or present occurrences at the point at which the rays of vibrations are directed.

"In order to view the past on our own planet, the rays, which travel at the speed of light, are sent out in a huge circle through space, returning to earth after having spent the requisite number of years in transit. Instantaneous effect is secured by a connecting beam that ties together the ends of the enormous arc. This, of course, is beyond your comprehension, since the Ninth Dimension is involved. When it is desired that events of the present be observed, the rays are projected direct. The future can not be viewed, since, in order to accomplish this, it would be necessary that the rays travel at a speed greater than that of light, which is manifestly impossible."

"Great guns!" gasped Frank. "This crystal sphere then, is capable of bringing to our eyes and ears the happenings of centuries past?"

"It is, my dear Frank," said Phaestra, "and I would that I were able to describe the process more clearly."

She smiled, and in the unearthly light of the sphere she appeared more beautiful than before, if such a thing were possible.

On the pedestal which supported the sphere there was a glittering array of dials and levers. Several of these controls were now adjusted by Phaestra, the delicate motions of her tapered fingers being watched by the visitors with intense admiration. There came a change in the note of the sphere, a steadying of the flickerings within.

"Behold!" exclaimed Phaestra.

They gazed into the depths of the sphere and lost all sense of detachment from the scene depicted therein. It seemed they were at a point several thousand miles from the surface of a planet. A great continent spread beneath them, its irregular shore line being clearly outlined against a large body of water. Here and there the surface was obscured by great white patches of clouds that cast their shadows below.

"Atlantis!" breathed Phaestra reverently.

The lost continent of mythology! The fabled body of land that was engulfed by the Atlantic thousands of years ago—a fact!

Tommy glanced at Frank, noting that he had withdrawn his gaze from the sphere and was devouring Phaestra with his eyes. As if drawn by the ardor of his observation, she raised her own eyes from the sphere to meet those of the handsome visitor. Obviously confused, she dropped her long lashes and turned nervously to the controls. Tommy experienced a sudden feeling of dread. Surely his pal was not falling in love with this Theronian empress!

Then there came another change in the note of the sphere and once more they lost themselves in contemplation of the scene within. The surface of the lost continent was rushing madly to meet them. With terrific velocity they seemed to be falling. An involuntary gasp was forced from Tommy's lips. Mountains, valleys, rivers could now be discerned.

Then the scene shifted slightly and they were stationary, directly above a large seacoast city. A city

of great beauty it was, and its buildings were of the same octagonal shape as were those of Theros! There could be but one inference—the Theronians were direct descendants of those inhabitants of ancient Atlantis.

"Yes," sighed Phaestra, in answer to the thought she had read, "our ancestors were those you now see in the streets of this city of Atlantis. A marvelous race they were, too. When the rest of the world was still savage and unenlightened, they knew more of the arts and sciences than is known on the surface to-day. The mysteries of the Fourth Dimension they had already solved. Their telescopes were of such power that they knew of the existence of intelligent beings on Mars and Venus. They had conquered the air. They knew of the relation between gravity and magnetism but recently propounded by your Einstein. They were prosperous, happy. Then—but watch!"

Faint sounds of the life of the city came to their ears. A swarm of monoplanes roared past just beneath them. The streets were crowded with rapidly moving vehicles, the roof-tops with air-craft. Then suddenly

the scene darkened; a deep rumbling came from the sea. As they watched in fascinated wonder, a great chasm opened up through the heart of the city. Tall buildings swayed and crumbled, falling into heaps of twisted metal and crushed masonry and burying hundreds of the populace in their fall. The confusion was indescribable, the uproar terrific, and within the space of a very few minutes the entire city was a mass of ruins, fully half of the wrecked area having been swallowed up by the heaving waters of the ocean.

Phaestra stifled a sob. "Thus it began," she stated. "Trovus was first—the city you just saw—then came three more of the cities of the western coast in rapid succession. Computations of the scientists showed that the upheaval was widespread and that the entire continent was to be engulfed in a very short time. The exodus began, but it was too late, and only a few hundred people were able to escape the continent before it was finally destroyed. The ocean became the tomb of two hundred millions. The handful of survivors reached the coast of what is now North America. But the rigors of the climate proved severe

and more than three-quarters of them perished within a few days after their planes landed. Then the rest took to the caves along the shore, and for a while were safe."

She manipulated the controls once more and there was a quick shift to another coast, a rugged, wave-beaten shore. Closer they drew until they observed a lofty palisade that extended for miles along the barren waterfront. They saw a fire atop this elevation and active men and women at various tasks within the narrow circle of its warmth. A cave mouth opened at the brink of the precipice near the spot they occupied.

Then came a repetition of the upheaval at Trovus. The ocean rushed in and beat against the cliff with such ferocity that its spray was tossed hundreds of feet in the air. The earth shook and the group of people around the fire made a hasty retreat to the mouth of the cave. The sky darkened and the winds howled with demoniac fury. Quake after quake rent the rugged cliffs: huge sections toppled into the angry waters. Then a great tidal wave swept in and covered everything, cliffs, cave mouths and all. Nought

remained where they had been but the seething waters.

"But some escaped!" exulted Phaestra, "and these discovered Theros. Though many miles of the eastern seaboard of your United States were submerged and the coastline entirely altered, these few were saved. Their cave connected with a long passage, a tunnel that led into the bowels of the earth. With the outer entrance blocked by the upheaval they had no alternative save to continue downward."

"They traveled for days and days. Some were overcome by hunger and fell by the wayside. The most hardy survived to reach Theros, a series of enormous caverns that extends for hundreds of miles under the surface of your country. Here they found subterranean lakes of pure water; forests, game. They had a few tools and weapons and they established themselves in this underground world. From that small beginning came this!"

Phaestra's slim fingers worked rapidly at the controls. The scenes shifted in quick succession. They were

once more in the present, and seemed to be traveling speedily through the underground reaches of Theros. Now they were racing through a long lighted passage; now over a great city similar to the one in which they had arrived. Here they visited a huge workshop or laboratory; there a mine where radium or cobalt or platinum was being wrested from the vitals of the unwilling earth. Then they visited a typical Theronian household, saw the perfect peace and happiness in which the family lived. Again they were in a large power plant where direct application of the internal heat of the earth as obtained through deep shafts bored into the interior was utilized in generating electricity.

They saw vast quantities of supplies, fifty-ton masses of machinery, moved from place to place as lightly as feathers by use of the gravity discs, those heavily charged plates whose emanations counteracted the earth's attraction. In one busy laboratory they saw an immense television apparatus and heard scientists discussing moot questions with inhabitants of Venus, whose images were depicted on the screen. They

witnessed a severe electrical storm in the huge cavern arch over one of the cities, a storm that condensed moisture from the artificially oxygenated and humidified atmosphere in such blinding sheets as to easily explain the necessity for well-roofed buildings in the underground realm. And, in all the speech and activities of the Theronians, there was evident that all-pervading feeling of absolute contentment and freedom from care.

"What I can not understand," said Frank, during a quiet interval, "is why the Theronians have never migrated to the surface. Surely, with all your command of science and mechanics, that would be easy."

"Why? Why?" Phaestra's voice spoke volumes. "Here—I'll show you the reason."

And again the scene in the sphere changed. They were on the surface and a few years in the past—at Chateau Thierry. They saw their fellow men mangled and broken; saw human beings shot down by hundreds in withering bursts of machine-gun fire; saw

them in hand-to-hand bayonet fights; gassed and in delirium from the horror of it all.

They traveled over the ocean; saw a big passenger liner the victim of torpedo fire; saw babies tossed into the water by distracted mothers who jumped in after them to join them in death.

A few years were passed by and they saw gang wars in Chicago and New York; saw militia and picketing strikers in mortal combat; saw wealthy brokers and bank presidents turn pistols on themselves following a crash in the stock market; government officials serving penitentiary terms for betrayal of the people's trust; opium dens, speakeasies, sex crimes. It was a fearful indictment.

"Ah, no," said Phaestra kindly, "the surface world has not yet emerged from savagery. We should be unwelcome were we to venture outside. And now we come to the reason for your visit. You come in search of one Edwin Leland, a fellow worker at one time. Your motives are above reproach. But Leland came as a greedy searcher of riches. We brought him within to

teach him the error of his ways and to beg him to desist from his efforts at destroying the dome of silver. He alone knew the secret."

"Then you followed him and we took you in for similar reasons, though our scientists found very quickly that your mental reactions were of entirely different type from Leland's and that the secret would be safe in your keeping. Leland remains obdurate. He threatens us with physical violence, and his reactions to the thought-reading machines are of the most treacherous sort. We must keep him with us. He shall remain unharmed, but he must not be allowed to return. That is the story. You two are free to leave when you choose. I ask not that you give your word to keep the secret of 'Silver Dome.' I know it is not necessary."

The lights had resumed their normal glow, and the marvelous sphere returned to its receptacle beneath the floor. Phaestra resumed her seat on the canopied divan. Frank dropped to a seat on the edge of the dais. Tommy and Orrin remained standing, Tommy lost in thought and Orrin stolidly mute. The empress

avoided Frank's gaze studiously. Her cheeks were flushed; her eyes bright with emotion.

Frank was first to break the silence. "Leland is in solitary confinement?" he asked.

"For the present he is under guard," replied Phaestra. "He was quite violent and it was necessary to disarm him after he had killed one of my attendants with a shot from his automatic pistol. When he agrees to submit peacefully, he shall be given the freedom of Theros for the remainder of his life."

"Perhaps," suggested Frank, "if I spoke to him...."

"The very thing." Phaestra thanked him with her wondrous eyes.

A high pitched note rang out from behind the hangings, and, in rapid syllables of the language of Theros, a voice broke forth from the concealed amplifiers. Orrin, startled from his stoicism, sprang to the side of his empress. She rose from her seat as the voice completed its excited message.

"It is Leland," she said calmly. "He has escaped and recovered his pistol. I have been told that he is now at large in the palace, terrorizing the household. We have no weapons here, you see."

"Good God!" shouted Frank. "Suppose he should come here?"

He jumped to his feet just as a shot rang out in the antechamber. Orrin dashed to the portal when a second shot spat forth from the automatic which must certainly be in the hands of a madman. The doors swung wide and Leland, hair disarranged and bloodshot eyes staring, burst into the room. Orrin went down at the next shot and the hardly recognizable scientist advanced toward the dais.

When he saw Frank and Tommy he stopped in his tracks. "So you two have been following me!" he snarled. "Well, you won't keep me from my purpose. I'm here to kill this queen of hell!"

Once more he raised his automatic, but Frank had been watching closely and he literally dove from the

steps of the dais to the knees of the deranged Leland. As beautiful a tackle as he had ever made in his college football days laid the maniac low with a crashing thud that told of a fractured skull. The bullet intended for Phaestra went wide, striking Tommy in the shoulder.

Spun half way around by the impact of the heavy bullet, Tommy fought to retain his balance. But his knees went suddenly awry and gave way beneath him. He crumpled helplessly to the floor, staring foolishly at the prostrate figure of Leland and at Frank, who had risen to his feet and now faced the beautiful empress of Theros. Strange lights danced before Tommy's eyes, and he found it difficult to keep the pair in focus. But he was sure of one thing—his pal was unharmed. Then the two figures seemed to merge into one and he blinked his eyes rapidly to clear his failing vision. By George, they were in each other's arms! Funny world—above or below—it didn't seem to make any difference. But it was a tough break for Frank—morganatic marriage and all that. No chance—well—

Tommy succumbed to his overpowering drowsiness.

The awakening was slow, but not painful. Rather there was a feeling of utter contentment, of joy at being alive. A delicious languor pervaded Tommy's being as he turned his head on a snow white silken pillow and stared at the figure of the white-capped nurse who was fussing with the bottles and instruments that lay on an enameled table beside the bed. Memory came to him immediately. He felt remarkably well and refreshed. Experimentally he moved his left shoulder. There was absolutely no pain and it felt perfectly normal. He sat erect in his surprise and felt the shoulder with his right hand. There was no bandage, no wound. Had he dreamed of the hammer blow of that forty-five caliber bullet?

His nurse, observing that her patient had recovered consciousness, broke forth in a torrent of unintelligible Theronian, then rushed from the room.

He was still examining his unscarred shoulder in wonder, when the nurse returned, with Frank Rowley at her heels. Frank laughed at the expression of his

friend's face.

"What's wrong, old-timer?" he asked.

"Why—I—thought that fool of a Leland had shot me in the shoulder," stammered Tommy, "but I guess I dreamed it. Where are we? Still in Theros?"

"We are." Frank sobered instantly, and Tommy noted with alarm that his usually cheerful features were haggard and drawn and his eyes hollow from loss of sleep. "And you didn't dream that Leland shot you. That shoulder of yours was mangled and torn beyond belief. He was using soft nosed bullets, the hell-hound!"

"Then how—?"

"Tommy, these Theronians are marvelous. We rushed you to this hospital and a half-dozen doctors started working on you at once. They repaired the shattered bones by an instantaneous grafting process, tied the severed veins and arteries and closed the gaping wound by filling it with a plastic compound and

drawing the edges together with clamps. You were anaesthetized and some ray machine was used to heal the shoulder. This required but ten hours and they now say that your arm is as good as ever. How does it feel?"

"Perfectly natural. In fact I feel better than I have in a month." Tommy observed that the nurse had left the room and he jumped from his bed and capered like a school boy.

This drew no sign of merriment from Frank, and Tommy scrutinized him once more in consternation. "And you," he said, "what is wrong with you?"

"Don't worry about me," replied Frank impatiently. Then, irrelevantly, he said "Leland's dead."

"Should be. I knew we shouldn't have started out to help him. But, Frank, I'm concerned about you. You look badly." Tommy was getting into his clothes as he spoke.

"Forget it, Tommy. You've been sleeping for two days,

you know—part of the cure—and I haven't had much rest during that time. That is all."

"It's that Phaestra woman," Tommy accused him.

"Well, perhaps. But I'll get over it, I suppose. Tommy, I love her. But there's no chance for me. Haven't seen her since the row in the palace. Her council surrounds her continually and I have been advised to-day that we are to be returned as quickly as you are up and around. That means immediately now."

"Good. The sooner the better. And you just forget about this queen as soon as you are able. She's a peach, of course, but not for you. There's lots more back in little old New York." But Frank had no reply to this sally.

There came a knock at the door and Tommy called, "Come in."

"I see you have fully recovered," said the smiling Theronian who entered at the bidding, "and we are overjoyed to know this. You have the gratitude of the

entire realm for your part in the saving of our empress from the bullets of the madman."

"I?"

"Yes. You and your friend. And now, may I ask, are you ready to return to your own land?"

Tommy stared. "Sure thing," he said, "or rather, I will be in a few minutes."

"Thank you. We shall await you in the transmitting room." The Theronian bowed and was gone.

"Well, I like that," said Tommy. "He hands me an undeserved compliment and then asks how soon we can beat it. A 'here's your hat, what's your hurry' sort of thing."

"It's me they're anxious to be rid of," remarked Frank, shrugging his broad shoulders, "and perhaps it is just as well."

"You bet it is!" agreed Tommy enthusiastically, "and

I'm in favor of making it good and snappy." He completed his toilet as rapidly as possible and then turned to face the down-hearted Frank.

"How do we go? The way we came?" he asked.

"No, Tommy. They have closed off the shaft that led from the cavern of the silver dome. They are taking no more chances. It seems that the shaft down which we floated was constructed by the Theronians; not by Leland. They had used it and the gravity disc to transport casual visitors to the surface, who occasionally mixed with our people in order to learn the languages of the upper world and to actually touch and handle the things they were otherwise able to see only through the medium of Silver Dome and the crystal spheres. Further visits to the surface are now forbidden, and we are to be returned by a remarkable process of beam transmission of our disintegrated bodies."

"Disintegrated?"

"Yes. It seems they have learned to dissociate the

atoms of which the human body is composed and to transmit them to any desired point over a beam of etheric vibrations, then to reassemble them in the original living condition."

"What? You mean to say we are to be shot to the surface through the intervening rock and earth? Disintegrated and reintegrated? And we'll not even be bent, let alone busted?"

This time he was rewarded by a laugh. "That's right. And I have gone through the calculations with one of the Theronian engineers and can find no flaw in the scheme. We're safe in their hands."

"If you say so, Frank, it's okay with me. Let's go!"

Reluctantly his friend lifted his athletic bulk from the chair. In silence he led the way to the transmitting room of the Theronian scientists.

Here they were greeted by two savants with whom Frank was already acquainted, Clarux and Rhonus by name. A bewildering array of complex mechanisms

was crowded into the high-ceilinged chamber and, prominent among them, was one of the crystal spheres, this one of somewhat smaller size than the one in the palace of Phaestra.

"Where do you wish to arrive?" asked Clarux.

"As near to my automobile as possible," replied Frank, taking sudden interest in the proceedings. "It is parked in the lane between Leland's house and the road."

Tommy looked quickly in his direction, encouraged by the apparent change in his attitude. The scientists proceeded to energize the crystal sphere. They were bent upon speeding the parting guests. Their beloved empress was to be saved from her own emotions.

Quick adjustments of the controls resulted in the locating of Frank's car, which was still buried to its axles in snow. The scene included Leland's house, or rather its site, for it appeared to have been utterly demolished by some explosion within.

Tommy raised questioning eyebrows.

"It was necessary," explained Rhonus, "to destroy the house in obliterating all traces of our former means of egress. It has been commanded that you two be returned safely, and we are authorized to trust implicitly in your future silence regarding the existence of Theros. This is satisfactory, I presume?"

Both Tommy and Frank nodded agreement.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" asked Clarux, who was adjusting a mechanism that resembled a huge radio transmitter. Its twelve giant vacuum tubes glowed into life as he spoke.

"We are," chimed the two visitors.

They were requested to step to a small circular platform that was raised about a foot from the floor by means of insulating legs. Above the table there was an inverted bowl of silver in the shape of a large parabolic reflector.

"There will be no alarming sensations," averred Clarux. "When I close the switch the disintegrating energy from the reflector above will bathe your bodies for a moment in visible rays of a deep purple hue. You may possibly experience a slight momentary feeling of nausea. Then—presto!—you have arrived."

"Shoot!" growled Frank from his position on the stand.

Clarux pulled the switch and there was a murmur as of distant thunder. Tommy blinked involuntarily in the brilliant purple glow that surrounded him. Then all was confusion in the transmitting room. Somebody had rushed through the open door shouting, "Frank! Frank!" It was the empress Phaestra.

In a growing daze Tommy saw her dash to the platform, seize Frank in a clutch of desperation. There was a violent wrench as if some monster were twisting at his vitals. He closed his eyes against the blinding light, then realized that utter silence had followed the erstwhile confusion. He sat in Frank's car—alone.

The journey was over, and Frank was left behind. With awful finality it came to him that there was nothing he could do. It was clear that Phaestra had wanted his pal, needed him—come for him. From the fact that Frank remained behind it was evident that she had succeeded in retaining him. A sickening fear came to Tommy that she had been too late; that Frank's body was already partly disintegrated and that he might have paid the price of her love with his life. But a little reflection convinced him that if this were the case a portion of his friend's body would have reached the intended destination. Then, unexplainably, he received a mental message that all was well.

Considerably heartened, he pressed the starter button and the cold motor of Frank's coupe turned over slowly, protestingly. Finally it coughed a few times, and, after considerable coaxing by use of the choke, ran smoothly. He proceeded to back carefully through the drifts toward the road, casting an occasional regretful glance in the direction of the demolished mansion.

He would have some explaining to do when he returned to New York. Perhaps—yes, almost certainly, he would be questioned by the police regarding Frank's disappearance. But he would never betray the trust of Phaestra. Who indeed would believe him if he told the story? Instead, he would concoct a weird fabrication regarding an explosion in Leland's laboratory, of his own miraculous escape. They could not hold him, could not accuse him of murder without producing a body—the *corpus delicti*, or whatever they called it.

Anyway, Frank was content. So was Phaestra.

Tommy swung the heavy car into the road and turned toward New York, alone and lonely—but somehow happy; happy for his friend.

#45 The Flying City, By Harold Thompson Rich

From space came Cor's disc-city of Vada—its mighty,
age-old engines weakening— its horde of dwarfs
hungry for the Earth!

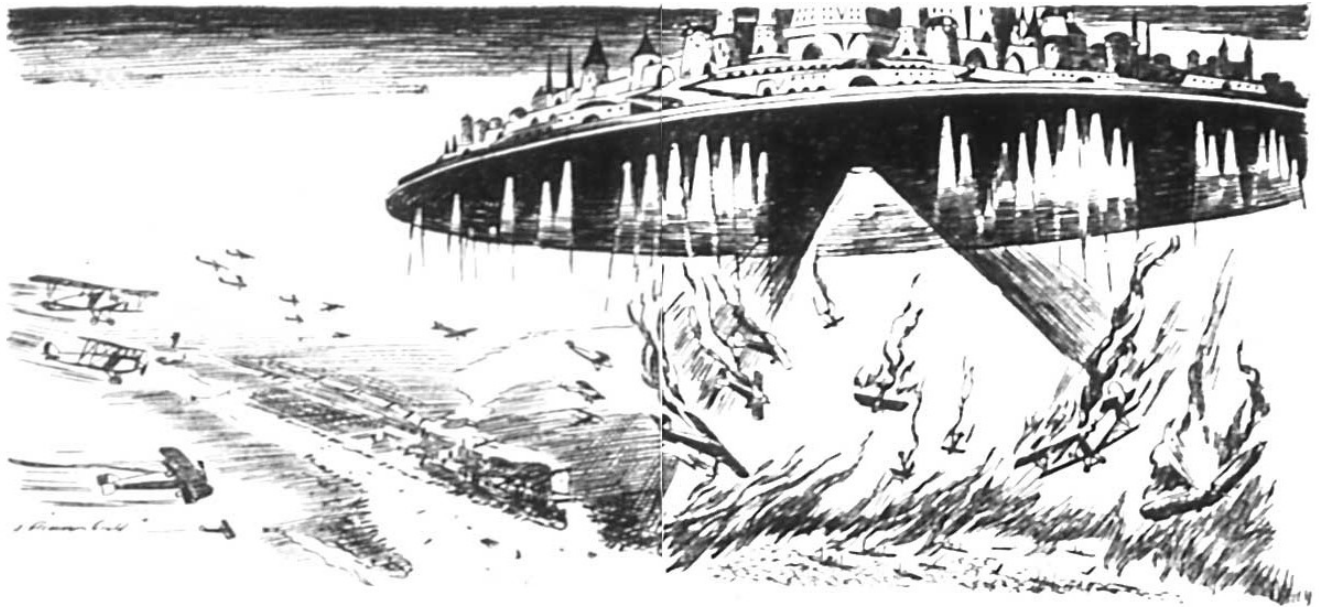
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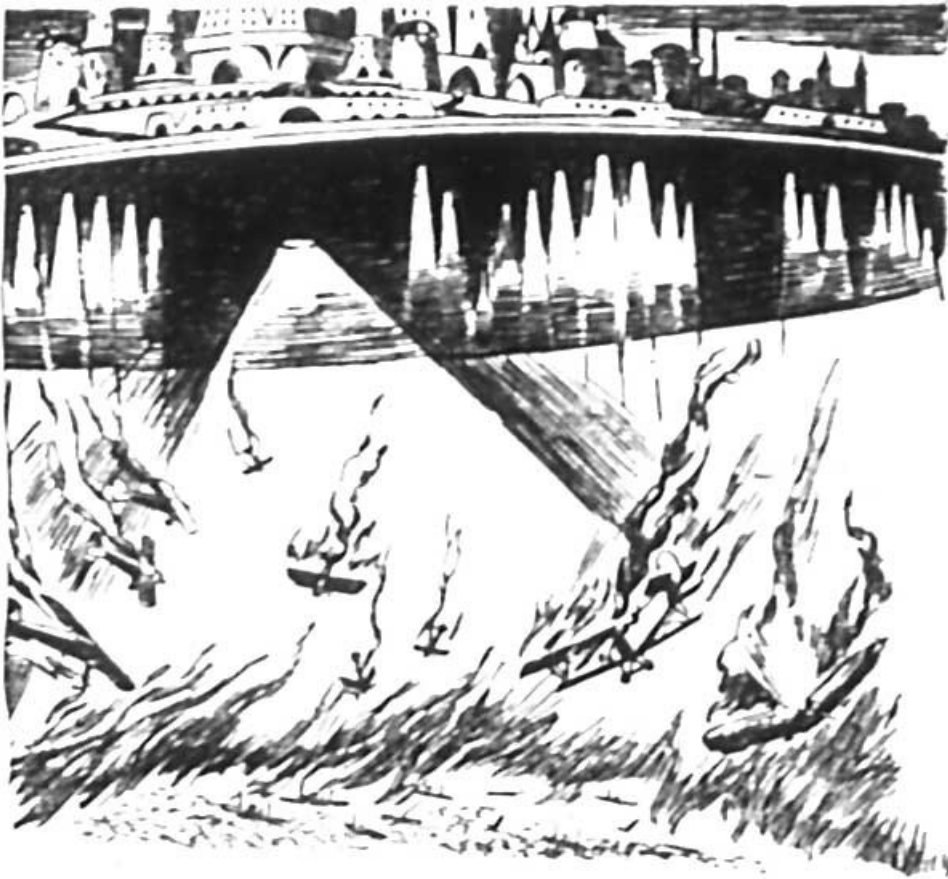


In the burning solitude of the great Arizona desert, some two miles south of Ajo, a young scientist was about to perform an experiment that might have far-reaching results for humanity.

The scientist was Gordon Kendrick—a tall, tanned, robust chap who looked more like a prospector in search of gold than a professor of physics from the State University of Tucson.

Indeed, he was in a way, a prospector, since it was gold he sought—some practical method of tapping the vast radio-energetic treasure of the sun—and it was an apparatus designed to accomplish just this that he was about to test.

The primary unit of the mechanism comprised a spheroidal vacuum-tube measuring a little over a foot across its long axis, mounted in a steel bracket that held it horizontal with the ground. Down through its short axis ran a shaft on which was centered a light cross of aluminum wire, carrying four vanes of mica, one face of each coated with lampblack. A flexible cable led from the bottom of this shaft to the base of the bracket, where it was geared to a small electric motor driven by two dry cells. A rheostat-switch for delivering and controlling the current was mounted nearby.



At the wide arc of the egg-shaped tube was a concave platinum cathode, at the narrow arc a nib of some sort, ending in a socket. From this socket, two heavy insulated wires extended sixty feet or so across the sand to the secondary unit of the mechanism, which was roughly a series of resistance coils, resembling those in an ordinary electric heater.

As Kendrick prepared to test this delicate apparatus that represented so much of his time and thought, held so much of his hope locked up in it, a turmoil

was in his heart, though his brown face was calm.

If his theories were right, that revolving cross would tap and draw into its vanes radio-energetic waves of force, much as the whirling armature of a dynamo draws into its coils electro-magnetic waves of force. For the blackened sides of the vanes, absorbing more radiation than the bright sides, would cause the molecules to rebound from the warmer surfaces with greater velocity, setting up an alternate pressure and bringing the rays to a focus on the cathode, where they would be reflected to the nib as waves of *heatricity*, to use the word he had coined.

Those were Kendrick's theories, and now he moved to put them to the supreme test. Switching on the current, he set the motor going. In response, the cross began to revolve, slowly at first—then faster, faster, as he opened the rheostat wider.

Eyes fixed on his resistance coils, he gave a sudden cry of triumph. Yes, there was no doubt about it! They were growing red, glowing brightly, whitely, above the intense desert sunlight.

Here was a means of convening solar radiation into heat, then, that offered tremendous commercial possibilities!

But even as he exulted, there came a blinding flash—and the overtaxed coils burst into flame.

Shielding his eyes from the glare, he reached for the rheostat, shut off the current, rushed to his secondary unit—where he beheld an amazing sight. Not only had this part of the apparatus completely disintegrated, but the sand of the desert floor under it as well. On the spot quivered a miniature lake of molten glass!

As Kendrick stood ruefully beside that fiery pool, meditating on the spectacular but not altogether gratifying results of his experiment, a peculiar low humming sound reached his ears. Rushing back to his primary unit, with the thought that perhaps by some chance he had not fully closed the rheostat, he looked at the cross. But no, the vanes were still.

The humming increased, however—grew into a vibration that made his eardrums ache.

Puzzled, he looked around. What on earth could it be? Had his unruly experiment called into play some tremendous, unsuspected force of the universe. Was he to bring the world to ruin, as a result of his blind groping after this new giant of power?

Such predictions had often been made by the ignorant, to be dismissed by scientists as the veriest nonsense. But was there some truth in the universal fear, after all? Was he to be the Prometheus who stole fire from Olympus, the Samson who toppled down the temple?

Chilled, dizzyed with the pain of the ever-increasing vibration, he gritted his teeth, awaiting he knew not what.

Then it came—a spectacle so staggering that he went rigid with awe as he regarded it, all power of motion utterly numbed for the moment. The vibration ceased. The thing appeared.

It was a city—a city in the air—a flying city!

As Kendrick stood staring at this phenomenon, he could scarcely credit his senses.

Had the magic carpet of Bagdad suddenly materialized before him, he would not have been more astounded. And indeed, it was in a way a magic carpet—a great disclike affair, several miles in diameter, its myriad towers and spires glinting like gold under the noonday sun, while its vast shadow fell athwart the desert like the pall of an eclipse.

The lower portion, he noted, was in the main flat, though a number of wartish protuberances jutted down from it, ejecting a pale violet emanation. Whatever this was it seemed to have the effect of holding the thing motionless in the air, for it hovered there quite easily, a hundred yards or so above the ground.

But what was it? Where was it from? What had brought it?

Those were the questions he wanted answered; and they were to be, sooner than he knew.

As he stood there speculating, a device like a trap-door opened in the base of the disc, and creatures resembling human beings began descending. Began floating down, rather.

Whereupon Kendrick did what any sensible man would have done, under similar circumstances. He reacted into motion. In short, he ran.

Glancing back over his shoulder after a minute or two, however, he drew up sheepishly. Of that strange apparition and those who had descended from it there was not a trace, not a shadow!

But the peculiar humming had recommenced, he realized in the next breath—and at the same instant he felt himself seized by invisible hands.

There was a struggle, but it was brief and futile. When it was over his captors became visible once more. They were singular little beings about four feet

tall, with strange, wise, leathery faces, their heads grotesquely bald.

The humming had ceased again. The disc, too, was once more visible.

What happened next was something even more astounding, if there could be any further degrees of wonder possible for the utterly baffled young scientist. He felt himself lifted up, leaving the desert floor, whirling away toward that incredible phenomenon hovering there.

Another moment or two and he had been borne up through its trap-door opening, was standing in a dark space bounded by solid metal walls. Then he was thrust into a cylinder with several of his tiny guards, shot swiftly upward.

A door opened as they came to rest, and he was led out into a vast court of gleaming amber crystal. Something like a taxi slid up, with iridescent planes, and he was bundled into it, whirled away again.

Down broad, gleaming avenues they passed, where similar traffic flowed densely, but under marvelous control. Towering skyscrapers loomed to right and left. Tier on tier of upper and lower boulevards revealed themselves, all crowded with automotive and pedestrian activity.

At length a stupendous concourse was reached. Thousands of these taxis and similar vehicles were parked along its broad flanks, while literal swarms of diminutive individuals circulated to and fro.

Assisted from the vehicle that had brought him to this obvious center of the disc's activities. Kendrick was led into a monumental structure of jade-green stone that towered a full hundred, stories above the street level. There he was escorted into another of those projectilelike elevators, shot up, up—till at length it came to rest. The door opened and he was led out into a small lobby of the same amber crystal he had observed before.

By now his guards had diminished to two, but he no longer made any effort to escape. Wherever this

amazing adventure might lead, he was resolved to follow it through.

One of the guards had advanced to a jewelled door and was pressing a button. In response, the door opened. A golden-robed, regal creature stood there.

Though dwarfed to four feet, like his fellow, he was obviously their mental superior to a prodigious degree. Not only was his symmetrical bald head of large brain content, but the finely-cut features of his parchment face bore the unmistakable stamp of a powerful intellect.

"*Ao-cha!*" commanded this evident monarch of the disc, addressing the guards.

They bowed and departed, abruptly.

"My dear Kendrick!" the regal personage now said, in thin, precise English. "It is indeed a pleasure to welcome you to my humble quarters. Pray enter and make yourself comfortable."

Whereupon he ushered him into a dazzling apartment that was one vast mosaic of precious gems, indicated a richly carved chair, into which the young scientist dropped wonderingly.

"Now then, Professor," continued the mighty little dwarf, when he was seated in a chair even more sumptuous, "suppose we have a friendly little discussion. I have been much interested in your experiments on heat radiation. What you demonstrated this morning, in particular, was most absorbing. You have hit upon a rather profound scientific principle, yes?"

"Possibly," Kendrick admitted, quite conscious that he was being patronized.

"Oh, don't be modest, my dear fellow!" smiled the dwarf. "I am the last one to belittle your achievement. Indeed, it is because of it that I have invited you here to-day. Permit me to introduce myself, and to make clear one or two possibly perplexing matters. Then I am sure we shall have a most agreeable chat."

His name was Cor, he said, and he was in truth the monarch of this strange realm. His people had come from the one-time planet of Vada, far distant in the universe. A thousand years ago, this planet had been doomed by the approach of an alien star. Their great scientist, Ravv, had met the emergency by inventing the disc, into whose construction they had poured all their resources. The pick of their populace had been salvaged on this giant life-raft. The rest had perished when that destroying star had crashed down on the doomed Vada.

Since then these survivors and their descendants had been voyaging through space on their marvelous disc. For hundreds of years they had given no thought to the future, content to drift on and on in the interstellar void, breathing an atmosphere produced artificially. But at length the inevitable had happened. This superb piece of mechanism devised by their super-genius, Ravv, was beginning to show signs of wear. Some of its mighty engines were nearing the exhaustion point. Either they must soon find a planet comparable with the one they had once known, where

they could pause and rehabilitate their machinery, or they must disintegrate and pass into oblivion.

Faced with that crisis, Cor had long been seeking such a planet. He had found it, at last, in the earth—and had resolved that this was where they were going to alight and transplant the civilization of ancient Vada, pending such time as they could take to space again.

For some months now they had been hovering over various portions of the earth, studying its geography and its peoples, with the result that they had concluded the United States offered the most logical point for launching the attack. Once this country was subdued, they were in possession of the richest and most advanced section of the planet. The conquest of the rest of it could await their leisure.

With such an invasion in view, their scientists had mastered the language of the country. This had been accomplished very easily, since in addition to their power of mingling with the populace in an invisible form, they had the principles of radio developed to a

high degree and were able to tune in on any station they wanted.

Kendrick sat there, stunned, as Cor followed his astounding revelation of their origin with this calm plan for the conquest of America, of the world. Why, of all people on earth, had he alone been singled out for this disclosure?

He asked the question now.

"My dear Professor, can't you really guess?" replied Cor, with that leathery smile. "Hasn't it dawned that you were a little too near our own field with that machine of yours? A trifle more research, a slightly different application—and you would have become a dangerous enemy."

"You—you mean—?"

"I mean there isn't a great deal of difference between the experiments you have been making and those our great Ravv once made. For instance, had you broadcast your heatricity, as you call it, instead of

trying to transmit it on wires—well, picture a receiving apparatus in each home of the land, like your commercial radio sets. You would have become a billionaire, don't you see?"

Kendrick saw indeed. It was simple, so simple! Fool—why hadn't he thought of it?

"But your invention will never make you wealthy now, my dear fellow," Cor went on, tauntingly. "You will be our guest, here, until we have taken over your interesting country. After that, if there is any need for the broadcasting of heat, we will furnish it ourselves. We have those facilities, among others, fully developed. Would you care to see our plant?"

Kendrick naturally admitted that he would, so the dwarf led him through a rear door and up a winding flight of stairs. They emerged presently into a great laboratory housed in the glass-roofed pinnacle of the tower.

There he beheld a sight that left him breathless. Never before had he seen such an assemblage of

scientific apparatus. Its vastness and strangeness were fairly overpowering, even to a man as well versed in physio-chemical paraphernalia as he was.

Before his eyes could take in a tenth part of the spectacle, Cor had led him to the left wall.

"There," he said, "you will observe a development of your heat generator."

Kendrick looked—to see a long bank of large vacuum-tubes, each about three feet high and a foot wide, connected by a central shaft that caused series of little vanes in each of them to revolve at lightning speed.

Around the apparatus moved numerous small attendants, oiling, wiping, adjusting its many delicate parts.

"Well, what do you think now?" asked Cor.

Kendrick made no reply, though he was thinking plenty.

"You see, it is your invention, my dear Professor," the dwarf went on in his taunting voice, "only anteceded by a thousand years—and rather more perfected, you must admit."

He walked now to the center of the laboratory, where stood a huge dial of white crystal, ranked with many levers and switches, all capped with the same material.

"Behold!" he said, throwing over one.

Instantly there came again that peculiar low humming that had so puzzled him a few minutes before—and the entire room, its engines, its attendants, Cor himself, leapt into invisibility. Only Kendrick remained, facing the faintly visible crystal dial.

Then he saw a switch move, as though automatically. But no, for the dwarf's hand was on it now. Visibility had returned. The vibration ceased.

"That is the central control," said Cor. "Our city and all its inhabitants become invisible when that switch

is thrown. Only the dial remains, for the guidance of the operator, and even that cannot be seen at a distance of more than fifty feet. But now behold!"

He raised his hand, touched a watch-like device strapped to his wrist—and was instantly invisible. But the laboratory and every machine and person in it remained in plain view. Nor was there any vibration now.

The next moment, having touched that curious little device again, Cor reappeared.

"That is the local control," he said. "Every one of our inhabitants, except those under discipline, has one of these little mechanisms. It enables us to make ourselves invisible at will. A convenience at times, you must admit."

"Decidedly," Kendrick agreed. "And the principle?"

"Quite simple. One of those, in fact, that lies behind your researches. Doubtless you would have hit upon it yourself in time. Your own scientist, Faraday, you may

recall, held the opinion that the various forms under which the forces of matter manifest themselves have a common origin. We of the disc, thanks to our great Ravv, have found that common origin."

It was the origin of matter itself, Cor said, which lay in the ether of interstellar space—energy, raw, cosmic—vibrations, rays.

By harnessing and controlling these various rays, his people had been able to accomplish their seeming miracles—miracles that the people of earth, too, were beginning to achieve—as in electricity, for instance, and its further application, radio.

But the people of Vada had long since mastered such simple rays, and now, in possession of vastly more powerful ones, had the elemental forces of the universe at their disposal.

The disc was propelled through space by short rays of tremendously high frequency, up above the ultra-violet. The same rays, directed downward instead of outward, enabled them to overcome the pull of

gravity when in a planet's influence, as at present. And the escalator rays, by which they could proceed to and from the disc, were also of high frequency, as were their invisibility rays.

"But you, Professor, are more interested in low frequency rays, the long ones down below infra-red," continued Cor. "You have seen our development of the heat-dynamo principle. It utilizes, I might add, not only solar radiation but that of the stars as well. There being a billion and a half of these in the universe, many of them a thousand times or more as large as your own sun, we naturally have quite an efficient little heating plant here. It provides us with our weapon of warfare, as well as keeping us warm. Permit me to demonstrate."

He led the way to a gleaming circle of glass like an inverted telescope, about a yard in diameter, mounted in the floor.

"Look!" said the dwarf.

Kendrick did so—and there, spread below him, lay the

floor of the desert. His camp, his apparatus, were just as he had left them.

Cor now moved toward the dial.

"Behold!" he said, pulling a lever.

Instantly the scene below was an inferno. Stricken by a blast of stupendous heat, the whole area went molten, lay quivering like a lake of lava in the crater of an active volcano.

"Suppose, my dear Professor," smiled the dwarf, strolling back from the dial, "just suppose, for instance, that instead of the lonely camp of an obscure scientist, your proud city of New York had been below there!"

Kendrick shuddered.

Well he knew now the terrible power, the appalling menace of this strange invader.

"I would prefer not to make such a supposition," he

said, quietly, with a last thoughtful glance at that witches' caldron below.

"Then let us think of pleasanter things. You are my guest of honor, sir—America's foremost scientist, though she may never realize it," with a piping chuckle. "To-night there will be a great banquet in your honor. Meanwhile, suppose I show you to your quarters."

Nettled, fuming, though outwardly calm, Kendrick permitted himself to be escorted from the laboratory to an ornate apartment on one of the lower floors.

There Cor left him, with the polite hint that he would find plenty of attendants handy should he require anything.

Alone now, in the midst of this vast, nightmarish metropolis, he paced back and forth, back and forth—knowing the hideous fate that threatened the world but powerless to issue one word of warning, much less avert it.

Kendrick was still thinking and brooding along these lines when he saw the door of the apartment swiftly open and close again.

Someone had entered, invisible!

Backing away, he waited, tense. Then, suddenly, his visitor materialized. With a gasp, he saw standing before him a beautiful girl.

She was a young woman, rather, in her early twenties. Not one of these pigmies of the disc either, but a tall, slender creature of his own world.

Her hair was dark, modishly bobbed. Her eyes were a deep, clear brown, her skin a warm olive. And she was dressed as though she had just stepped off Fifth Avenue—which indeed she had, not so long ago, as he was soon to learn.

"I hope I haven't startled you too much, Mr. Kendrick," she said, in a rich, husky murmur, "but—well, there wasn't any other way."

"Oh, I guess I'll get over it," he replied with a smile.
"But you have the advantage of me, since you know my name."

Hers was Marjorie Blake, she told him then.

"Not the daughter of Henderson Blake?" he gasped.

"Yes," with a tremor, "his only daughter."

Whereupon Kendrick knew the solution of a mystery that had baffled the police for weeks. The newspapers had been full of it at the time. This beautiful girl, whose father was one of America's richest men and president of its largest bank, had disappeared as though the earth had swallowed her. She had left their summer estate at Great Neck, Long Island, on a bright June morning, bound for New York on a shopping tour—and had simply vanished.

Suicide had been hinted by some of the papers, but had not been taken seriously, since she had no apparent motive for ending her life. Abduction seemed to be the more logical explanation, and huge

rewards had been offered by her frantic parents—all to no avail.

What had happened was, she now explained, that after visiting several shops and making a number of purchases, she had stepped into Central Park at the Plaza for a breath of fresh air before lunching at the Sherry-Netherlands, where she planned to meet some friends.

But before advancing a hundred yards along the secluded path, she had been seized by invisible hands—had felt something strapped to her wrist, before anyone came in sight—and then, invisible too, had been lifted up, whirled away into a vast, humming vibration that sounded through the air.

Once on the disc, it had swept off into space at incredible speed, pausing only when some hundreds of miles above the earth and invisible from below without mechanical aid. When its vibration finally ceased that amazing city had leapt before her eyes.

Then, her own visibility restored, she had been led

into the presence of that mighty little monarch, Cor, who explained that she had been seized as a hostage and would be held as an ace in the hole, pending conquest of her country. Since when she had been a prisoner aboard the disc.

Learning of Kendrick's capture, from gossip among the women, she had taken the first opportunity of coming to him, in the hope that between them they might devise some means of escape.

Indeed, that was his own fondest hope—their imperative need, if the people of America and of the earth were to be saved from this appalling menace. But what basis was there for such a fantastic hope? Just one, that he could see.

"That thing on your wrist," he said, voicing it. "I'm surprised they let you wear one of those."

"They don't," she smiled. "I stole it!—from one of the maids in my apartment. It was the only way I could get here without being seen. I felt I must see you at once. We've got to do something, soon, or it'll be too

late. I felt that, as a scientist, you might have some idea how we could get off."

"How do the people themselves get off?" he asked.
"That escalator ray—do you know how they use it?"

"No, I've never been able to find out. They don't let me go near that part of the city."

Kendrick reflected a moment.

"Let's have a look at that invisibility affair," he said.

She removed it from her wrist, handed it to him.
Somewhat in awe, he examined it.

The mechanism portion, which was linked in a strap of elastic metal, resembled only superficially a watch, he now saw. Rather it had the appearance of some delicate electric switch. Rectangular in shape, it was divided into two halves by a band of white crystal. In each of these halves were two little buttons of the same material, those on one side round, on the other square.

"Which buttons control the invisibility?" he asked.

"The square ones," she replied. "One's pushed in now, you see. If you should push the other, the first would come out—and you'd pass out of the picture, so to speak."

Kendrick was half tempted to try the thing then and there, but deferred the impulse.

"What are the round buttons for?" he inquired instead.

Marjorie didn't know, but thought they were probably an emergency pair, in case something went wrong with the square ones. In any event, nothing happened when you pushed them.

Kendrick pushed one, just to see. It was true. Nothing happened—but he seemed to sense a faint, peculiar vibration and a wave of giddiness swept over him. On pushing the other, which released the first, it stopped.

He handed the device back to Marjorie.

"There's your bracelet. Now, if I can just get one like it, I think we'll get down to earth all right."

"Oh, Mr. Kendrick!" Her eyes lit up eagerly. "Then you've thought of a way?"

"Not exactly. I think I've discovered their own way. I can't be certain, but I'm willing to gamble on it, if you are."

"Then you—you think those round buttons are connected with the escalator rays?"

"Exactly! I think they control individual descent and ascent, just as the square ones control individual visibility and invisibility. At any rate, it's the hunch I'm going to act on right now, if you're with me."

"Oh, I'm with, you!" she breathed. "Anything, death almost, would be preferable to this."

"Then stand by, invisible. I'm going to get one of my jailors in here and relieve him of his wrist-watch."

Marjorie touched that little square button on her own. She instantly became invisible.

Kendrick touched a button too, a button he had noticed beside the door. As he had supposed, it brought one of the Vadans.

Shutting the door quietly, he seized the fellow before he could move his hand to his wrist. Thwarted in his attempt to vanish from sight, the diminutive guard attempted an outcry. But Kendrick promptly throttled him.

Marjorie had reappeared by now and together they bound him to a chair with a gilded cord torn from the drapery.

Removing the precious mechanism from his wrist, Kendrick slipped it on his own.

"Now let's go!" he said, pressing the protruding square button of the device. "We haven't a minute to—my golly, what a peculiar sensation!"

"It is rather odd, isn't it?" she laughed, pressing her own and joining him in that invisible realm.

"Feels like a combination electric massage and cold shower! Where are you, anyway? I can't see you."

"Of course you can't!" came an unseen tinkle. "Here!"

He felt her brush him.

"Better hold hands," he suggested, then gave an invisible flush he was glad she couldn't see.

"All right. A good idea."

Her delicate hand came into his, soft, warm. Heart vibrating even faster than his body, his whole being a-quiver with a strange exaltation, Kendrick opened the door, and they left the apartment.

The next half-hour was the tensest either of them had ever experienced. Every foot of the way was fraught with peril.

Not only did they have to carefully avoid the visible swarms of little people who hurried everywhere, but had to be on their guard as well against any who might be moving about like themselves under cover of invisibility.

Nor could they use any elevator or public conveyances, but were obliged to make their way down to the concourse by heaven knew how many flights of stairs, and cross heaven knew how many teeming streets on foot, before they reached the amber court, below which the trap-door and their hope of freedom.

They got there at last, however, descended, and peered down from that yawning brink upon the desert floor—to draw back with gasps of dismay. For the area still gleamed semi-molten from the stupendous blast that had wiped out Kendrick's camp.

"W-what is it?" she gasped.

Swiftly he told her.

"But isn't there any way around it? Look, over there to the left. One edge of the crater seems to end almost underneath us."

It was true that the center of the caldron was far to the right of where they stood, and that its left rim was only a little within their direct line of descent. But to land even one foot inside that inferno would be as fatal as to alight in its very midst.

Kendrick was thinking fast.

"There's just a chance," he said. "It all depends upon how wide the zone of these escalator rays is, and whether we can tune in on them. At least, I can probably answer the latter question."

Pushing the protrudent round button on his mysterious bracelet as he spoke, he leaned over the edge of the trap-door and awaited results.

They were not long in coming. The vibration he was already under from the invisibility rays seemed to double. Alternate waves of giddiness and depression,

of push and pull, swept over him.

A minute of it was enough. He pressed the round button that now protruded, ending this influence, and faced Marjorie, stating:

"I'm positive now that these things control descent and ascent. As nearly as I can figure, the rays work on the principle of an endless belt. If you're up here, you get carried down, and vice versa. As to how wide the belt is, and whether you can move sideways on it, remains to be seen. Anyway, I'm going to take a chance. I'll go first. If my guess is wrong, you—well, needn't follow."

"No, I'm going with you!" she declared resolutely.
"We've come this far together. I shan't be left alone now. Let's go!"

And again her soft, warm hand was in his.

Lord, what a girl! How many would be brave enough to take a gamble like that, on a fellow's mere supposition?

"All right—go it is!" he said. "Push your round button, like this." He showed her the way he thought was right, pushed his own. "Ready?"

"Ready!"

Their voices were grave. It was a grim prospect, stepping off into space like that, with only a guess between them and death.

"Then jump!"

They jumped, gripping each other's hands tightly—and instead of dropping like plummets were caught in a powerful field of force and whirled gently downward.

"Oh, you were right!" gasped Marjorie, awed. "See, we—"

Then she paused, horror-stricken, for it was obvious that they were to descend within that lake of molten glass, unless they could change their course at once.

"Quick!" he called. "Hold fast! Now—run!"

Breathless, they raced to the left, across that invisible descending belt.

Too far, Kendrick knew, and they would plunge outside its zone, fall crushed and mangled. Not far enough, and they would meet cremation. It was a fearful hazard, either way, but it had to be taken.

They were almost down, now, and still not quite far enough to the left. The heat of that yawning crater rose toward them.

"Faster—*faster*!" he cried, fairly dragging her along with him.

A last dash—a breathless instant—and they stood there on the ground, not three feet from the edge of doom.

Swooning with the heat, Marjorie swayed against him, murmured an incoherent prayer.

"Take heart!" he whispered, lifting her bodily and bearing her some yards away. "We're down—safe!"

Their safety was but relative, however, Kendrick well knew. Until they could put miles between them and this monstrous disc, they were not really safe. No telling how soon their escape might be discovered. No telling what terrible means Cor might take of curbing their flight.

So as soon as Marjorie had recovered sufficiently to proceed, they headed off across the desert at a fast walk toward Ajo, where he hoped to catch the afternoon train for Gila Bend. From there, they could board the limited for Tucson and points east, when it came through from Yuma that night.

They had tuned out on the escalator rays, but continued on still invisible—for the disc hung above them in plain view and it would have been suicide to let themselves be seen.

Even so, Kendrick soon began to have an uneasy feeling of being followed. He looked around from time

to time, but could see nothing. Were some of those invisible little creatures on their trail?

He said nothing to Marjorie of his anxiety, but presently she too began glancing backward uneasily, every few steps.

"They are near us!" she said at length, in a whisper. "I can sense them."

It was more than sense, they soon discovered. Little paddings became quite audible, and once or twice they saw the sand scuffed up, not twenty feet away, as though by a foot passing over it.

Meanwhile they were climbing a rise of ground, broken by many small hummocks and dotted with thorny shrubs. On the other side, at the foot of a long down-slope, lay Ajo.

Once they reached the summit, Kendrick felt sure they could outdistance their pursuers on the descent. Already, if his watch was right, the train was preparing to pull out. It would be a breathless dash,

but he was confident they could make it.

So he reassured Marjorie as best he could, and helped her on up the slope.

They were practically on the summit and already in view of the little railroad station and huddle of shacks below—when suddenly he felt himself tripped and flung violently to the ground. At the same instant, his companion emitted a scream, as she felt herself seized by invisible hands.

Leaping to his feet, Kendrick flailed out with solid fists at their attackers. Groans answered the impacts and he knew his blows were taking effect.

Free for a moment he dashed to Marjorie, felt for the midgets who swarmed around her. Seizing one of the invisible forms, he lifted it and flung it crashing to the ground. Another, likewise, and another.

Then he threshed his legs, where two of the creatures clung, trying to drag him down again. They flew through the air, with cries of fright.

"Well, so far, so good!" he exclaimed. "We won't wait to see if there are any more. Come on—let's go!"

"Right!"

Reaching for each other's hands, they raced down the slope.

Halfway there they saw a warning blast of steam rise from the engine, followed by a whistle.

"They'll be pulling out in a minute now!" he gasped, increasing speed. "We've got to make it!—our only chance!"

"We *will* make it!" she sobbed through clenched teeth, meeting his pace.

Glancing over his shoulder, after another fifteen seconds, Kendrick saw that the disc was no longer visible. Since there was no vibration he realized with relief that it was now hidden behind the slope they were descending.

"Quick—push your button!" he said, pushing his own.

They came out of the influence of the invisibility rays, raced breathless on down the slope—gained the station platform just as the train was getting under way.

Helping the exhausted girl aboard, he mounted the steps himself, led her through the vestibule into its single passenger coach.

Dropping into a seat, they sat there panting as the train gathered speed.

By the time the decrepit but life-saving little local drew into Gila Bend they had somewhat recovered from their harrowing experience.

Marjorie was still pale, however, as Kendrick helped her from the train.

"I may recover," she said with a wan smile, "but I'll never look the same! An old saying, but I know what it means now."

He thought better of a sudden impulse to tell her she looked quite all right to him. Instead, he said grimly:

"I know now what a lot of things mean!"

The Tucson limited would not be through for over an hour, they learned. That would give them time to hunt up the authorities and sound a warning of the ominous invader that was in the vicinity. Perhaps, by prompt military action, it might be destroyed, or at least crippled.

But first they went to the telegraph office, where Marjorie got off a message that would bring joy to her grieved family.

While standing there outside the barred window, odors of food wafting to them from a nearby lunch-room.

"Um-m!" she sniffed. "That smells good to me! I haven't tasted any earthly cooking for ages. Everything on that horrible disc was synthetic."

"Then I suggest we have ham and eggs, at once," he said. "Or would you prefer a steak?"

"I think I'll have both!"

As they walked into the lunch-room, Kendrick told her of the banquet in his honor Cor had promised for that night.

"I guess I didn't miss much," he ended.

"You certainly didn't!" she assured him, with a smile. "It would have opened with a purée of split-molecule soup, continued with an entrée of breaded electrons, and closed with an ionic café."

He laughed.

"I'm just as well satisfied. I was unable to attend! Humble as it is, I think this will prove to be much more wholesome food."

Night had fallen by the time they left the lunch-room. Glancing at his watch, Kendrick saw that they still

had better than a half-hour before the limited was due, so they betook themselves to the police station.

It was only a block away and in consequence they weren't long reaching it.

The chief had gone home, the officer at the desk informed them, but if there was anything they cared to report, he would be glad to make note of it.

A big raw-boned westerner, he shifted his quid as he spoke and spat resoundingly in a cuspidor at his feet.

"All right, then—get your pencil ready!" said Kendrick with a smile. "This is Miss Marjorie Blake, daughter of Henderson Blake, of New York. Perhaps you read of her disappearance, a few weeks ago. And I...."

As he introduced himself and told briefly of their astounding experience, the officer's eyes bulged with amazement.

"Say, what yuh-all tryin' to hand me?" he snorted finally. "D'yuh think I was born simple?"

"Press your button!" whispered Marjorie. "Show him how the invisibility ray works. It'll save a lot of argument."

"Right!"

He held up his wrist.

"See this? Now watch!"

Whereupon he pressed the button. But to their dismay, nothing happened.

"Wa-al. I'm still watchin'!" drawled the officer. "Who's loony now?"

Kendrick examined the mechanism in impatience, pressed that little button repeatedly: but still nothing happened.

"Try yours!" he told Marjorie finally.

She did so, with similar results—or lack of them, rather.

"Something's wrong," he said at length. "The ray isn't working."

"Wrong is right!" declared the officer with a contemptuous flood of tobacco juice. "Yuh folks better go catch yuhr train 'fore yuh ferget where it is."

Chagrined, embarrassed, they took their leave, headed back toward the railroad station.

"Of all the utterly silly things!" declared Marjorie, as they walked along. "Why do you suppose it didn't work?"

Kendrick didn't reply at once. When he did, his voice was grave.

"Because the disc has gone!" he said. "We are outside its zone of influence. That's my hunch, at least, and I think we'd better act on it."

"You mean...?"

"I mean our escape has probably caused them to

hurry their plans. They're probably over New York right now. I think we'd better get there the quickest possible way."

The result was that when the train came, they remained on it only to Tucson. There they chartered a fast plane and started east at once.

At sunset the following day the plane swooped out of the sky and slid to rest on the broad grounds of the Blake estate at Great Neck.

As Kendrick stepped from the cabin and helped Marjorie down, a tall, distinguished-looking man with graying hair and close-cropped mustache came hurrying toward them.

"Daddy!" she cried, rushing into his arms. "Oh, Daddy—Daddy!"

Even without this demonstration. Kendrick would have recognized Henderson Blake from pictures he had seen recently in the papers.

Now he was introduced, and Blake was gripping his hand warmly.

"I don't quite know what this is all about, Professor," he heard the great financier say. "Marjorie's telegram last night was as cryptic as it was over-joying. But I do know that I owe you a deep debt of gratitude."

"Yes, and you owe our pilot about a thousand dollars, too!" put in the daughter of the house, clinging to her father's arm. "Please give him a check—then we'll go inside and I'll explain all about it."

"A matter very much easier dispatched than my debt to Professor Kendrick," said Blake, complying.

The check was for two thousand, not one, the pilot saw when he received it.

"Thank you very much, sir!" he said, saluting.

"Don't mention it. Good night—and good luck to you!"

The pilot returned to his plane, it lifted from the lawn,

droned off into the twilight.

Then they approached the cool white villa that stood invitingly a hundred yards or so away beyond sunken gardens.

As they neared it, a handsome, well-preserved woman whose face reflected Marjorie's own beauty came toward them. Lines of suffering were still evident around her sensitive mouth, but her dark eyes were radiant.

"Mother!"

"My poor darling!"

They rushed into each other's arms, clung, sobbing and laughing.

Kendrick was glad when these intimate greetings were over and he had met Mrs. Blake.

They were in the drawing-room now, listening to a somewhat more lucid account of their daughter's

experiences and those of her rescuer. Marjorie was doing most of the talking, but every now and again she would turn to Kendrick for verification.

"Heavens!" gasped Mrs. Blake, finally. "Can such things be possible?"

"Almost anything seems possible nowadays, my dear," her husband told her. "And you say, Professor, that you have brought back samples of this invisibility device?"

"Yes, we have, but I can't promise they'll work. I'll try, however."

Whereupon, sceptically, he pressed that little square button—and instantly faded out of sight.

"Good Lord!" cried Blake, leaping to his feet. "That proves it! Why, this is positively—"

His remarks were cut short by a scream of terror from his wife.

"Marjorie—Marjorie!" she shrieked.

Wheeling, he faced the chair where his daughter had sat. It was empty, so far as human eyes could see.

"Don't worry Mother—Daddy!" came a calm voice from it. "I'm quite all right—coming back—steady."

And back she came, as did Kendrick, from the empty chair beside her.

His face was grave. The success of the demonstration, which had proved their story to practical-minded Henderson Blake, had proved to him something altogether more significant. The disc, as he had surmised, had rushed eastward immediately on learning of their escape, and was now probably hovering right over New York.

"Marvelous—marvelous!" declared Blake. "But that heat ray, Professor. That sounds bad. You are convinced it is as powerful as they make out!"

"Positively! That blast they let go in the desert would

have utterly destroyed New York."

"Hm! Yes, no doubt you're right. I fully realize how the fearful menace of this thing. Do you think the military authorities will be able to cope with it?"

"I don't know. Perhaps, if they are prompt enough."

"And is there no other way—no scientific way?"

Kendrick grew thoughtful.

"I wonder," he said at last. "There's just a possibility—something running through my mind—an experiment I'd like to make, if I had the facilities of some large electrical laboratory."

"You shall have them to-morrow!" Blake promised.

"I'm one of the directors of Consolidated Electric. Their experimental laboratory in Brooklyn is the finest of its kind in America. I'll see that you have the run of it."

"That will be very kind," said Kendrick. "But don't

expect anything to come from it, necessarily. It's just a theory I want to work out."

A butler entered at this moment and announced dinner.

"Well, theories are mighty these days!" beamed Blake, as they rose, clapping the younger man on the shoulder. "You go ahead with your theories—and I'll bring a few facts to bear. To-morrow noon I'll escort some military men and others of my friends over to the laboratory to hear and see something of this menace direct. Meanwhile, and during this crisis, it will honor me to have you as my guest."

"Our guest!" amended Marjorie, with a warm smile.

Next morning Blake motored Kendrick out to the Brooklyn Laboratory of the Consolidated Electric Utilities Corporation and installed him there.

Then he left—to return at noon with the promised delegation of generals, admirals, statesmen and financiers.

They were all frankly sceptical, though realizing that Henderson Blake was not a man given to exaggeration. Nor did their scepticism altogether vanish when Kendrick had ended his bizarre story with a demonstration of the invisibility device.

Murmurs of amazement ran around the laboratory, it is true, but the more hard-headed of his spectators charged him with having invented the apparatus himself. Though they didn't come right out and say so, they seemed to imply that he was seeking publicity.

Annoyedly, Kendrick tried to refute their charges. But even as he was summoning words, refutation utter and complete came from the air.

A low, humming vibration sounded, grew in volume till it filled the room—and as suddenly ceased: The light of midday faded to twilight.

"*The disc!*" gasped Kendrick, rushing to the west windows.

They followed, tense with awe. And there, between

earth and sun, its myriad towers and spires refracting a weird radiance, hovered that vast flying city.

"My God!" muttered a famous general, staring as though he had seen a ghost.

A great statesman opened his lips, but no words came.

"Appalling! Incredible!" burst from others of that stunned assemblage.

Their comments were cut short by a broadcast voice, thin and clear, tremendously amplified, a voice Kendrick recognized at once as that of Cor.

"People of America!" it said. "We of the planet Vada have come to conquer your country. You will be given forty-eight hours to lay down your arms. If complete surrender has not been made by high noon, two days from now, New York will be destroyed."

The voice ceased. The humming recommenced—waned in volume till it died away. Twilight turned

once more to midday.

Peering fixedly through the west windows of the laboratory, the little assemblage saw the disc swallowed up in the clear blue sky.

Then they turned, faced one another gravely.

Outside, on the streets, confusion reigned. In newspaper plants, presses were whirling. In telegraph and cable offices, keys were ticking. From radio towers, waves were speeding.

Within an hour, the nation and the world knew of this planetary invader and its staggering ultimatum.

Naturally, the government at Washington refused to meet these shameful terms. Military and naval forces were rushed to the threatened metropolis. The Atlantic Fleet steamed up from Hampton Roads under forced draught and assembled in the outer harbor. Thousands of planes gathered at Mitchell Field and other nearby aerodromes.

But where was the enemy? He must be miles up in space, Kendrick knew, as he toiled feverishly in the laboratory over his experiment after a sleepless night. For had that flying city been nearer earth, it could not have maintained invisibility without that peculiar humming vibration.

Scout planes urged on by impatient squadron commanders, climbed till they reached their ceilings, searching in vain. They could encounter nothing, see nothing of the invader.

Thus passed a morning of growing tension.

But by noon of that day, with a bare twenty-four hours left before the expiration of the ultimatum, the disc came down, showed itself boldly.

There followed stunning disasters.

One salvo, and the ray shot down—the Atlantic Fleet, the pride of America, burst and melted in flaming hell. Squadrons of planes, carrying tons of bombs, frizzled like moths in the air. Mighty projectiles

hurled by land batteries were deflected off on wild trajectories.

Appalled, the nation and the world followed in lurid extras these crushing defeats.

By nightfall of that day, all seemed lost. All opposition had been obliterated. America must capitulate or perish. It had until the next noon to decide which.

Meanwhile, in that great Brooklyn laboratory, Kendrick was working against time, besieged by frantic delegations of the nation's leaders. They knew now that their one hope lay in him. Was he succeeding? Was there even any hope?

Face haggard, eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, he waved them away, went on with his work.

"I will tell you—as soon as I know."

That was all he would say.

Followed a night that was the blackest in all history,

though the myriad stars of heaven shone tauntingly brilliant in the summer sky.

At length, as dawn was breaking. Kendrick paused in his labors.

"There!" he said, grimly, surveying an apparatus that seemed to involve the entire facilities of the laboratory. "It is done! Now then—will it work?"

The delegation were called to witness the test.

Henderson Blake was among them, as was Marjorie. She stepped forward, as he prepared to make the demonstration.

"I *know*, somehow, you're going to be successful!" she murmured, pressing his hand, meeting his eyes with a smile of confidence.

"I hope you're right—Marjorie!" he replied, letting slip the last word almost unconsciously.

Her face colored warmly as she stepped back and

rejoined her father.

Kendrick's heart was beating fast as he turned to his instruments. How could he fail, with faith like that behind him?—love, even, perhaps! He mustn't fail—nor would he, if his theories were sound.

Addressing the assemblage, he explained briefly the complicated apparatus.

"These towers," he said, pointing to four steel structures about ten feet high, arranged at the corners of a square roughly twenty feet across, "are miniature radio masts. The area enclosed by them, we will assume, is the city of New York. That metal disc suspended above the area represents the invader. It contains a miniature heat-generator such as I was experimenting with recently in the Arizona desert."

He paused, threw a switch. Somewhere in the laboratory a dynamo began to whirl.

"I am now sending electro-magnetic waves from the four towers," he resumed. "But instead of

broadcasting them in every direction. I am bending them in concave cathode of force over the city. You may picture this cathode as an invisible shield, if you choose, but it is more than that. It is a reflector. If my theories are right, the radio-energetic ray I am about to project upon it from my miniature disc will be flung back to its source as though it had been a ray of light falling on a mirror. The success of the experiment depends upon what the result will be."

Kendrick ceased, moved toward a rheostat.

As he made ready to touch it, a breathless tension settled upon the assemblage. Upon the outcome of what was now to happen rested the fate of America—and the world.

Calmly, though every fiber of his being was at breaking stress, the young scientist opened the rheostat.

For an instant, the ray seared down—then, as it boomeranged back, the disc burst into flame, dissolved, disintegrated. A thin dust, like carbon,

slowly settled to the laboratory floor.

Cutting off the current from the radio towers, Kendrick faced them, a light of triumph in his tired eyes.

"You see—it works," he said.

They saw. Beyond a doubt, it worked!

And what Kendrick saw, as his eyes met Marjorie's, made him forget his fatigue.

The rest was a mad scramble of preparation. Only a few brief hours remained, and much was to be done.

The application of the principle that had just been demonstrated involved a hook-up from the Consolidated Electric laboratory with every broadcasting station in the metropolitan area, power being supplied by commandeering every generating plant within a radius of fifty miles.

The city, moreover, had to be evacuated of all but the

few brave hundreds who volunteered to stand by their posts at radio stations and generating plants.

As for Kendrick, it was the busiest, most hectic morning he had ever experienced. Only the realization of a girl's love and a nation's trust enabled him to overcome the exhaustion of two sleepless nights.

At length, a little before eleven, all was in readiness. Just two questions troubled the young scientist's mind. Had the people of the disc learned of their preparations to counter the attack? And would the improvised broadcasting apparatus of the area stand the stupendous strain that would be placed upon it if the ray came down?

The first of these questions was answered, staggeringly, at a quarter after eleven.

"Kendrick—oh, my God!" cried Blake, bursting into the laboratory. "Marjorie—they've got her again! Look! Read this!"

He thrust out a piece of paper. Kendrick took it, read:
Your daughter will be my queen, after this noon.

"Where'd you get it?" he gasped.

"One of the invisible devils thrust it into my hand right out in the street, not five minutes ago," Blake explained, trembling with anguish. "Do you realize what this means, Kendrick? She's on the disc now—and in a scant three-quarters of an hour...."

"Yes, I realize!" his voice came grimly. "And I realize, too, that they don't know their fate. They'll stay. There's forty-five minutes yet. We can't abandon our defense against the ray, not even for Marjorie. But I'll go, I'll rescue her—or die with her!"

And even as Blake mutely reached out his hand to grip that of the determined young man who stood before him. Kendrick touched his wrist mechanism and went invisible.

Once on the street, he pressed the escalator button as

well—and by the strength of the vibrations that followed, he knew he must be very close within that mysterious lifting zone.

Running west a block, he found it growing stronger.

Fairly racing now, he continued on toward the river, progress unhampered in the deserted streets.

Suddenly, with a thrill of exultation, he felt himself swept up, whirled away toward that great shimmering hulk against the sun.

"What hope?" he was thinking. "What possible hope?" And the answer came: Cor!

Reaching the disc, he switched out the escalator influence and hastened across the city to that monumental structure of jade-green stone.

The mighty little dwarf would be up there in his glittering mosaic apartment, or in his pinnacle laboratory, perhaps, ready to pull the lever that would release that stupendous blast of heat.

Gaining the jewelled door of the monarch's quarters at last, after escaping detection by a hair's breadth more than once, he pressed the button outside, just as the guard had done that first time.

In response, the door opened—and there stood Cor.

He stood there an instant, that is, while the expression on his leathery face went from inquiry to alarm. Then, as Kendrick burst into the room and shut the door, he went invisible.

In that same instant, the young scientist's eyes beheld a sight that caused his heart to leap. There sat Marjorie, bound in a chair, an expression half of hope, half of dejection, on her face.

"It's I—Gordon!" he called. "Take courage!"

"Oh, I prayed so you'd come—and you came!" she murmured as her face lighted. Then, tensely, she added, "The door—look out!"

Kendrick wheeled, and just in time. The door was

opening.

"Not so fast!" he called, lunging.

His hands gripped the dwarf, yanked him back, throttled him before he could emit a cry, pushed the door shut.

Cor struggled like a madman, but it was futile. Kendrick's hands cut into his throat like a vice. After a moment or two, he gasped, relaxed.

Releasing his grip then, Kendrick felt for his wrist, stripped off his bracelet—whereupon the dwarf became visible. His face was putty-white. He was either dead or unconscious.

Restoring his own visibility then, he advanced to Marjorie, swiftly freed her.

"Take this!" he said, handing her Cor's bracelet.

She slipped it on.

"Now let's tie him and get out of here. He may be dead, but we can't take any chances."

The dwarf wasn't dead, however, for he groaned and opened his eyes as they lifted him into the chair.

"You win, Professor—but it avails you nothing!" He smiled maliciously. "My capture, my death even, will not prevent the ray. The orders have been given. It will be projected sharp at twelve. You but go to your doom!"

"That," said Kendrick, "is a matter of opinion."

Swiftly they bound him, gagged him.

"And now," he added, "we wish you good day—and such fate as you deserve!"

Then, turning to Marjorie:

"Your hand again!"

There was a new tenderness in its soft warmth that

thrilled him.

They touched their buttons, went invisible.

Silently, then, they stole from the apartment. Swiftly they made their way down to the concourse, raced across the city to the amber court, descended to the trap-door.

It must be nearly twelve, Kendrick knew. He couldn't look at his watch, for it as well as himself was invisible. Indeed, even as they stood there, poised for the plunge, a faint whistle rose from below.

Marjorie trembled.

"Steady!" he spoke. "Some of them always blow a minute or two before. Are you ready?"

"Yes!"

"Then press your button—jump!"

Even as they leapt, the sickening thought came that

perhaps the escalator ray was no longer running. But the fear was unwarranted. They were caught up, whirled gently downward.

Moving along laterally, as they descended, they were able to land without difficulty in the middle of a deserted street near the Consolidated Electric laboratory.

"Thank heaven!" she sighed, as their feet touched solid ground. They pressed off both buttons, becoming visible once more.

"Echo!" he agreed. "So let's—"

But Kendrick never completed that sentence—for now whistles all over the metropolitan area, rising from the generating plants, announced the ominous hour.

It was high noon. The ultimatum had expired.

Lifting tense faces to the disc, they waited. Would that stupendous ray be hurled back upon itself? Or would it sear through their makeshift defense,

plunging them and the whole great metropolis into oblivion?

Suddenly, cataclysmically, the answer came.

There burst a withering whirlwind from the disc. It struck that mighty concave cathode of interlaced waves above the city. There followed an instant's clash of titanic forces. Then the cathode triumphed, hurled it back.

Rocked by a concussion as of two worlds in impact, blinded by a glare that made the sunlight seem feeble in comparison. Marjorie and Kendrick clung together, while the disc grew into a satellite of calcium fire in the sky.

Presently, as the conflagration waned, they opened their eyes. Gravely, but with deep thanksgiving, they searched each other's faces. In them they read deep understanding, too, and a new hope.

"I think we'd better go and find father," she said at length, quietly.

"I think so too!" he agreed.

As they headed toward the laboratory, a fine, powdery dust, like volcanic ash was falling.

It continued to fall until the city streets were covered to a depth of an inch or more.

Thus passed the menace of Vada.

September 1930

#46 A Problem In Communication, By Miles John. Breuer, M.D.:

The delivery of his country into the clutches of a merciless, ultra-modern religion can be prevented only by Dr. Hagstrom's deciphering an extraordinary code.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -



the famous science temple

Part 1: The Science Community

(This part is related by Peter Hagstrom, Ph.D.)

"The Ability to communicate ideas from one individual to another," said a professor of sociology to his class, "is the principal distinction between human beings and their brute forbears. The increase and refinement of this ability to communicate is an index of the degree of civilization of a people. The more civilized a people, the more perfect their ability to communicate,

especially under difficulties and in emergencies."

The delivery of his country into the clutches of a merciless, ultra-modern religion can be prevented only by Dr. Hagstrom's deciphering an extraordinary code.

As usual, the observation burst harmlessly over the heads of most of the students in the class, who were preoccupied with more immediate things—with the evening's movies and the week-end's dance. But upon two young men in the class, it made a powerful impression. It crystallized within them certain vague conceptions and brought them to a conscious focus, enabling the young men to turn formless dreams into concrete acts. That is why I take the position that the above enthusiastic words of this sociology professor, whose very name I have forgotten, were the prime moving influence which many years later succeeded in saving Occidental civilization from a catastrophe which would have been worse than death and destruction.

One of these young men was myself, and the other

was my lifelong friend and chum, Carl Benda, who saved his country by solving a tremendously difficult scientific puzzle in a simple way, by sheer reasoning power, and without apparatus. The sociology professor struck a responsive chord in us: for since our earliest years we had wigwagged to each other as Boy Scouts, learned the finger alphabet of the deaf and dumb so that we might maintain communication during school hours, strung a telegraph wire between our two homes, admired Poe's "Gold Bug" together and devised boyish cipher codes in which to send each other postcards when chance separated us. But we had always felt a little foolish about what we considered our childish hobbies, until the professor's words suddenly roused us to the realization that we were a highly civilized pair of youngsters.

Not only did we then and there cease feeling guilty about our secret ciphers and our dots and dashes, but the determination was born within us to make of communication our life's work. It turned out that both of us actually did devote our lives to the cause of communication; but the passing years saw us

engaged in widely and curiously divergent phases of the work. Thirty years later, I was Professor of the Psychology of Language at Columbia University, and Benda was Maintenance Engineer of the Bell Telephone Company of New York City; and on his knowledge and skill depended the continuity and stability of that stupendously complex traffic, the telephone communication of Greater New York.

Since our ambitious cravings were satisfied in our everyday work, and since now ordinarily available methods of communication sufficed our needs, we no longer felt impelled to signal across the house-tops with semaphores nor to devise ciphers that would defy solution. But we still kept up our intimate friendship and our intense interest in our beloved subject. We were just as close chums at the age of fifty as we had been at ten, and just as thrilled at new advances in communication: at television, at the international language, at the supposed signals from Mars.

That was the state of affairs between us up to a year ago. At about that time Benda resigned his position

with the New York Bell Telephone Company to accept a place as the Director of Communication in the Science Community. This, for many reasons, was a most amazing piece of news to myself and to anyone who knew Benda.

Of course, it was commonly known that Benda was being sought by Universities and corporations: I know personally of several tempting offers he had received. But the New York Bell is a wealthy corporation and had thus far managed to hold Benda, both by the munificence of its salary and by the attractiveness of the work it offered him. That the Science Community would want Benda was easy to understand; but, that it could outbid the New York Bell, was, to say the least, a surprise.

Furthermore, that a man like Benda would want to have anything at all to do with the Science Community seemed strange enough in itself. He had the most practical common sense—well-balanced habits of thinking and living, supported by an intellect so clear and so keen that I knew of none to excel it. What the Science Community was, no one knew

exactly; but that there was something abnormal, fanatical, about it, no one doubted.

The Science Community, situated in Virginia, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, had first been heard of many years ago, when it was already a going concern. At the time of which I now speak, the novelty had worn off, and no one paid any more attention to it than they do to Zion City or the Dunkards. By this time, the Science Community was a city of a million inhabitants, with a vast outlying area of farms and gardens. It was modern to the highest degree in construction and operation; there was very little manual labor there; no poverty; every person had all the benefits of modern developments in power, transportation, and communication, and of all other resources provided by scientific progress.

So much, visitors and reporters were able to say.

The rumors that it was a vast socialistic organization, without private property, with equal sharing of all privileges, were never confirmed. It is a curious observation that it was possible, in this country of

ours, for a city to exist about which we knew so little. However, it seemed evident from the vast number and elaboration of public buildings, the perfection of community utilities such as transportation, streets, lighting, and communication, from the absence of individual homes and the housing of people in huge dormitories, that some different, less individualistic type of social organization than ours was involved. It was obvious that as an organization, the Science Community must also be wealthy. If any of its individual citizens were wealthy, no one knew it.

I knew Benda as well as I knew myself, and if I was sure of anything in my life, it was that he was not the type of man to leave a fifty thousand dollar job and join a communist city on an equal footing with the clerks in the stores. As it happens, I was also intimately acquainted with John Edgewater Smith, recently Power Commissioner of New York City and the most capable power engineer in North America, who, following Benda by two or three months, resigned his position, and accepted what his letter termed the place of Director of Power in the Science

Community. I was personally in a position to state that neither of these men could be lightly persuaded into such a step, and that neither of them would work for a small salary.

Benda's first letter to me stated that he was at the Science Community on a visit. He had heard of the place, and while at Washington on business had taken advantage of the opportunity to drive out and see it. Fascinated by the equipment he saw there, he had decided to stay a few days and study it. The next letter announced his acceptance of the position. I would give a month's salary to get a look at those letters now; but I neglected to preserve them. I should like to see them because I am curious as to whether they exhibit the characteristics of the subsequent letters, some of which I now have.

As I have stated, Benda and I had been on the most intimate terms for forty years. His letters had always been crisp and direct, and thoroughly familiar and confidential. I do not know just how many letters I received from him from the Science Community before I noted the difference, but I have one from the

third month of his stay there (he wrote every two or three weeks), characterized by a verbosity that sounded strange for him. He seemed to be writing merely to cover the sheet, trifles such as he had never previously considered worth writing letters about. Four pages of letter conveyed not a single idea. Yet Benda was, if anything, a man of ideas.

There followed several months of letters like that: a lot of words, evasion of coming to the point about anything; just conventional letters. Benda was the last man to write a conventional letter. Yet, it was Benda writing them: gruff little expressions of his, clear ways of looking at even the veriest trifles, little allusion to our common past: these things could neither have been written by anyone else, nor written under compulsion from without. Something had changed Benda.

I pondered on it a good deal, and could think of no hypothesis to account for it. In the meanwhile, New York City lost a third technical man to the Science Community. Donald Francisco, Commissioner of the Water Supply, a sanitary engineer of international

standing, accepted a position in the Science Community as Water Director. I did not know whether to laugh and compare it to the National Baseball League's trafficking in "big names," or to hunt for some sinister danger sign in it. But, as a result of my ponderings, I decided to visit Benda at The Science Community.

I wrote him to that effect, and almost decided to change my mind about the visit because of the cold evasiveness of the reply I received from him. My first impulse on reading his indifferent, lackadaisical comment on my proposed visit was to feel offended, and determine to let him alone and never see him again. The average man would have done that, but my long years of training in psychological interpretation told me that a character and a friendship built during forty years does not change in six months, and that there must be some other explanation for this. I wrote him that I was coming. I found that the best way to reach the Science Community was to take a bus out from Washington. It involved a drive of about fifty miles northwest, through a picturesque section of the

country. The latter part of the drive took me past settlements that looked as though they might be in about the same stage of progress as they had been during the American Revolution. The city of my destination was back in the hills, and very much isolated. During the last ten miles we met no traffic at all, and I was the only passenger left in the bus. Suddenly the vehicle stopped.

"Far as we go!" the driver shouted.

I looked about in consternation. All around were low, wild-looking hills. The road went on ahead through a narrow pass.

"They'll pick you up in a little bit," the driver said as he turned around and drove off, leaving me standing there with my bag, very much astonished at it all.

He was right. A small, neat-looking bus drove through the pass and stopped for me. As I got in, the driver mechanically turned around and drove into the hills again.

"They took up my ticket on the other bus," I said to the driver. "What do I owe you?"

"Nothing," he said curtly. "Fill that out." He handed me a card.

An impertinent thing, that card was. Besides asking for my name, address, nationality, vocation, and position, it requested that I state whom I was visiting in the Science Community, the purpose of my visit, the nature of my business, how long I intended to stay, did I have a place to stay arranged for, and if so, where and through whom. It looked for all the world as though they had something to conceal; Czarist Russia couldn't beat that for keeping track of people and prying into their business. Sign here, the card said.

It annoyed me, but I filled it out, and, by the time I was through, the bus was out of the hills, traveling up the valley of a small river; I am not familiar enough with northern Virginia to say which river it was. There was much machinery and a few people in the broad fields. In the distance ahead was a mass of

chimneys and the cupolas of iron-works, but no smoke.

There were power-line towers with high-tension insulators, and, far ahead, the masses of huge elevators and big, square buildings. Soon I came in sight of a veritable forest of huge windmills.

In a few moments, the huge buildings loomed up over me; the bus entered a street of the city abruptly from the country. One moment on a country road, the next moment among towering buildings. We sped along swiftly through a busy metropolis, bright, airy, efficient looking. The traffic was dense but quiet, and I was confident that most of the vehicles were electric; for there was no noise nor gasoline odor. Nor was there any smoke. Things looked airy, comfortable, efficient; but rather monotonous, dull. There was a total lack of architectural interest. The buildings were just square blocks, like neat rows of neat boxes. But, it all moved smoothly, quietly, with wonderful efficiency.

My first thought was to look closely at the people who swarmed the streets of this strange city. Their faces were solemn, and their clothes were solemn. All seemed intently busy, going somewhere, or doing something; there was no standing about, no idle sauntering. And look whichever way I might, everywhere there was the same blue serge, on men and women alike, in all directions, as far as I could see.

The bus stopped before a neat, square building of rather smaller size, and the next thing I knew, Benda was running down the steps to meet me. He was his old gruff, enthusiastic self.

"Glad to see you, Hagstrom, old socks!" he shouted, and gripped my hand with two of his. "I've arranged for a room for you, and we'll have a good old visit, and I'll show you around this town."

I looked at him closely. He looked healthy and well cared-for, all except for a couple of new lines of worry on his face. Undoubtedly that worn look meant some sort of trouble.

Part 2: The New Religion

(This part is interpolated by the author into Dr. Hagstrom's narrative.)

Every great religion has as its psychological reason for existence the mission of compensating for some crying, unsatisfied human need. Christianity spread and grew among people who were, at the time, persecuted subjects or slaves of Rome; and it flourished through the Middle Ages at a time when life held for the individual chiefly pain, uncertainty, and bereavement. Christianity kept the common man consoled and mentally balanced by minimizing the importance of life on earth and offering compensation afterwards and elsewhere.

A feeble nation of idle dreamers, torn by a chaos of intertribal feuds within, menaced by powerful, conquest-lusting nations from without, Arabia was enabled by Islam, the religion of her prophet Mohammed, to unite all her sons into an intense loyalty to one cause, and to turn her dream-stuff into reality by carrying her national pride and honor

beyond her boundaries and spreading it over half the known world.

The ancient Greeks, in despair over the frailties of human emotion and the unbecomingness of worldly conduct, which their brilliant minds enabled them to recognize clearly but which they found themselves powerless to subdue, endowed the gods, whom they worshipped, with all of their own passions and weaknesses, and thus the foolish behavior of the gods consoled them for their own obvious shortcomings. So it goes throughout all of the world's religions.

In the middle of the twentieth century there were in the civilized world, millions of people in whose lives Christianity had ceased to play any part. Yet, psychically—remember, "psyche" means "soul"—they were just as sick and unbalanced, just as much in need of some compensation as were the subjects of the early Roman empire, or the Arabs in the Middle Ages. They were forced to work at the strained and monotonous pace of machines; they were the slaves, body and soul, of machines; they lived with machines and lived like machines—they were expected to *be*

machines. A mechanized mode of life set a relentless pace for them, while, just as in all the past ages, life and love, the breezes and the blue sky called to them; but they could not respond. They had to drive machines so that machines could serve them. Minds were cramped and emotions were starved, but hands must go on guiding levers and keeping machines in operation. Lives were reduced to such a mechanical routine that men wondered how long human minds and human bodies could stand the restraint. There is a good deal in the writings of the times to show that life was becoming almost unbearable for three-fourths of humanity.

It is only natural, therefore, that Rohan, the prophet of the new religion, found followers more rapidly than he could organize them. About ten years before the visit of Dr. Hagstrom to his friend Benda, Rohan and his new religion had been much in the newspapers. Rohan was a Slovak, apparently well educated in Europe. When he first attracted attention to himself, he was foreman in a steel plant at Birmingham,

Alabama. He was popular as an orator, and drew unheard-of crowds to his lectures.

He preached of *Science* as God, an all-pervading, inexorably systematic Being, the true Center and Motive-Power of the Universe; a Being who saw men and pitied them because they could not help committing inaccuracies. The Science God was helping man become more perfect. Even now, men were much more accurate and systematic than they had been a hundred years ago; men's lives were ordered and rhythmic, like natural laws, not like the chaotic emotions of beasts and savages.

Somehow, he soon dropped out of the attention of the great mass of the public. Of course, he did so intentionally, when his ideas began to crystallize and his plans for his future organization began to form. At first he had a sort of church in Birmingham, called The Church of the Scientific God. There never was anything cheap nor blatant about him. When he moved his church from Birmingham to the Lovett Branch Valley in northern Virginia, he was hardly noticed. But with him went seven thousand people, to

form the nucleus of the Science Community.

Since then, some feature writer for a metropolitan Sunday paper has occasionally written up the Science Community, both from its physical and its human aspects. From these reports, the outstanding bit of evidence is that Rohan believes intensely in his own religion, and that his followers are all loyal worshippers of the Science God. They conceive the earth to be a workshop in which men serve Science, their God, serving a sort of apprenticeship during which He perfects them to the state of ideal machines. To be a perfect machine, always accurate, with no distracting emotions, no getting off the track—that was the ideal which the Great God *Science* required of his worshippers. To be a perfect machine, or a perfect cog in a machine, to get rid of all individuality, all disturbing sentiment, that was their idea of supreme happiness. Despite the obvious narrowness it involved, there was something sublime in the conception of this religion. It certainly had nothing in common with the "Christian Science" that was in vogue during the early years of the twentieth

Century; it towered with a noble grandeur above that feeble little sham.

The Science Community was organized like a machine: and all men played their parts, in government, in labor, in administration, in production, like perfect cogs and accurate wheels, and the machine functioned perfectly. The devotees were described as fanatical, but happy. They certainly were well trained and efficient. The Science Community grew. In ten years it had a million people, and was a worldwide wonder of civic planning and organization; it contained so many astonishing developments in mechanical service to human welfare and comfort that it was considered as a sort of model of the future city. The common man there was provided with science-produced luxuries, in his daily life, that were in the rest of the world the privilege of the wealthy few—but he used his increased energy and leisure in serving the more devotedly, his God, Science, who had made machines. There was a great temple in the city, the shape of a huge dynamo-generator, whose interior was worked out in a scheme of mechanical

devices, and with music, lights, and odors to help in the worship.

What the world knew the least about was that this religion was becoming militant. Its followers spoke of the heathen without, and were horrified at the prevalence of the sin of individualism. They were inspired with the mission that the message of God—scientific perfection—must be carried to the whole world. But, knowing that vested interests, governments, invested capital, and established religions would oppose them and render any real progress impossible, they waited. They studied the question, looking for some opportunity to spread the gospel of their beliefs, prepared to do so by force, finding their justification in their belief that millions of sufferers needed the comforts that their religion had given them. Meanwhile their numbers grew.

Rohan was Chief Engineer, which position was equal in honor and dignity to that of Prophet or High Priest. He was a busy, hard-worked man, black haired and

gaunt, small of stature and fiery eyed; he looked rather like an overworked department-store manager rather than like a prophet. He was finding his hands more full every day, both because of the extraordinary fertility of his own plans and ideas, and because the Science Community was growing so rapidly. Among this heterogenous mass of proselyte strangers that poured into the city and was efficiently absorbed into the machine, it was yet difficult to find executives, leaders, men to put in charge of big things. And he needed constantly more and more of such men.

That was why Rohan went to Benda, and subsequently to others like Benda. Rohan had a deep knowledge of human nature. He did not approach Benda with the offer of a magnanimous salary, but came into Benda's office asking for a consultation on some of the puzzling communication problems of the Science Community. Benda became interested, and on his own initiative offered to visit the Science Community, saying that he had to be in Washington anyway in a few days. When he saw what the

conditions were in the Science Community, he became fascinated by its advantages over New York; a new system to plan from the ground up; no obsolete installation to wrestle with; an absolutely free hand for the engineer in charge; no politics to play; no concessions to antiquated city construction, nor to feeble-minded city administration—just a dream of an opportunity. He almost asked for the job himself, but Rohan was tactful enough to offer it, and the salary, though princely, was hardly given a thought.

For many weeks Benda was absorbed in his job, to the exclusion of all else. He sent his money to his New York bank and had his family move in and live with him. He was happy in his communication problems.

"Give me a problem in communication and you make me happy," he wrote to Hagstrom in one of his early letters.

He had completed a certain division of his work on the Science Community's communication system, and it occurred to him that a few days' relaxation would do him good. A run up to New York would be just the

thing.

To his amazement, he was not permitted to board the outbound bus.

"You'll need orders from the Chief Engineer's office," the driver said.

Benda went to Rohan.

"Am I a prisoner?" he demanded with his characteristic directness.

"An embarrassing situation," the suave Rohan admitted, very calmly and at his ease. "You see, I'm nothing like a dictator here. I have no arbitrary power. Everything runs by system, and you're a sort of exception. No one knows exactly how to classify you. Neither do I. But, I can't break a rule. That is sin."

"What rule? I want to go to New York."

"Only those of the Faith who have reached the third

degree can come and go. No one can get that in less than three years."

"Then you got me in here by fraud?" Benda asked bluntly.

Rohan side-stepped gracefully.

"You know our innermost secrets now," he explained. "Do you suppose there is any hope of your embracing the Faith?"

Benda whirled on his heel and walked out.

"I'll think about it!" he said, his voice snapping with sarcasm.

Benda went back to his work in order to get his mind off the matter. He was a well-balanced man if he was anything; and he knew that nothing could be accomplished by rash words or incautious moves against Rohan and his organization. And on that day he met John Edgewater Smith.

"You here?" Benda gasped. He lost his equilibrium for a moment in consternation at the sight of his fellow-engineer.

Smith was too elated to notice Benda's mood.

"I've been here a week. This is certainly an ideal opportunity in my line of work. Even in Heaven I never expected to find such a chance."

By this time Benda had regained control of himself. He decided to say nothing to Smith for the time being.

They did not meet again for several weeks. In the meantime Benda discovered that his mail was being censored. At first he did not know that his letters, always typewritten, were copied and objectionable matter omitted, and his signature reproduced by the photo-engraving process, separately each time. But before long, several letters came back to him rubber-stamped: "Not passable. Please revise." It took Benda two days to cool down and rewrite the first letter. But outwardly no one would have ever known that there

was anything amiss with him.

However, he took to leaving his work for an hour or two a day and walking in the park, to think out the matter. He didn't like it. This was about the time that it began to be a real issue as to who was the bigger man of the two, Rohan or Benda. But no signs of the issue appeared externally for many months.

John Edgewater Smith realized sooner than Benda that he couldn't get out, because, not sticking to work so closely, he had made the attempt sooner. He looked very much worried when Benda next saw him.

"What's this? Do you know about it?" he shouted as soon as he had come within hearing distance of Benda.

"What's the difference?" Benda replied casually.
"Aren't you satisfied?"

Smith's face went blank.

Benda came close to him, linked arms and led him to

a broad vacant lawn in the park.

"Listen!" he said softly in Smith's ear. "Don't you suppose these people who lock us in and censor our mail aren't smart enough to spy on what we say to each other?"

"Our only hope," Benda continued, "is to learn all we can of what is going on here. Keep your eyes and ears open and meet me here in a week. And now come on; we've been whispering here long enough."

Oddly enough, the first clue to the puzzle they were trying to solve was supplied by Francisco, New York's former Water Commissioner. Why were they being kept prisoners in the city? There must be more reason for holding them there than the fear that information would be carried out, for none of the three engineers knew anything about the Science Community that could be of any possible consequence to outsiders. They had all stuck rigidly to their own jobs.

They met Francisco, very blue and dejected, walking in the park a couple of months later. They had been having weekly meetings, feeling that more frequent rendezvous might excite suspicion. Francisco was overjoyed to see them.

"Been trying to figure out why they want us," he said. "There is something deeper than the excuse they have made; that rot about a perfect system and no breaking of rules may be true, but it has nothing to do with us. Now, here are three of us, widely admitted as having good heads on us. We've got to solve this."

"The first fact to work on," he continued, "is that there is no real job for me here. This city has no water problem that cannot be worked out by an engineer's office clerk. Why are they holding me here, paying me a profligate salary, for a job that is a joke for a grown-up man? There's something behind it that is not apparent on the surface."

The weekly meetings of the three engineers became an established institution. Mindful that their conversation was doubtless the object of attention on

the part of the ruling powers of the city through spies and concealed microphones, they were careful to discuss trivial matters most of the time, and mentioned their problem only when alone in the open spaces of the park.

After weeks of effort had produced no results, they arrived at the conclusion that they would have to do some spying themselves. The great temple, shaped like a dynamo-generator attracted their attention as the first possibility for obtaining information. Benda, during his work with telephone and television installation, found that the office of some sort of ruling council or board of directors were located there. Later he found that it was called the Science Staff. He managed to slip in several concealed microphone detectors and wire them to a private receiver on his desk, doing all the work with his own hands under the pretense of hunting for a cleverly contrived short-circuit that his subordinates had failed to find.

"They open their meeting," he said, reporting several days of listening to his comrades, "with a lot of

religious stuff. They really believe they are chosen by God to perfect the earth. Their fanaticism has the Mohammedans beat forty ways. As I get it from listening in, this city is just a preliminary base from which to carry, forcibly, the gospel of Scientific Efficiency to the whole world. They have been divinely appointed to organize the earth.

"The first thing on the program is the seizure of New York City. And, it won't be long; I've heard the details of a cut-and-dried plan. When they have New York, the rest of America can be easily captured, for cities aren't as independent of each other as they used to be. Getting the rest of the world into their hands will then be merely a matter of routine; just a little time, and it will be done. Mohammed's wars weren't in it with this!"

Francisco and Smith stared at him aghast. These dull-faced, blue-serge clad people did not look capable of it; unless possibly one noted the fiery glint in their eyes. A worldwide Crusade on a scientific basis! The idea left them weak and trembling.

"Got to learn more details before we can do anything," Benda said. "Come on; we've been whispering here long enough; they'll get suspicious." Benda's brain was now definitely pitted against this marvelous organisation.

"I've got it!" Benda reported at a later meeting. "I pieced it together from a few hours listening. Devilish scheme!

"Can you imagine what would happen in New York in case of a break-down in water-supply, electric power, and communication? In an hour there would be a panic; in a day the city would be a hideous shambles of suffering, starvation, disease, and trampling maniacs. Dante's Inferno would be a lovely little pleasure-resort in comparison.

"Also, have you ever stopped to think how few people there are in the world who understand the handling of these vital elements of our modern civilized organization sufficiently to keep them in operation? There you have the scheme. Because they do not want to destroy the city, but merely to threaten it, they are

holding the three of us. A little skilful management will eliminate all other possible men who could operate the city's machinery, except ourselves. We three will be placed in charge. A threat, perhaps a demonstration in some limited section of what horrors are possible. The city is at their mercy, and promptly surrenders.

"An alternative plan was discussed: just a little quiet violence could eliminate those who are now in charge of the city's works, and the panic and horrors would commence. But, within an hour of the city's capitulation, the three of us could have things running smoothly again. And there would be no New York; in its place would be Science Community Number Two. From it they could step on to the next city."

The other two stared at him. There was only one comment.

"They seem to be sure that they could depend on us," Smith said.

"They may be correct," Benda replied. "Would you stand by and see people perish if a turn of your hand could save them? You would for the moment, forget the issue between the old order and the new religion."

They separated, horrified by the ghastly simplicity of the plan.

Just following this, Benda received the telegram announcing the prospective visit of his lifelong friend, Dr. Hagstrom. He took it at once to Rohan.

"Will my friend be permitted to depart again, if he once gets in here?" he demanded with his customary directness.

"It depends on you," Rohan replied blandly. "We want your friend to see our Community, and to go away and carry with him the nicest possible reports and descriptions of it to the world. I wonder, do I make myself clear?"

"That means I've got to feed him taffy while he's here?" Benda asked gruffly.

"You choose to put it indelicately. He is to see and hear only such things about the Science Community as will please the world and impress it favorably. I am sure you will understand that under no other circumstances will he be permitted to leave here."

Benda turned around abruptly and walked out without a word.

"Just a moment," Rohan called after him. "I am sure you appreciate the fact that every precaution will be taken to hear the least word that you say to him during his stay here? You are watched only perfunctorily now. While he is here you will be kept track of carefully, and there will be three methods of checking everything you do or say. I am sure you do not underestimate our caution in this matter."

Benda spent the days intervening between then and the arrival of his friend Hagstrom, closed up in his office, in intense study. He figured things on pieces of paper, committed them to memory, and scrupulously burned the paper. Then he wandered about the park and plucked at leaves and twigs.

Part 3: The Cipher Message

(Related by Peter Hagstrom, Ph.D.)

Benda conducted me personally to a room very much like an ordinary hotel room. He was glad to see me. I could tell that from his grip of welcome, from his pleased face, from the warmth in his voice, from the eager way in which he hovered around me. I sat down on a bed and he on a chair.

"Now tell me all about it," I said.

The room was very still, and in its privacy, following Benda's demonstrative welcome, I expected some confidential revelations. Therefore I was astonished.

"There isn't much to tell," he said gaily. "My work is congenial, fascinating, and there's enough of it to keep me out of mischief. The pay is good, and the life pleasant and easy."

I didn't know what to say for a moment. I had come there with my mind made up that there was

something suspicious afoot. But he seemed thoroughly happy and satisfied.

"I'll admit that I treated you a little shabbily in this matter of letters," he continued. "I suppose it is because I've had a lot of new and interesting problems on my mind, and it's been hard to get my mind down to writing letters. But I've got a good start on my job, and I'll promise to reform."

I was at a loss to pursue that subject any further.

"Have you seen Smith and Francisco?" I asked.

He nodded.

"How do they like it?"

"Both are enthusiastic about the wonderful opportunities in their respective fields. It's a fact: no engineer has ever before had such resources to work with, on such a vast scale, and with such a free hand. We're laying the framework for a city of ten millions, all thoroughly systematized and efficient. There is no

city in the world like it; it's an engineer's dream of Utopia."

I was almost convinced. There was only the tiniest of lurking suspicions that all was not well, but it was not powerful enough to stimulate me to say anything. But I did determine to keep my eyes open.

I might as well admit in advance that from that moment to the time when I left the Science Community four days later, I saw nothing to confirm my suspicions. I met Smith and Francisco at dinner and the four of us occupied a table to ourselves in a vast dining hall, and no one paid for the meal nor for subsequent ones. They also seemed content, and talked enthusiastically of their work.

I was shown over the city, through its neat, efficient streets, through its comfortable dormitories each housing hundreds of families as luxuriously as any modern hotel, through its marvelous factories where production had passed the stage of labor and had assumed the condition of a devoted act of worship. These factory workers were not toiling: they were

worshipping their God, of Whom each machine was a part. Touching their machine was touching their God. This machinery, while involving no new principles, was developed and coordinated to a degree that exceeded anything I had ever seen anywhere else.

I saw the famous Science Temple in the shape of a huge dynamo-generator, with its interior decorations, paintings, carvings, frescoes, and pillars, all worked out on the motive of machinery; with its constant streams of worshippers in blue serge, performing their conventional rites and saying their prayer formulas at altars in the forms of lathes, microscopes, motors, and electron-tubes.

"You haven't become a Science Communist yourself?" I bantered Benda.

There was a metallic ring in the laugh he gave.

"They'd like to have me!" was all he said.

I was rather surprised at the emptiness of the large and well-kept park to which Benda took me. It was

beautifully landscaped, but only a few scattering people were there, lost in its vast reaches.

"These people seem to have no need of recreation," Benda said. "They do not come here much. But I confess that I need air and relaxation, even if only for short snatches. I've been too busy to get away for long at a time, but this park has helped me keep my balance—I'm here every day for at least a few minutes."

"Beautiful place," I remarked. "A lot of strange trees and plants I never saw before—"

"Oh, mostly tropical forms, common enough in their own habitats. They have steam pipes under the ground to grow them. I've been trying to learn something about them. Fancy *me* studying natural history! I've never cared for it, but here, where there is no such thing as recreation, I have become intensely interested in it as a hobby. I find it very much of a rest to study these plants and bugs."

"Why don't you run up to New York for a few days?"

"Oh, the time will come for that. In the meanwhile, I've got an idea all of a sudden. Speaking of New York, will you do me a little service? Even though you might think it silly?"

"I'll do anything I can," I began, eager to be of help to him.

"It has been somewhat of a torture to me," Benda continued, "to find so many of these forms which I am unable to identify. I like to be scientific, even in my play, and reference books on plants and insects are scarce here. Now, if you would carry back a few specimens for me, and ask some of the botany and zoology people to send me their names—"

"Fine!" I exclaimed. "I've got a good-sized pocket notebook I can carry them in."

"Well then, please put them in the order in which I hand them to you, and send me the names by number. I am pretty thoroughly familiar with them, and if you will keep them in order, there is no need for me to keep a list. The first is a blade of this queer grass."

I filed the grass blade between the first two pages of my book.

"The next is this unusual-looking pinnate leaf." He tore off a dry leaflet and handed me a stem with three leaflets irregularly disposed of it.

"Now leave a blank page in your book. That will help me remember the order in which they come."

Next came a flat insect, which, strangely enough, had two legs missing on one side. However, Benda was moving so fast that I had to put it away without comment. He kept darting about and handing me twigs of leaves, little sticks, pieces of bark, insects, not seeming to care much whether they were complete or not; grass-blades, several dagger-shaped locust-thorns, cross-sections of curious fruits, moving so rapidly that in a few moments my notebook bulged widely, and I had to warn him that its hundred leaves were almost filled.

"Well, that ought to be enough," he said with a sigh after his lively exertion. "You don't know how I'll

appreciate your indulging my foolish little whim."

"Say!" I exclaimed. "Ask something of me. This it nothing. I'll take it right over to the Botany Department, and in a few days you ought to have a list of names fit for a Bolshevik."

"One important caution," he said. "If you disturb their order in the book, or even the position on the page, the names you send me will mean nothing to me. Not that it will be any great loss," he added whimsically. "I suppose I've become a sort of fan on this, like the business men who claim that their office work interferes with their golf."

We walked leisurely back toward the big dormitory. It was while we were crossing a street that Benda stumbled, and, to dodge a passing truck, had to catch my arm, and fell against me. I heard his soft voice whisper in my ear:

"Get out of this town as soon as you can!"

I looked at him in startled amazement, but he was

walking along, shaking himself from his stumble, and looking up and down the street for passing trucks.

"As I was saying," he said in a matter-of-fact voice, "we expect to reach the one-and-one-quarter million mark this month. I never saw a place grow so fast."

I felt a great leap of sudden understanding. For a moment my muscles tightened, but I took my cue.

"Remarkable place," I said calmly; "one reads a lot of half-truths about it. Too bad I can't stay any longer."

"Sorry you have to leave," he said, in exactly the right tone of voice. "But you can come again."

How thankful I was for the forty years of playing and working together that had accustomed us to that sort of team-work! Unconsciously we responded to one another's cues. Once our ability to "play together" had saved my life. It was when we were in college and were out on a cross-country hike together; Benda suddenly caught my hand and swung it upward. I recognized the gesture; we were cheerleaders and

worked together at football games, and we had one stunt in which we swung our hands over our heads, jumped about three feet, and let out a whoop. This was the "stunt" that he started out there in the country, where we were by ourselves. Automatically, without thinking, I swung my arms and leaped with him and yelled. Only later did I notice the rattlesnake over which I had jumped. I had not seen that I was about to walk right into it, and he had noticed it too late to explain. A flash of genius suggested the cheering stunt to him.

"*Communication* is a science!" he had said, and that was all the comment there was on the incident.

So now, I followed my cue, without knowing why, nor what it was all about, but confident that I should soon find out. By noon I was on the bus, on my way through the pass, to meet the vehicle from Washington. As the bus swung along, a number of things kept jumbling through my mind: Benda's effusive glee at seeing me, and his sudden turning and bundling me off in a nervous hurry without a word of explanation; his lined and worried face and

yet his insistence on the joys of his work in The Science Community; his obvious desire to be hospitable and play the good host, and yet his evasiveness and unwillingness to chat intimately and discuss important thing as he used to. Finally, that notebook full of odd specimens bulging in my pocket. And the memory of his words as he shook hands with me when I was stepping into the bus:

"Long live the science of communication!" he had said. Otherwise, he was rather glum and silent.

I took out the book of specimens and looked at it. His caution not to disturb the order and position of things rang in my ears. The Science of Communication! Two and two were beginning to make four in my mind. All the way on the train from Washington to New York I could hardly, keep my hands off the book. I had definitely abandoned the idea of hunting up botanists and zoologists at Columbia. Benda was not interested in the names of these things. That book meant something else. Some message. The Science of Communication!

That suddenly explained all the contradictions in his behavior. He was being closely watched. Any attempt to tell me the things he wanted to say would be promptly recognized. He had succeeded brilliantly in getting a message to me. Now, my part was to read it! I felt a sudden sinking within me. That book full of leaves, bugs, and sticks? How could I make anything out of it?

"There's the Secret Service," I thought. "They are skilled in reading hidden messages. It must be an important one, worthy of the efforts of the Secret Service, or he would not have been at such pains to get it to me—

"But no. The Secret Service is skilled at reading hidden messages, but not as skilled as I am in reading my friend's mind. Knowing Benda, his clear intellect, his logical methods, will be of more service in solving this than all the experts of the Secret Service."

I barely stopped to eat dinner when I reached home. I hurried to the laboratory building, and laid out the specimens on white sheets of paper, meticulously

preserving order, position, and spacing. To be on the safe side I had them photographed, asking the photographer to vary the scale of his pictures so that all of the final figures would be approximately the same size. Plate I. shows what I had.

I was all a-tremble when the mounted photographs were handed to me. The first thing I did was to number the specimens, giving each blank space also its consecutive number. Certainly no one could imagine a more meaningless jumble of twigs, leaves, berries, and bugs. How could I read any message out of that?

Yet I had no doubt that the message concerned something of far more importance than Benda's own safety. He had moved in this matter with astonishing skill and breathless caution; yet I knew him to be reckless to the extreme where only his own skill was concerned. I couldn't even imagine his going to this elaborate risk merely on account of Smith and Francisco. Something bigger must be involved.

I stared at the rows of specimens.

"Communication is a science!" Benda had said, and it came back to me as I studied the bent worms and the beetles with two legs missing. I was confident that the solution would be simple. Once the key idea occurred to me I knew I should find the whole thing astonishingly direct and systematic. For a moment I tried to attach some sort of hieroglyphic significance to the specimen forms; in the writing of the American Indians, a wavy line meant water, an inverted V meant a wigwam. But, I discarded that idea in a moment. Benda's mind did not work along the paths of symbolism. It would have to be something mathematical, rigidly logical, leaving no room for guess-work.

No sooner had the key-idea occurred to me than the basic conception underlying all these rows of twigs and bugs suddenly flashed into clear meaning before me. The simplicity of it took my breath away.

"I knew it!" I said aloud, though I was alone. "Very simple."

I was prepared for the fact that each one of the

specimens represented a letter of the alphabet. If nothing else, their number indicated that. Now I could see, so clearly that the photographs shouted at me, that each specimen consisted of an upright stem, and from this middle stem projected side-arms to the right and to the left, and in various vertical locations on each side.

The middle upright stem contained these side-arms in various numbers and combinations. In five minutes I had a copy of the message, translated into its fundamental characters, as shown on Plate II.



Plate I

The first grass-blade was the simple, upright stem; the second, three leaflets on their stem, represented the upright portion with two arms to the left at the top and middle, and one arm to the right at the top; and so on.

That brought the message down to the simple and

straightforward matter of a substitution cipher. I was confident that Benda had no object in introducing any complications that could possibly be avoided, as his sole purpose was to get to me the most readable message without getting caught at it. I recollected now how cautious he had been to hand me no paper, and how openly and obviously he had dropped each specimen into my book; because he knew someone was watching him and expecting him to slip in a message. He had, as I could see now in the retrospect, been conspicuously careful that nothing suspicious should pass from his hands to mine.

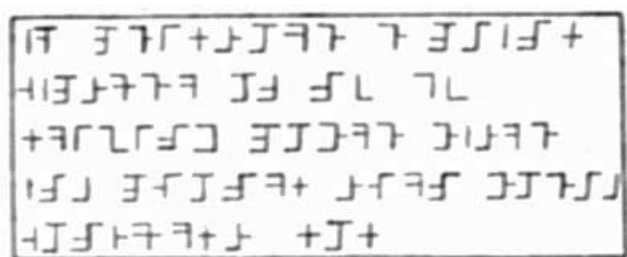


Plate II

Substitution ciphers are easy to solve, especially for those having some experience. The method can be found in Edgar Allen Poe's "Gold Bug" and in a host of its imitators. A Secret Service cipher man could have

read it in an hour. But I knew my friend's mind well enough to find a short-cut. I knew just how he would go about devising such a cipher, in fact, how ninety-nine persons out of a hundred with a scientific education would do it.

If we begin adding horizontal arms to the middle stem, from top to bottom and from left to right, the possible characters can be worked out by the system shown on Plate III.

I	L	T	J	F	d	C	E
i	T	f	J	F	J	J	J
t	F	+	J	F	J	J	J
L	L	L	L	F	±	J	E
F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
L	L	L	L	F	±	±	±
C	T	L	L	F	H	H	H
E	F	F	F	F	±	H	H

Plate III

It is most logical to suppose that Benda would begin with the first sign and substitute the letters of the alphabet in order. That would give us the cipher code shown on Plate IV.

It was all very quick work, just as I had anticipated, once the key-idea had occurred to me. The ease and speed of my method far exceeded that of Poe's method, but, of course, was applicable only to this particular case. Substituting letters for signs out of my diagram, I got the following message:

AM PRISONER R PLANS CAPTURE OF N Y BY
SEIZING POWER WATER AND PHONES THEN
WORLD CONQUEST S O S

I A	7 B	+ C	J D	F E	F F	3 G	E H
7 I	T J	7 K	7 L	7 M	7 N	7 O	7 P
7 Q	7 R	7 S	7 T	7 U	7 V	7 W	7 X
L Y	7 Z	7 1	7 2	7 3	7 4	7 5	7 6
F 7	F 8	F 9	F 0				

Plate IV

Part 4: L'Envoi

(By Peter Hagstrom, M.D.)

My solution of the message practically ends the story. Events followed each other from then on like bullets from a machine-gun. A wild drive in a taxicab brought me to the door of Mayor Anderson at ten o'clock that night. I told him the story and showed him my photographs.

Following that I spent many hours telling my story to and consulting with officers in the War Department. Next afternoon, photographic maps of the Science Community and its environs, brought by airplanes during the forenoon, were spread on desks before us. A colonel of marines and a colonel of aviation sketched plans in notebooks. After dark I sat in a transport plane with muffled exhaust and propellers, slipping through the air as silently as a hawk. About us were a dozen bombing planes, and about fifty transports, carrying a battalion of marines.

I am not an adventure-loving man. Though a cordon

of husky marines about me was a protection against any possible danger, yet, stealing along through that wild valley in the Virginia mountains toward the dark masses of that fanatic city, the silent progress of the long, dark line through the night, their mysterious disappearance, one by one, as we neared the city, the creepy, hair-raising journey through the dark streets—I shall never forget for the rest of my life the sinking feeling in my abdomen and the throbbing in my head. But I wanted to be there, for Benda was my lifelong friend.

I guided them to Rohan's rooms, and saw a dozen dark forms slip in, one by one. Then we went on to the dormitory where Benda lived. Benda answered our hammering at his door in his pajamas. He took in the Captain's automatic, and the bayonets behind me, at a glance.

"Good boy, Hagstrom!" he said. "I knew you'd do it. There wasn't much time left. I got my instructions about handling the New York telephone system today."

As we came out into the street. I saw Rohan handcuffed to two big marines, and rows of bayonets gleaming in the darkness down the streets. Every few moments a bright flare shot out from the planes in the sky, until a squad located the power-house and turned on all the lights they could find.

#47 Jetta Of The Lowlands, By Ray Cummings:

Fantastic and sinister are the lowlands into which Philip Grant descends on his dangerous assignment.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -



Foreword

Have you ever stood on the seashore, with the

breakers rolling at your feet, and imagined what the scene would be like if the ocean water were gone? I have had a vision of that many times. Standing on the Atlantic Coast, gazing out toward Spain, I can envisage myself, not down at the sea-level, but upon the brink of a height. Spain and the coast of Europe, off there upon another height.

Fantastic and sinister are the Lowlands into which Philip Grant descends on his dangerous assignment.

And the depths between? Unreal landscape!
Mysterious realm which now we call the bottom of the sea! Worn and rounded crags; bloated mud-plains; noisome reaches of ooze which once were the cold and dark and silent ocean floor, caked and drying in the sun. And off to the south the little fairy mountain tops of the West Indies rearing their verdured crowns aloft.

"Look around, Chief. See where I am?"

If the ocean water were gone! Can you picture it? A new world, greater in area than all the land we now

have. They would call the former sea-level the zero-height, perhaps. The depths would go down as far beneath it as Mount Everest towers above it.

Aeroplanes would fly down into them.

And I can imagine the settlement of these vast new realms: New little nations being created, born of man's indomitable will to conquer every adverse condition of inhospitable nature.

A novel setting for a story of adventure. It seems so to me. Can you say that the oceans will never drain of their water? That an earthquake will not open a rift—some day in the future—and lower the water into subterranean caverns? The volume of water of all the oceans is no more to the volume of the earth than a tissue paper wrapping on an orange.

Is it too great a fantasy? Why, reading the facts of what happened in 1929, it is already prognosticated. The fishing banks off the Coast of Newfoundland have suddenly sunk. Cable ships repairing a broken cable, snapped by the earthquake of November 18th, 1929, report that for distances of a hundred miles on the

Grand Banks the cables have disappeared into unfathomable depths. And before the subterranean cataclysm, they were within six hundred feet of the surface. And all the bottom of that section of the North Atlantic seems to have caved in. Ten thousand square miles dropped out of the bottom of the ocean! Fact, not fancy.

And so let us enlarge the picture. Let us create the Lowlands—twenty thousand feet below the zero-height—the setting for a tale of adventure. The romance of the mist-shrouded deeps. And the romance of little Jetta.

Chapter 1: The Secret Mission

I was twenty-five years of age that May evening of 2020 when they sent me south into the Lowlands. I had been in the National Detective Service Bureau, and then was transferred to the Customs Department, Atlantic Lowlands Branch. I went alone; it was best, my commander thought. An assignment needing diplomacy rather than a show of force.

It was 9 P. M. when I catapulted from the little stage of Long Island airport. A fair, moonlit evening—a moon just beyond the full, rising to pale the eastern stars. I climbed about a thousand feet, swung over the headlands of the Hook, and, keeping in the thousand-foot local lane, took my course.

My destination lay some thirteen hundred miles southeast of Great New York. I could do a good normal three-ninety in this fleet little Wasp, especially if I kept in the rarer air-pressures over the zero-height. The thousand-foot lane had a southward drift, this night. I was making now well over four hundred; I would reach Nareda soon after midnight.

The Continental Shelf slid beneath me, dropping away as my course took me further from the Highland borders. The Lowlands lay patched with inky shadows and splashes of moonlight. Domes with upstanding, rounded heads; plateaus of naked black rock, ten thousand feet below the zero-height; trenches, like valleys, ridged and pitted, naked in places like a pockmarked lunar landscape. Or again, a pall of black mist would shroud it all, dark curtain of sluggish cloud with moonlight tinging its edges pallid green.

To my left, eastward toward the great basin of the mid-Atlantic Lowlands, there was always a steady downward slope. To the right, it came up over the continental shelf to the Highlands of the United States.

There was often water to be seen in these Lowlands. A spring-fed lake far down in a caldron pit, spilling into a trench; low-lying, land-locked little seas; cañons, some of them dry, others filled with tumultuous flowing water. Or great gashes with water sluggishly flowing, or standing with a heavy slime, and a pall of uprising vapor in the heat of the night.

At 37°N. and 70°W., I passed over the newly named Atlas Sea. A lake of water here, more than a hundred miles in extent. Its surface lay fifteen thousand feet below the zero-height; its depth in places was a full three thousand. It was clear of mist to-night. The moonlight shimmered on its rippled surface, like pictures my father had often shown me of the former oceans.

I passed, a little later, well to the westward of the verdured mountain top of the Bermudas.

There was nothing of this flight novel to me. I had frequently flown over the Lowlands; I had descended into them many times. But never upon such a mission as was taking me there now.

I was headed for Nareda, capital village of the tiny Lowland Republic of Nareda, which only five years ago came into national being as a protectorate of the United States. Its territory lies just north of the mountain Highlands of Haiti, Santo Domingo and Porto Rico. A few hundred miles of tumbled Lowlands, embracing the turgid Nares Sea, whose bottom is the

lowest point of all the Western Hemisphere—some thirty thousand feet below the zero-height.

The village of Nareda is far down indeed. I had never been there. My charts showed it on the southern border of the Nares Sea, at minus twenty thousand feet, with the Mona Valley behind it like a gash in the steep upward slopes to the Highlands of Porto Rico and Haiti.

Nareda has a mixed population of typical Lowland adventures, among which the hardy Dutch predominate; and Holland and the United States have combined their influence in the World Court to give it national identity.

And out of this had arisen my mission now. Mercury—the quicksilver of commerce—so recently come to tremendous value through its universal use in the new antiseptics which bid fair to check all human disease—was being produced in Nareda. The import duty into the United States was being paid openly enough. But nevertheless Hanley's agents believed that smuggling was taking place.

It was to investigate this condition that Hanley was sending me. I had introduction to the Nareda government officials. I was to consult with Hanley by ether-phone in seeking the hidden source of the contraband quicksilver, but, in the main, to use my own judgment.

A mission of diplomacy. I had no mind to pry openly among the people of these Lowland depths, looking for smugglers. I might, indeed, find them too unexpectedly! Over-curious strangers are not welcomed by the Lowlanders. Many have gone into the depths and have never returned....

I was above the Nares Sea, by midnight. I was still flying a thousand feet over the zero-height. Twenty-one thousand feet below me lay the black expanse of water. The moon had climbed well toward the zenith, now. Its silver shafts penetrated the hanging mist-stratas. The surface of the Nares Sea was visible—dark and sullen looking.

I shifted the angles of incidence of the wings, re-set my propeller angles and made the necessary

carburetor adjustments, switching on the supercharger which would supply air at normal zero-height pressure to the carburetors throughout my descent.

I swung over Nareda. The lights of the little village, far down, dwarfed by distance, showed like bleary, winking eyes through the mists. The jagged recesses of the Mona valley were dark with shadow. The Nares Sea lay like some black monster asleep, and slowly, heavily panting. Moonlight was over me, with stars and fleecy white clouds. Calm, placid, atmospheric night was up here. But beneath, it all seemed so mysterious, fantastic, sinister.

My heart was pounding as I put the Wasp into a spiral and forced my way down.

Chapter 2: The Face at the Window

With heavy, sluggish engines I panted down and came to rest in the dull yellow glow of the field lights. A new world here. The field was flat, caked ooze, cracked and hardened. It sloped upward from the shore toward where, a quarter of a mile away, I could see the dull lights of the settlement, blurred by the gathered night vapors.

The field operator shut off his permission signal and came forward. He was a squat, heavy-set fellow in wide trousers and soiled white shirt flung open at his thick throat. The sweat streamed from his forehead. This oppressive heat! I had discarded my flying garb in the descent. I wore a shirt, knee-length pants, with hose and wide-soled shoes of the newly fashioned Lowland design. What few weapons I dared carry were carefully concealed. No alien could enter Nareda bearing anything resembling a lethal weapon.

My wide, thick-soled shoes did not look suspicious for one who planned much walking on the caked Lowland ooze. But those fat soles were cleverly fashioned to

hide a long, keen knife-blade, like a dirk. I could lift a foot and get the knife out of its hidden compartment with fair speed. This I had in one shoe.

In the other, was the small mechanism of a radio safety recorder and image finder, with its attendant individual audiophone transmitter and receiver. A miracle of smallness, these tiny contrivances. With batteries, wires and grids, the whole device could lay in the palm of one's hand. Once past this field inspection I would rig it for use under my shirt, strapped around my chest. And I had some colored magnesium flares.

The field operator came panting.

"Who are you?"

"Philip Grant. From Great New York." I showed him my name etched on my forearm. He and his fellows searched me, but I got by.

"You have no documents?"

"No."

My letter to the President of Nareda was written with invisible ink upon the fabric of my shirt. If he had heated it to a temperature of 180°F. or so, and blown the fumes of hydrochloric acid upon it, the writing would have come out plain enough.

I said, "You'll house and care for my machine?"

They would care for it. They told me the price—swindlingly exorbitant for the unwary traveller who might wander down here.

"All correct," I said cheerfully. "And half that much more for you and your men if you give me good service. Where can I have a room and meals?"

"Spawn," said the operator. "He is the best. Fat-bellied from his own good cooking. Take him there, Hugo."

I had a gold coin instantly ready; and with a few additional directions regarding my flyer, I started off.

It had been hot and oppressive standing in the field; it was infinitely worse climbing the mud-slope into the village; but my carrier, trudging in advance of me along the dark, winding path up the slope, shouldered my bag and seemed not to notice the effort. We passed occasional tube-lights strung on poles. They illumined the heavy rounded crags. A tumbled region, this slope which once was the ocean floor twenty thousand feet below the surface. Rifts were here like gulleys; little buttes reared their rounded, dome heads. And there were caves and crevices in which deep sea fish once had lurked.

For ten minutes or so we climbed. It was past the midnight hour; the village was asleep. We entered its outposts. The houses were small structures of clay. In the gloom they looked like drab little beehives set in unplanned groups, with paths for streets wandering between them.

Then we came to a more prosperous neighborhood. The street widened and straightened. The clay houses, still with rounded dome like tops, stood back from the road, with wooden front fences, and gardens and shrubbery. The windows and doors were like round finger-holes plugged in the clay by a giant hand. Occasionally the windows, dimly lighted, stared like sleeping giant eyes.

There were flowers in all the more pretentious private gardens. Their perfume, hanging in the heavy night air, lay on the village, making one forget the over-curtain of stenching mist. Down by the shore of the Nares Sea, this world of the depths had seemed darkly sinister. But in the village now, I felt it less ominous. The scent of the flowers, the street lined in one place by arching giant fronds drowsing and nodding overhead—there seemed a strange exotic romance to it. The sultry air might almost have been sensuous.

"Much further, Hugo?"

"No. We are here."

He turned abruptly into a gateway, led me through a garden and to the doorway of a large, rambling, one-story building. The news of my coming had preceded me. A front room was lighted; my host was waiting.

Hugo set down my bag, accepted another gold coin; and with a queer sidelong smile, the incentive for which I had not the slightest idea, he vanished. I fronted my host, this Jacob Spawn. Strange fate that should have led me to Spawn! And to little Jetta!

Spawn was a fat-bellied Dutchman, as the field attendant had said. A fellow of perhaps fifty-five, with sparse gray hair and a heavy-jowled, smooth-shaved face from which his small eyes peered stolidly at me. He laid aside a huge, old-fashioned calabash pipe and offered a pudgy hand.

"Welcome, young man, to Nareda. Seldom do we see strangers."

The meal which he presently cooked and served me

himself was lavishly done. He spoke good English, but slowly, heavily, with the guttural intonation of his race. He sat across the table from me, puffing his pipe while I ate.

"What brings you here, young lad? A week, you say?"

"Or more. I don't know. I'm looking for oil. There should be petroleum beneath these rocks."

For an hour I avoided his prying questions. His little eyes roved me, and I knew he was no fool, this Dutchman, for all his heavy, stolid look.

We remained in his kitchen. Save for its mud walls, its concave, dome-roof, it might have been a cookery of the Highlands. There was a table with its tube-light; the chairs; his electron stove; his orderly rows of pots and pans and dishes on a broad shelf.

I recall that it seemed to me a woman's hand must be here. But I saw no woman. No one, indeed, beside Spawn himself seemed to live here. He was reticent of his own business, however much he wanted to pry

into mine.

I had felt convinced that we were alone. But suddenly I realized it was not so. The kitchen adjoined an interior back-garden. I could see it through the opened door oval—a dim space of flowers; a little path to a pergola; an adobe fountain. It was a sort of Spanish patio out there, partially enclosed by the wings of the house. Moonlight was struggling into it. And, as I gazed idly, I thought I saw a figure lurking. Someone watching us.

Was it a boy, observing us from the shadowed moonlit garden? I thought so. A slight, half grown boy. I saw his figure—in short ragged trousers and a shirt-blouse—made visible in a patch of moonlight as he moved away and entered the dark opposite wing of the house.

I did not see the boy's figure again; and presently I suggested that I retire. Spawn had already shown me my bedroom. It was in another wing of the house. It

had a window facing the front; and a window and door back to this same patio. And a door to the house corridor.

"Sleep well, Meester Grant." My bag was here on the table under an electrolier. "Shall I call you?"

"Yes," I said. "Early."

He lingered a moment. I was opening my bag. I flung it wide under his gaze.

"Well, good night. I shall be very comfortable, thanks."

"Good night," he said.

He went out the patio door. I watched his figure cross the moonlit path and enter the kitchen. The noise of his puttering there sounded for a time. Then the light went out and the house and garden fell into silence.

I closed my doors. They sealed on the inside, and I fastened them securely. Then I fastened the

transparent window panes. I did not undress, but lay on the bed in the dark. I was tired; I realized it now. But sleep would not come.

I am no believer in occultism, but there are premonitions which one cannot deny. It seemed now as I lay there in the dark that I had every reason to be perturbed, yet I could not think why. Perhaps it was because I had been lying to this innkeeper stoutly for an hour past, and whether he believed me or not for the life of me I could not now determine.

I sat up on the bed, presently, and adjusted the wires and diaphragms of the ether-wave mechanism. When in place it was all concealed under my shirt. As I switched it on, the electrodes against my flesh tingled a little. But it was absolutely soundless, and one gets used to the tingle. I decided to call Hanley.

The New York wave-sorter handled me promptly, but Hanley's office was dead.

As I sat there in the darkness, annoyed at this, a slight noise forced itself on me. A scratching—a tap—something outside my window.

Spawn, come back to peer in at me?

I slipped noiselessly from the bed. The sound had come from the window which faced the patio. The room, over by the bed, was wholly dark. The moonlight outside showed the patio window as a dimly illumined oval.

For a moment I crouched on the floor by the bed. No sound. The silence of the Lowlands is as heavy and oppressive as its air. I felt as though my heart were audible.

I lifted my foot; extracted my dirk. It opened into a very businesslike steel blade of a good twelve-inch length. I bared the blade. The click of it leaving the flat, hollow handle sounded loud in the stillness of the room.

A moment. Then it seemed that outside my window a

shadow had moved. I crept along the floor. Rose up suddenly at the window.

And stared at a face peering in at me. A small face, framed by short, clustering, dark curls.

A girl!

Chapter 3: In a Moonlit Garden

She drew back from the window like a startled fawn; timorous, yet curious, too, for she ran only a few steps, then turned and stood peering. The moonlight slanted over the western roof of the building and fell on her. A slight, boyish figure in short, tattered trousers and a boy's shirt, open at her slim, rounded throat. The moonlight gleamed on the white shirt fabric to show it torn and ragged. Her arms were upraised; her head, with clustering, flying dark curls, was tilted as though listening for a sound from me. A shy, wild creature. Drawn to my window; tapping to awaken me, then frightened at what she had done.

I opened the garden door. She did not move. I thought she would run, but she did not. The moonlight was on me as I stood there. I was conscious of its etching me with its silver sheen. And twenty feet from me this girl stood and gazed, with startled eyes and parted lips—and white limbs trembling like a frightened animal.

The patio was very silent. The heavy arching fronds

stirred slightly with a vague night breeze; the moonlight threw a lacy dark pattern of them on the gray stone path. The fountain bowl gleamed white in the moonlight behind the girl, and in the silence I could hear the low splashing of the water.

A magic moment. Unforgettable. It comes to some of us just once, but to all of us it comes. I stood with its spell upon me. Then I heard my voice, tense but softly raised.

"Who are you?"

It frightened her. She retreated until the fountain was between us. And as I took a step forward, she retreated further, noiseless, with her bare feet treading the smooth stones the path.

I ran and caught her at the doorway of the flowered pergola. She stood trembling as I seized her arms. But the timorous smile remained, and her eyes, upraised to mine, glowed with misty starlight.

"Who are you?"

This time she answered me. "I am called Jetta."

It seemed that from her white forearm within my grasp a magic current swept from her to me and back again. We humans, for all our clamoring, boasting intellectuality, are no more than puppets in Nature's hands.

"Are you Spawn's daughter?"

"Yes."

"I saw you a while ago, when I was having my meal."

"Yes—I was watching you."

"I thought you were a boy."

"Yes. My father told me to keep away. I wanted to meet you, so I came to wake you up."

"He may be watching us now."

"No. He is sleeping. Listen—you can hear him snore."

I could, indeed. The silence of the garden was broken now by a distant, choking snore.

We both laughed. She sat on the little mossy seat in the pergola doorway And on the side away from the snore. (I had the wit to be sure of that.)

"I wanted to meet you," she repeated. "Was it too bold?"

I think that what we said sitting there with the slanting moonlight on us, could not have amounted to much. Yet for us, it was so important! Vital. Building memories which I knew—and I think that she knew, even then—we would never forget.

"I will be here a week, Jetta."

"I want—I want very much to know you. I want you to tell me about the world of the Highlands. I have a few

books. I can't read very well, but I can look at the pictures."

"Oh, I see—"

"A traveler gave them to me. I've got them hidden. But he was an old man: all men seem to be old—except those in the pictures, and you, Philip."

I laughed. "Well, that's too bad. I'm mighty glad I'm young."

Ah, in that moment, with blessed youth surging in my veins, I was glad indeed!

"Young. I don't remember ever seeing anyone like you. The man I am to marry is not like you. He is old, like father—"

I drew back from her, startled.

"Marry?"

"Yes. When I am seventeen. The law of Nareda—your

Highland law, too, father says—will not let a girl be married until she is that age. In a month I am seventeen."

"Oh!" And I stammered, "But why are you going to marry?"

"Because father tells me to. And then I shall have fine clothes: it is promised me. And go to live in the Highlands, perhaps. And see things; and be a woman, not a ragged boy forbidden to show myself; and—"

I was barely touching her. It seemed as though something—some vision of happiness which had been given me—were fading, were being snatched away. I was conscious of my hand moving to touch hers.

"Why do you marry—unless you're in love? Are you?"

Her gaze like a child came up to meet mine. "I never thought much about that. I have tried not to. It frightened me—until to-night."

She pushed me gently away. "Don't. Let's not talk of him. I'd rather not."

"But why are you dressed as a boy?"

I gazed at her slim but rounded figure in tattered boy's garb—but the woman's lines were unmistakable. And her face, with clustering curls. Gentle girlhood. A face of dark, wild beauty.

"My father hates women. He says they are all bad. It is a sin to wear woman's finery; or it breeds sin in women. Let's not talk of that. Philip, tell me—oh, if you could only realize all the things I want to know. In Great New York, there are theatres and music?"

"Yes," I said. And began telling her about them.

The witching of this moonlit garden! But the moon had presently sunk, and to the east the stars were fading.

"Philip! Look! Why, it's dawn already. I've got to leave you."

I held her just a moment by the hand.

"May I meet you here to-morrow night?" I asked.

"Yes," she said simply.

"Good night—Jetta."

"Good night. You—you've made me very happy."

She was gone, into a doorway of the opposite wing. The silent, empty garden sounded with the distant, reassuring snores of the still sleeping Spawn.

I went back to my room and lay on my bed. And drifted off on a sea of magic memories. The world—my world before this night—now seemed to have been so drab. Empty. Lifeless. But now there was pulsing, living magic in it for me.

I drifted into sleep, thinking of it.

Chapter 4: The Mine in the Cauldron Depths

I was awakened by the tinkling, buzzing call of the radio-diaphragm beneath my shirt. I had left the call open.

It was Hanley. I lay down, eyeing my window which now was illumined by the flat light of dawn.

Hanley's microscopic voice:

"Phil? I've just raised President Markes, there in Nareda. I've been a bit worried about you."

"I'm all right, Chief."

"Well, you'd better see President Markes this morning."

"That was my intention."

"Tell him frankly what you're after. This smuggling of quicksilver from Nareda has got to stop. But take it easy, Phil; don't be reckless. Remember: one little

knife thrust and I've lost a good man!"

I laughed at his anxious tone. That was always Hanley's way. A devil himself, when he was on a trail, but always worried for fear one of his men would come to harm.

"Right enough, Chief. I'll be careful."

He cut off presently.

I did not see Jetta that morning. I told Spawn I was hoping to see President Markes on my petroleum proposition. And at the proper hour I took myself to the government house.

This Lowland village by daylight seemed even more fantastic than shrouded in the shadows of night. The morning sun had dissipated the overhead mists. It was hot in the rocky streets under the weird overhanging vegetation. The settlement was quietly busy with its tropical activities. There were a few

local shops; vehicles with the Highland domestic animals—horses and oxen—panting in the heat; an occasional electro-automatic car.

But there were not many evidences of modernity here. The street and house tube-lights. A few radio image-finders on the house-tops. An automatic escalator bringing ore from a nearby mine past the government checkers to an aero stage for northern transportation. Cultivated fields in the village outskirts operated with modern machinery.

But beyond that, it seemed primitive. Two hundred years back. Street vendors. People in primitive, ragged, tropical garb. Half naked children. I was stared at curiously. An augmenting group of children followed me as I went down the street.

The President admitted me at once. In his airy office, with safeguards against eavesdropping, I found him at his desk with a bank of modern instruments before him.

"Sit down, Grant."

He was a heavy-set, flabby man of sixty-odd, this Lowland President. White hair; and an old-fashioned, rolling white mustache of the sort lately come into South American fashion. He sat with a glass of iced drink at his side. His uniform was stiffly white, and ornate with heavy gold braid, but his neckpiece was wilted with perspiration.

"Damnable heat, Grant."

"Yes, Sir President."

"Have a drink." He swung a tinkling glass before me. "Now then, tell me what is your trouble. Smuggling, here in Nareda. I don't believe it." His eyes, incongruously alert with all the rest of him so fat and lazy, twinkled at me. "We of the Nareda Government watch our quicksilver production very closely. The government fee is a third."

I might say that the Nareda government collected a third on all the mineral and agricultural products of

the country, in exchange for the necessary government concessions. Markes exported this share openly to the world markets, paying the duty exactly like a private corporation.

He added, "You think—Hanley thinks—the smuggling is on too large a scale to be any illicit producer?"

I nodded.

"Then," he said, "it must be one of our recognized mines."

"Hanley thinks it is a recognized mine, falsifying its production record," I explained.

"If that is so, I will discover it," he said. He spoke with enthusiasm and vigor. "For you I shall treat as what you are—the representative of our most friendly government. The figures of our quicksilver production I shall lay before you in just a few days. Let me fill up your glass, Grant."

The lazy tropics. I really did not doubt his sincerity. But I did doubt his ability to cope with any clever criminal. His enthusiasm for action would wilt like his neckpiece, in Nareda's heat. Unless, perhaps, the knowledge that the smuggler was cheating him as well as the United States—*that* might spur him.

He added—and now I got a shock wholly unexpected: "If we think that some recognized producer of quicksilver here is cheating us, it should not be difficult to check up on it. Nareda has only one large cinnabar lode being worked. A private individual: that fellow Jacob Spawn—"

"Spawn?" I exclaimed involuntarily.

"Why, yes. Did not he mention it? His mine is no more than ten kilometers from here—back on the southern slope."

"He didn't mention it," I said.

"So? That is strange; but he is a secretive Dutchman by nature. He specializes in prying into the other

fellow's affairs. Hm-m."

He fell into a reverie while I stared at him. Spawn, the big—the only big—quicksilver producer here!

The President interrupted my startled thoughts. "I hope you did not intimate your real purpose?"

"No."

We both turned at the sound of an opening door. Markes called, "Ah, come in Perona! Are you alone? Good! Close that slide. Here is Chief Hanley's representative." He introduced us all in a breath. "This is interesting, Perona. Damnably interesting. We're being cheated, what? It looks that way. Sit down, Perona."

This was Greko Perona. Nareda's Minister of Internal Affairs. Spawn had mentioned him to me. A South American. A man in his fifties. Thin and darkly saturnine, with iron-gray hair, carefully plastered to

cover his half-bald head. He sat listening to the President's harangue, twirling the upturned waxen ends of his artificially black mustache. A wave of perfume enveloped him. A ladies' courtier, this Perona by the look of him. His white uniform was immaculate, carefully tailored and carefully worn to set off at its best his still trim and erect figure.

"Well," he said, when at last the President paused, "of a surety something must be done."

Perona seemed not excited, rather more carefully watchful, of his own words, and of me. His small dark eyes roved me.

"What is it you would plan to do about it, Señorito?"

An irony was in that Latin diminutive! He spread his pale hands. "Your United States officials perhaps exaggerate. I am very doubtful if we have smugglers here in Nareda."

"Unless it is Spawn," the President interjected.

Perona frowned slightly. But his suave manner remained. "Spawn? Why Spawn?"

"You need not take offense, Perona," Markes retorted. "We are discussing this before an envoy of the United States, sent here to consult with us. We have nothing to hide."

Markes turned to me. And his next words were like a bomb exploding at my feet.

"Perona *is* offended, Grant. But I promise you, his natural personal prejudice will not affect my investigation. Of course he is prejudiced, since he is to marry Spawn's daughter, the little Jetta."

I started involuntarily. This pomaded old dotard! This perfumed, ancient dandy!

For all the importance of my mission in Nareda my thoughts had been subconsciously more upon Jetta—far more—than upon smugglers of quicksilver. This

palsied popinjay! This, the reality of the specter which had been between Jetta and me during all that magic time in the moonlit garden!

This suave old rake! Betrothed to that woodland pixie whose hand I had held and to whom I had sung love songs in the magic flower-scented moonlight only a few hours ago! And whom I had promised to meet there again to-night!

This, then, was my rival!

Nothing of importance transpired during the remainder of that interview. Markes reiterated his intention of making a complete governmental investigation at once. To which Perona suavely assented.

"*Por Dios Señorito*," he said to me, "we would not have your great government annoyed at Nareda. If there are smugglers, we will capture them of a certainty."

From the Government House, it now being almost time for the midday meal, I returned to Spawn's.

The rambling mud walls of the Inn stood baking in the noonday heat when I arrived. The outer garden drowsed; there seemed no one about. I went through the main door oval into the front public room, where first I had met Spawn. He was not here now, nor was Jetta.

A sudden furtiveness fell upon me. With noiseless steps I went the length of the dim, padded interior corridor to my own room. My belongings seemed undisturbed; a vague idea that Spawn might have seized this opportunity to ransack them had come to me. But it seemed not; though if he had he would have found nothing.

I stood for a moment listening at my patio window. I could see the kitchen from here; there was no one in it. I started back for the living room. That furtive instinct was still on me. I made no noise. And abruptly I heard Spawn's voice, floating out softly in the hushed silence of the house.

"So, Perona?"

A brief silence, in which it seemed that I could hear a tiny aerial answer. Then Spawn again. A startled oath.

"De duvel! You say—"

I stood frozen, listening.

"She is here.... Yes, I will keep her close. I am no fool, Perona."

Spawn's laugh was like a growl. "Later to-day, yes. Fear not! I am no fool. I will be careful of it."

Spawn, talking by private audiphone, to Perona. The colloquy came to an abrupt end.

"... Might eavesdrop? By hell, you are right!"

I heard the click as Spawn and Perona broke connection. Spawn came from his room. But he was not quick enough. I slipped away before he saw me.

In the living room I had time to be calmly seated with a lighted cigarette. His approaching heavy footsteps sounded. He came in.

"Oh—Grant."

"Good noon, friend Spawn. I'm hungry." I grinned at him. "I understand my bargain with you included a noonday meal. Does it?"

He eyed me suspiciously. "Have you been waiting here long?"

"No. I just came in."

He led me to the kitchen. He apologized for the informality of his hotel service: visitors were so infrequent. But the good quality of his food would make up for it.

"Right," I agreed. "Your food is marvelous, friend Spawn."

There was a difference in Spawn's manner toward me now. He seemed far more wary. Outwardly he was in a high good humor. He asked nothing concerning my morning at the Government House. He puttered over his electron-stove, making me help him; he cursed the heat; he said one could not eat in such heat as this; but the meal he cooked, and the way he sat down opposite me and attacked it, belied him.

He was acting; but so was I. And perhaps I deceived him as little as he deceived me. We avoided the things which were uppermost in the thoughts of us both. But, when we had very nearly finished the meal, I decided to try him out. I said suddenly, out of a silence:

"Spawn, why didn't you tell me you were a producer of quicksilver?" I shot him a sharp glance. "You are, aren't you?"

It took him by surprise, but he recovered himself instantly. "Yes. Are you interested?"

I tried another shot. "What surprised me was that a

wealthy mine owner—you are, aren't you?—should bother to keep an unprofitable hotel. Why bother with it, Spawn?"

I thought I knew the answer: he wanted Nareda's visitors under his eyes.

"That is a pleasure." There was irony in his tone. "I am a lonesome man. I like—interesting companionship, such as yours, young Grant."

It was on my tongue to hint at his daughter. But I thought better of it.

"I am going to the mine now," he said abruptly.

"Would you like to come?"

"Yes," I smiled. "Thanks."

I wanted to see his mine. But that he should be eager to show it, surprised me. I wondered what purpose he could have in that. I had a hint of it later; for when we

took his little autocar and slid up the winding road into the bloated crags towering on the slope behind Nareda, he told me calmly:

"I shall have to put you in charge of my mine commander. I am busy elsewhere this afternoon. You will see the mine just as well without me."

He added. "I must go to the Government House: President Markes wants a report on my recent production."

So that was what Perona had told him over the audiphone just before our noonday meal?

It was an inferno of shadows and glaring lights, this underground cavern. As modern mining activities go, it was small and primitive. No more than a dozen men were here, beside the sweating pudgy mine commander who was my guide. A voluble fellow; of what original nationality I could not determine.

We stood watching the line of carts dumping the ore onto the endless lifting-belt. It went a hundred feet or

so up and out of the cavern's ascending shaft, to fall with a clatter into the bins above the smelter.

"Rich ore," I said. "Isn't it?"

The cinnabar ran like thick blood-red veins in the rock.

"Rich," said the mine commander. "That it is. Rich. But who does it make rich? Only Spawn, not me." He waved his arms, airing his grievance with which for an hour past he had regaled me. "Only Spawn. For me, a dole each week."

The smelter was in a stone building—one of a small group of mine houses which stood in a cauldron depression above excavations. Rounded domes of rock towered above them. The sun, even at this tri-noon hour, was gone behind the heights above us. The murky shadows of night were gathering, the mists of the Lowlands settling. The tube-lights of the mine, strung between small metal poles, winked on like bleary eyes.

"Of a day soon I will fling this job to hell—"

I was paying scant attention to the fellow's tirade. Could there be smuggling going on from this mine? It all seemed to be conducted openly enough. If the production record were being falsified I felt that this dissatisfied mine commander was not aware of it. He showed me the smelter, where the quicksilver condensed in the coils and ran with its small luminous silver streams into the vats.

He was called away momentarily by one of his men, leaving me standing there. I was alone; no one seemed in sight, or within hearing. In the shadow of the condensers I drew out my transmitter and called Hanley.

I got him within a minute.

"Chief!"

"Yes, Phil. I hoped you'd call me. Didn't want to

chance it, raising you when you might not be alone."

I told him swiftly what I had done; where I was now.

And Hanley said, with equal briskness: "I've an important fact. Just had Markes on secret wavelength. He tells me that Spawn has been saving up his quicksilver for six months past. He's got several hundred thousand dollar-standards' worth of it in ingots there right now."

"Here at the mine?"

"Yes. Got them all radiuminized, ready for the highest priced markets. Markes says he is scheduled to turn them over to the government checkers to-morrow. The Nareda government takes its share to-morrow; then Spawn exports the rest."

I heard a footstep. "Off, Chief! I'll call you later!"

I clicked off summarily. The little grid was under my shirt when the mine commander rejoined me.

For another half hour or so I hovered about the smelter house. A treasure of quicksilver ingots here? I mentioned it casually to my companion. He shot me a sharp glance.

"Spawn has told you that?"

"I heard it."

"His business. We do not talk of that. Never can I tell what Spawn will choose to take offense at."

We rambled upon other subjects. Later, he said, "We work not at night. But Spawn, he is here often at night, with his friend, the Señor Perona."

That caught my attention. "I met Perona this morning," I said quickly. "Is he a partner of Spawn's?"

"If he is so, I never was told it. But much he is here—at night."

"Why at night?"

The fellow really knew nothing. Or if he did, he was diplomatic enough not to jeopardize his post by babbling of it to me. He said:

"Perona is Spawn's friend. Why not? His daughter to marry: that will make him a son-in-law." He laughed. "An old fool, but not such a fool either. Spawn is rich."

"His daughter. Has he a daughter?"

"The little Jetta. You haven't seen her? Well, that is not strange. Spawn keeps her very hidden. A mystery about it: all Nareda talks, but no one knows; and Spawn does not like questions."

Spawn abruptly joined us! He came from the black shadows of the lurid smelter room. Had he heard us discussing Jetta? I wondered.

Chapter 5: Mysterious Meeting

"Ah, Grant—have you enjoyed yourself?" He dismissed his subordinate. "I was detained. Sorry."

He was smoothly imperturbable. "Have you seen everything? Quite a little plant I have here? We shut down early to-day. I will make ready to close."

I followed him about while he arranged for the termination of the day's activities. The clatter of the smelter house was presently still; the men departing. Spawn and I were the last to leave, save for the eight men who were the mine's night guards. They were stalwart, silent fellows, armed with electronic needle projectors.

The lights of the mine went low until they were mere pencil points of blue illumination in the gloom. The eery look of the place was intensified by the darkness and silence of the abnormally early nightfall. The fantastic crags stood dark with formless shadow.

Spawn stopped to speak to one of the guards. The

men wore a gold-trimmed, but now dirty, white linen uniform, wilted by the heat—the uniform of Nareda's police. I remarked it to him.

"The government lent me the men," Spawn explained. "Of an ordinary time I have only one guard."

"But this then, is not an ordinary time?" I hinted.

He looked at me sharply. And upon sudden impulse, I added:

"President Markes said something about you having a treasure here. Radiumized quicksilver."

It was evidently Spawn's desire to appear thoroughly frank with me. He laughed. "Well, then, if Markes has told you, then might I not as well admit it? The treasure is here, indeed yes. Will you like to see it?"

He led me into a little strong room adjoining the smelter coil-rectifiers. He flashed his hand

searchlight. On the floor, piled crosswise, were small moulded bars of refined quicksilver—dull, darkened silver ingots of this world's most precious metal.

"Quite a treasure, Grant, here to-night. See, it is radiumized."

He snapped off his torch. In the darkness the little bars glowed irridescent.

"To-morrow I will divide with our Nareda government. One-third for them. And my own share I will export: to Great New York, this shipment. Already I have the order for it."

He added calmly, "The duty is high, Grant. Too bad your big New York market is protected by so large a duty. With my cost of production—these accursed Lowland workmen who demand so much for their labor, and a third of all I produce taken by Nareda—there is not much in it for me."

He had re-lighted the room. I could feel his eyes on me, but I said nothing. It was obvious to me now that

he knew I was a government customs agent.

I said, "This certainly interests me, friend Spawn. I'll tell you why some other time."

We exchanged significant glances, both of us smiling.

"Well can I guess it, young Grant. So here is my treasure. Without the duty I would soon be wealthy. Chut! Why should I roll in a pity for myself? There is a duty and I am an honest man, so I pay it."

I said, "Aren't you afraid to leave this stored here?" I knew that this pile of ingots—the quicksilver in its radiumized form—was worth four or five hundred thousand dollars in American gold-coin at the very least.

Spawn shrugged. "Who would attack it? But of course I will be glad to be rid of it. It is a great responsibility—even though it carries international insurance, to protect my and the Nareda Government share."

He was sealing up the heavy barred portals of the little strong-room. There was an alarm-detector, connected with the office of Nareda's police commander. Spawn set the alarm carefully.

"I have every safeguard, Grant. There is really no danger." He added, as though with sudden thought. "Except possibly one—a depth bandit named De Boer. Ever you have heard of him?"

"Yes. I have."

We climbed into Spawn's small automatic vehicle. The lights of the mine faded behind us as we coasted the winding road down to the village.

"De Boer," said Spawn. "A fellow who lives by his wits in the depths. Near here, perhaps: who knows? They say he has many followers—fifty—a hundred, perhaps—outlaws: a cut-belly band it must be."

"Didn't he once take a hand in Nareda's politics?" I suggested.

Spawn guffawed. "That is so. He was once what they called a patriot here. He thought he might be made President. But Markes ran him out. Now he is a bandit. I have believe that American mail-ship which sank last year in the cauldron north of the Nares Sea—you remember how it was attacked by bandits?—I have always believe that was De Boer's band."

We rolled back to Nareda. Spawn's manner had again changed. He seemed even more friendly than before. More at his ease with me. We had supper, and smoked together in his living room for half an hour afterward. But my thoughts were more on Jetta than on her father. There was still no evidence of her about the premises. Ah, if I only had known what had taken place there at Spawn's that afternoon while I was at the mine!

Soon after supper Spawn yawned. "I think I shall go to bed." His glance was inquiring. "What are you going to do?"

I stood up. "I'll go to bed, too. Markes wants to see me early in the morning. You'll be there, Spawn?"

"Yes. We will go together."

It was still no more than eight o'clock in the evening. Spawn followed me to my bedroom, and left me at its door.

"Sleep well. I will call you in time."

"Thanks, Spawn."

I wondered if there were irony in his voice as he said good night. No one could have told.

I did not go to bed. I sat listening to the silence of my room and the garden, and Spawn's retreating footsteps. He had said he was sleepy, but nevertheless I presently heard him across the patio. He was apparently in the kitchen, cleaning away our meal, to judge by the rattling of his pans. It was as yet not

much after hour eight of the evening. The hours before my tryst with Jetta seemed an interminable time to wait. She might not come, though, I was afraid, until midnight.

At all events I felt that I had some hours yet. And it occurred to me that the evening was not yet too far advanced for me to call upon Perona. He lived not far from here, I had learned. I wanted to see this beribboned old Minister of Nareda's Internal Affairs.

I would use as my excuse a desire to discuss further the possibility of smuggler being here in Nareda.

I put on my hat and a light jacket, verified that my dirk was readily accessible and sealed up my room. Spawn apparently was still in the kitchen. I got out of the house, I felt sure, without him being aware of it.

The Nareda streets were quiet. There was a few pedestrians, and none of them paid much attention to me. It was no more than ten minutes walk to Perona's

home.

His house was set back from the road, surrounded by luxurious vegetation. There was a gate in front of the garden, and another, a hundred feet or so along a small alleyway which bordered the ground to my left. I was about to enter the front gate when sight of a figure passing under the garden foliage checked me. It was a man, evidently coming from the house and headed toward the side gate. He went through a shaft of light that slanted from one of the lower windows of the house.

Perona! I was sure it was he. His slight figure, with a gay, tri-cornered hat. A short tasseled cloak hanging from his shoulders. He was alone; walking fast. He evidently had not seen me. I crouched outside the high front wall, and through its lattice bars I saw him reach the side gate, open it swiftly, pass through, and close it after him. There was something furtive about his manner, for all he was undisguised. I decided to follow him.

The front street fortunately was deserted at the

moment. I waited long enough for him to appear. But he did not; and when I ran to the alley corner—chancing bumping squarely into him—I saw him far down its dim, narrow length where it opened into the back street which bordered his grounds to the rear. He turned to the left and shot a swift glance up the alley, which I anticipated, provided for by drawing back. When I looked again, he was gone.

I have had some experience at playing the shadow. But it was not easy here along the almost deserted and fairly bright Nareda streets. Perona was walking swiftly down the slope toward the outskirts of the village where it bordered upon the Nares Sea. For a time I thought he was headed for the landing field, but at a cross-path he turned sharply to the right, away from the field, whose sheen of lights I could now see down the rocky defile ahead of me. There was nothing but broken, precipitous rocky country ahead of him, into which this path he had taken was winding. What could Perona, a Minister, be engaged in, wandering off alone into this black, deserted region?

It was black indeed, by now. The village was soon far behind us. A storm was in the night air; a wind off the sea; solid black clouds overhead blotted out the moon and stars. The crags and buttes and gullies of this tumbled area loomed barely visible about me. There were times when only my feel of the path under my feet kept me from straying, to fall into a ravine or crevice.

I prowled perhaps two hundred yards behind Perona. He was using a tiny hand-flash now; it bobbed and winked in the darkness ahead, vanishing sometimes when a curve in the path hid him, or when he plunged down into a gully and up again. I had no search-beam. Nor would I have dared use one: Perona could too obviously have seen that someone was following him.

There was half a mile of this, I think, though it seemed interminable. I could hear the sea, rising with the wind, pounding against the rocks to my left. Then, a distance ahead, I saw lights moving. Perona's—and others. Three or four of them. Their combined glow made a radiance which illumined the path and rocks. I could see the figures of several men whom Perona

had joined. They stood a moment and then moved off. To the right a ragged cliff wall towered the path. The spots of light bobbed toward it. I caught the vague outline of a huge broken opening, like a cave mouth in the cliff. The lights were swallowed by it.

I crept cautiously forward.

Chapter 6: Ether-wave Eavesdropping

I had thought it was a cavern mouth into which the men had disappeared, but it was not. I reached it without any encounter. It loomed above me, a great archway in the cliff—an opening fifty feet high and equally as broad. And behind it was a roofless cave—a sort of irregularly circular bowl, five hundred feet across its broken, boulder-strewn, caked-ooze floor.

I crouched in the blackness under the archway. The moon had risen and its light filtered with occasional shafts through the swift-flying black clouds overhead. The scene was brighter. It was dark in the archway, but a glow of moonlight in the bowl beyond showed me its tumbled floor and the precipitous, eroded walls, like a crater-rim, which encircled it.

The men whom Perona had met were across the bowl near its opposite side. I could see the group of them, five hundred feet from me, by a little moonlight that was on them; also by the sheen from the spots of their hand-lights. Four or five men, and Perona. I thought I distinguished the aged Minister sitting on a rock, and

before him a huge giant man's figure striding up and down. Perona seemed talking vehemently: the men were listening; the giant paused occasionally in his pacing to fling a question.

All this I saw with my first swift glance. My attention was drawn from the men to an object near them. The nose of a flyer showed between two upstanding crags on the floor of the valley. Only its forward horizontal propellers and the tip of its cabin and landing gear were visible, but I could guess that it was a fair-sized ship.

The men were too far away for me to hear them. Could I get across the floor of the bowl without discovery? It did not seem so. The accursed moonlight became stronger every moment. Then I saw a guard—a dark figure of a man showing just inside the archway, some seventy feet from me. He was leaning against a rock, facing my way. In his hands was a thick-barreled electronic projector.

I could not advance: that was obvious. The moonlight lay in a clear clean patch beyond the archway. The

guard stood at its edge.

A minute or two had passed. Perona was still talking vehemently. I was losing it: not a word was audible. Yet I felt that if I could hear Perona now, much that Hanley and I wanted to learn would be made clear to us. My little microphone receiver could be adjusted for audible air vibrations. I crouched and held it cautiously above my head with its face, like a listening ear, turned toward the distant men. My single-vacuum amplification brought up the sound until their voices sounded like whispers murmured in my ear-grids.

"De Boer, listen to me—"

Perona's voice. They must have been chance words spoken loudly. It was all I could hear, save tantalizing, unintelligible murmurs.

So this was De Boer, the bandit! The big fellow pacing before Perona. I wanted infinitely more, now, to hear

what was being said.

I thought of Hanley. There might be a way of handling this.

I had to murmur very softly. I was hidden in these shadows from the guard's sight, but he was close enough to hear my normal voice. I chanced it. A wind was sucking through the archway with an audible whine: the guard might not hear me.

"X. 2. AY."

The sorter's desk. He came in. I murmured Hanley's rating. "Rush. Danger. Special."

It went swiftly through. Hanley, thank Heaven, was at his desk.

I plugged in my little image finder; held it over my head; turned it slowly. I whispered:

"Look around, Chief. See where I am? Near Nareda; couple of miles out. Followed Perona; he met these men.

"The big one is De Boer, the depth bandit. I can't hear what they're saying—but I can send you their voice murmurs."

"Amplify them all you can. Relay them up," Hanley ordered.

I caught Perona's murmurs again; I swung them through my tiny transformers and off my transmitter points into the ether.

"Hear them, Chief?"

"Yes. I'll try further amplification."

It was what I had intended. Hanley's greater power might be able to amplify those murmurs into audible strength.

"I'm getting them, Phil."

He swung them back to me. Grotesquely distorted, blurred with tube-hum and interference crackle, they roared in my ear-grids so loudly that I saw the nearby guard turn his head as though startled. Listening....

But evidently he concluded it was nothing.

I cut down the volume. Hanley switched in.

"By God. Phil! This—"

"Off, Chief! Let me hear, too!"

He cut away. Those distorted voices! They came from Perona and the bandits to me across this five hundred foot moonlit bowl; from me, thirteen hundred miles up to Hanley's instruments; and back to me once more. But the words, most of them, now were distinguishable.

Perona's voice: "I tell it to you. De Boer ... and a good chance for you to make the money."

"But will they pay?"

"Of course they will pay. Big. A ransom princely."

"And why, Perona? Why princely? Who is this fellow—so important?"

"He is with rich business men, I tell to you."

"A private citizen?"

"... And a private citizen, of a surety. Fool! Have you come to be a coward, De Boer?"

"Pah!"

"Well then I tell you it is a lifetime chance. All of it I have arranged. If he was a government agent, that would be very different, for they are very keen, this administration of the American government, to protect their agents. But their private citizens—it is a scandal! Do you not ever pick the newscasters' reports, De Boer? Has it not been a scandal that this administration does very little for its citizens abroad?"

"And you want to get rid of this fellow? Why, Perona?"

"That is not your concern. The ransom is to be all yours. Make away with him—in the depths somewhere. Demand your ransom. Fifty thousand gold-standards! Demand it of me. Of Nareda!"

"And you will pay it?"

"I promise it. Nareda will pay it—and Nareda will collect the ransom from the American capitalists. Very easy."

His voice fell lower. "Between us, you will get the ransom money from Nareda—and then kill your prisoner if you like. Call it an accident; what matter? And dead men are silent men, De Boer. I will see that no real pursuit is made after you."

They were talking about me! It was obvious. Questions rushed at me. Perona, planning with this bandit to abduct me. Hold me for ransom. Or kill me!

But Perona knew that I was not a private citizen. He was lying to De Boer, to persuade him.

Why this attack upon me? Was Spawn in on it? Why were they so anxious to get rid of me? Because of Jetta? Or because I was dangerous, prying into their smuggling activities. Or both?

De Boer: "... Get up with my men through the streets to Spawn's house? You have it fixed?"

"Yes. Over the route from here as I told you, there are no police to-night. I have ordered them off. In the garden. *Dios!* You offer so many objections! I tell you all is fixed. In an hour, half an hour; even now, perhaps, the Americano is in the garden. The girl has promised to meet him there. He will be there, fear not. Will you go?"

"Yes."

"Hah! That is the De Boer I have always admired!"

I could see them in the moonlight across the pit.

Perona now standing up, the giant figure of the bandit towering over him.

Hanley's microscopic voice cut in: "Getting it, Phil? To seize you for ransom!"

"Yes. I hear it."

"This girl. Who—?"

"Wait, Chief. Off—"

De Boer: "I will do it! Fifty thousand."

Perona: "An hour now. Spawn will be at his home asleep."

"And you will go to the mine?"

"Yes. Now, from here. You seize this fellow Grant, and then attack the mine. Our regular plan, De Boer. This does not change it."

Attack Spawn's mine! Half a million of treasure was there to-night!

Perona was chuckling: "You give Spawn's guards the signal. They are all my men—in my pay. They will run away when you appear."

Hanley cut in again. "By the gods, they're after that treasure! Phil, listen to me! you must...." His voice faded.

"Chief, I can't hear you!"

Hanley came again: "... And I will notify Porto Rico. The local patrol will be about ready to leave."

"Or notify Nareda headquarters," I suggested. "If you can get President Markes, he can send some police to the mine—"

"And find all Nareda's police bribed by Perona? I'll get Porto Rico. We have an hour or two; the patrol can reach you in an hour."

The bandits were preparing to leave here. Two or three of them had gone to the flyer. Perona and De Boer were parting.

"... Well, that is all, De Boer."

"Right, Señor Perona. I will start shortly."

"On foot, by the street route to Spawn's—"

Hanley's hurried voice came back: "I've sent the call to Porto Rico."

The guard had moved again. He was no more than forty feet away from me now—standing up gazing directly toward where I was crouching over my tiny instruments in the shadows of the rocky arch. A footstep sounded behind me, on the path outside the arch. Someone approaching!

A tiny light bobbing!

Then a voice calling, "Perona! De Boer!"

The guard took a step forward; stopped, with levelled weapon.

Then the voice again: it was so loud it went through my opened relay, flashed up to New York, and blew out half a dozen of Hanley's attuned vacuums.

"Perona!"

Spawn's voice! He was coming toward me! I lay prone, my little grids switched off. I held my breath.

Spawn's figure went past within ten feet of me. But he did not see me.

He met the guard. "Hello, Gutierrez. The damned American—"

Perona and De Boer came hastening. Spawn joined them in the moonlight just beyond the archway, close enough for me to hear them plainly. Spawn was out of breath, panting from his swift walk. He greeted them

with a roar.

"The American—he is gone!"

"*Dios!* Gone where, Spawn?"

"The hell—how do I know, Perona? He is gone from his room—from the house. Maybe he followed you here? Did he?"

Chapter 7: Behind the Sealed Door

There was a moment when I think I might have escaped unseen from that archway. But I was too amazed at Spawn's appearance to think of my own situation. I had believed that Perona was plotting against Spawn, meeting these bandits in this secret place; I had just heard them planning to attack Spawn's mine—to rob it of the treasure doubtless, which I knew was stored there.

But I realized now it was not a plot against Spawn. He had come here swiftly to join Perona and tell him that I, their intended victim, was missing. He had greeted the bandit guard by name. He seemed, indeed, as well known to these bandits as Perona himself.

They stood now in a group some thirty feet away from me. I could hear their excited voices perfectly clearly. My instruments were off; but I recall that as I listened to Spawn I was also aware of the tingle of the electrode-band on my chest—Hanley, vigorously calling me back to find out why I had so summarily disconnected.

"I took him to his room," Spawn was explaining excitedly. "De duvel, why should I have sealed him in? How could I? He is no child!"

De Boer laughed caustically. "And so he has walked away from you? I think I am a fool to mix myself with you two."

Perona retorted, "I have made you rich, De Boer. Think what you like; to-night is the end of our partnership. Only, you do what I have told you to-night."

"Hah! How can I? Your American has flown his trap."

This guard—this Gutierrez, as Spawn had called him—was listening with interest. De Boer's several other men were gathered there. I felt myself safe where I was, for the moment at least.

I cut Hanley in. "Chief, they're closer! Spawn has come! They've missed me! I'll relay what they're

saying, but you step it down; there's too much volume."

"You're all right, Phil? Thank Heaven for that! Something blew my vacuums."

"Chief, listen—here they are—"

Perona: "But he will be back. In the garden now, no doubt, with Jetta."

De Boer: "Ah—the little Jetta! So she is there, Spawn? Not in years have you spoken of your daughter. A young lady now, I suppose. Is it so?"

Spawn cursed. "We leave her out of this. You follow the Señor's plan."

"Come to your house? You think the bird will be there for me to seize?"

"Yes," Perona put in. "You go there; in an hour. Then to the mine."

Spawn undoubtedly was in this plot to attack his mine! He said, "At the mine we have arranged everything. Damn this American! But for Perona I would not bother with him."

"But you will bother," Perona interjected.

De Boer laughed again. "I would be witless could I not figure this! He is a young man, and so handsome he has frightened you with the little Jetta! Is that it, Perona? Jealous, eh?"

I had been holding the image finder so that Hanley might see them. Hanley's voice rattled my ear-grid. "Phil! Get away from there! Look! De Boer is searching!"

De Boer had, a moment before, spoken quietly aside to Gutierrez. And now three or four of the men were spreading out, poking about with small hand-flashes. Searching for me! The possibility that I might be here, eavesdropping!

Hanley repeated vehemently, "Phil, they'll find you! Get out of there: the way is still open!"

Gutierrez was approaching the archway. But I lingered a moment longer.

"Chief, you heard about that girl, Jetta, Spawn's daughter—"

I stopped. Perona was saying, "Spawn, was Jetta still in her room? You did not untie her?"

"No."

"And gagged? Suppose the Americano was back there now? She might call to him, and he would release her —"

De Boer: "How do you know he is not around here? Listening?"

With the assumption that I might be within hearing, De Boer tried to trap me. Gutierrez, at a signal now, suddenly dashed through the archway and planted

himself on the path outside. The other searchers spread their rays; the rocks all about me were lighted. But my niche was still untouched.

De Boer: "If he is around here—"

Perona: "He could not have followed me; I was too careful."

I was murmuring: "Chief, they've got that girl."

"Phil, you get away! Go to Markes. Stay with him."

"But Chief, that Jetta, I—"

"Keep out of this! You're only one; you can't help any! I've sent for the Porto Rican patrol ship to handle this."

"Chief, I'm going back to Spawn's."

"No—"

I cut off abruptly. In another moment I would have been discovered. The searchers were headed directly

for me.

I moved, crouching, back along the inner wall of the archway. The moon was momentarily behind a cloud. It was black under the arch; and out front it was so dim I could only see the faint blob of Gutierrez's standing figure, and the spot of his flashlight.

Perona: "He is not around here, De Boer. That is foolish."

Spawn: "He could have gone anywhere. Maybe a walk around the village."

Perona: "Go back home, Spawn. De Boer will come—"

Their voices faded as I moved away. A searching bandit behind me poked with his light into the crevice where a moment before I had been crouching. I moved faster. Only Gutierrez now was in front of me. He was at the far end of the arch. I could slip past, and still be fifty feet from him—if I could avoid his

swinging little light-beam.

I was running now, chancing that he would hear me. I was on the path; I could see it vaguely.

From behind me came a sizzling flash, and the ting of the flying needle as it missed me by a foot.

"The Americano! He goes there!"

Another shot. The shouts of the bandits in the archway. A turmoil back there.

But it was all behind me. I leaped sidewise off the path as Gutierrez small light-beam swept it. I ran stumbling through a stubble of boulders, around an upstanding rock spire, back to the path again.

There were other shots. Then De Boer's voice, faint by distance: "Stop! Fools! We will alarm the village! The landing field can see our shots from here! Take it easy! You can't get him!"

The turmoil quieted. I went around a bend in the

path, running swiftly.

Pursuit was behind me. I could hear them coming.

It was a run of no more than ten minutes to the junction where, down the slope, I could see the lights of the landing field.

The glow of the village was ahead of me. Then I was in its outskirts. Occasional dark houses. Deserted streets.

I slowed to a fast walk. I was breathless, panting in the heat.

I heard no pursuit now. But Spawn and the rest of them doubtless were after me. Would they head back for Spawn's inn? I thought they would. But I could beat them back there; I was sure there was no shorter route than this I was taking.

Would they use their flyer? That would not gain them

any time, what with launching it and landing, for so short a flight. And a bandit flyer could not very well land unseen or unnoticed, even in somnolent Nareda.

I reached the main section of the village. There were occasional lights and pedestrians. My haste was noticeable, but I was not accosted. There seemed no police about. I recalled Perona's remark that he had attended to that.

My electrode was tingling. I had been running again. I slowed down.

"Chief?"

"Phil." His voice carried relief. "You got away?"

"Yes. I'm in the village."

"Go to President Markes."

"No, I'm headed for Spawn's! They're all behind me; I can get there a few minutes ahead of them."

I panted an exclamation, incoherently, but frankly, about Jetta. "I'm going to get her out of there."

"Phil, what in hell—"

I told him.

"So you've fallen in love with a girl? Entangled—"

"Chief!"

"Go after her, Phil! Got her bound and gagged, have they? Going to marry her to this Perona? Like the Middle Ages?"

I had never seen this side of Hanley.

"Get her if you want her. Get her out of there. Take her to Markes—No, I wouldn't trust anybody in Nareda! Take her into the uplands behind the village. But keep away from that mine! Have you got flash-fuses?"

"Yes."

I was within sight of Spawn's house. The street was dim and deserted. I was running again.

I panted. "I'm—almost at Spawn's!"

"Good! When it's over, whatever happens up there at the mine, then signal the patrol."

"Yes."

I reached Spawn's front gate. The house and front garden were dark.

"Use your fuses, Phil. What colors?"

"I have red and blue."

"I'll talk to the patrol ship again. Tell them to watch for you. Red and blue. Two short red flashes, a long blue."

"Right, Chief. I'm here at Spawn's, cutting off."

"Come back on when you can." His voice went anxious again. "I'll wait here."

"All right."

I cut silent. I ran through the front doorway of Spawn's inn. The living room was dim and empty. Which way was Jetta's room? I could only guess.

I had a few minutes, perhaps, before my pursuers would arrive.

I reached the inner, patio garden. The moon was well out from under the clouds now. The patio shimmered, a silent, deserted fairyland.

"Jetta!" I called it softly. Then louder. "Jetta!"

Spawn's house was fairly large and rambling. There were so many rooms. Jetta was gagged; how could she answer me? But I had no time to search for her.

"Jetta?"

And then came her voice. "Philip?"

"Jetta! Which way? Where are you?"

"Here! This way: in my room."

A window and a door near the pergola. "Jetta!"

"Yes. I am in here. They tied me up. Not so loud, Phil: father will hear you."

"He's gone out."

I reached her garden door. Turned its handle. Rattled the door. Shoved frantically with my shoulder!

The metal door was firmly sealed!

Part 2

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

In the year 2020 the oceans have long since drained from the surface of the earth, leaving bared to sun and wind the one-time sea floor. Much of it is flat, caked ooze, cracked and hardened, with, here and there, small scum-covered lakes, bordered by slimy rocks. It is hot, down in the depth of the great Lowland areas, and it is chiefly adventurers and outcasts of human kind who can endure life in what few towns there are.

Into remote Lowlands, in an invisible flyer, go Grant and Jetta—prisoners of a scientific depth bandit.

Into Nareda, the capital village of the tiny Lowland Republic of Nareda, goes Philip Grant, an operative of the United States Customs Department, on a dangerous assignment—to ferret out the men who are smuggling mercury into the United States from that place.

Grant falls in love with Jetta, the daughter of Jacob Spawn, a big mercury mine owner of Nareda, only to learn that Spawn has promised her in marriage to Greko Perona, the country's Minister of Internal Affairs.

Grant follows Perona to a midnight Lowland rendezvous with mysterious strangers and eavesdrops on them, sending their indistinct voice murmurs to his chief, Hanley, in Washington, who relays them back to him, amplified. He learns several important things: that Spawn and Perona and a depth bandit named De Boer are together involved in the smuggling; that they have planned a fake robbery of a fortune in radiumized mercury stored at Spawn's mine, to collect the insurance on it and escape paying the Government export fee: and that they, plan to kidnap Grant for ransom.

The plotters learn of Grant's absence from Nareda, and suspect that he may be nearby. They start to search for him. Grant barely escapes, with the bandits and conspirators in hot pursuit. He flees to Jetta, hoping that they will be able to get away together:

but he finds her tied hand and foot in her room.

The door is tightly sealed.

And close behind him are his pursuers!

Chapter 8: Jetta's Defiance

I must go back now to picture what befell Jetta that afternoon while I was at Spawn's mine. It is not my purpose to becloud this narrative with mystery. There was very little mystery about it to Jetta, and I can reconstruct her viewpoint of the events from what she afterward told me.

Jetta's room was in a wing of the house on the side near the pergola. Her window and door looked out upon the patio. When I had retired—that first night in Nareda—Spawn had gone to his daughter and upbraided her for showing herself while he was giving me that first midnight meal.

"You stay in your room: you have nothing to do with him. Hear me?"

"Yes, Father."

From her infancy he had dominated her; it never occurred to either of them that she could disobey. And yet, this time she did; for no sooner was he asleep

that night than she came to my window as I have told.

This next day Jetta dutifully had kept herself secluded. She cooked her own breakfast while I was at the Government House, and was again out of sight by noon.

Jetta was nearly always alone. I can picture her sitting there within the narrow walls of her little room. Boy's ragged garb. All possible femininity stripped from her. Yet, within her, the woman's instincts were struggling. She sewed a great deal, she since has told me, there in the cloistered dimness. Making little dresses of silk and bits of finery given her surreptitiously by the neighbor women. Gazing at herself in them with the aid of a tiny mirror. Hiding them away, never daring to wear them openly; until at intervals her father would raid the room, find them and burn them in the kitchen incinerator.

"Instincts of Satan! By damn but I will get these woman's instincts out of you, Jetta!"

A

nd there were hours when she would try to read hidden books, and look at pictures of the strange fairy world of the Highlands. She could read and write a little: she had gone for a few years to the small Nareda government school, and then been snatched from it by her father.

When Spawn and I had finished that noonday meal, I recall that he left me for a moment. He had gone to Jetta.

"I am taking that young American to the mine. I will return presently. Stay close, Jetta."

"Yes, Father."

He left with me. Jetta remained in her room, her thoughts upon the coming night. She trembled at them. She would meet me again, this evening in the moonlit garden....

The sound of a man walking the garden path aroused

her from her reverie. Then came a soft ingratiating voice:

"Jetta, *chica Mia!*"

It was Perona, standing by the pergola preening his effeminate mustache.

"Jetta, little love bird, come out and talk to me."

Jetta slammed the window slide and sat quiet.

"Jetta, it is your Greko."

"Well do I know it," she muttered.

"Jetta!" He strode down the path and back. "Jetta."
His voice began rising into a strident, peevish anger.

"Jetta, are you in there? *Chica*, answer me."

No answer.

"Jetta, *por Dios*—" He fumed, then fell to pleading.

"Are you in there? Please, little love bird, answer your

Greko. Are you in there?"

"Yes."

"Come out then. Come to Greko."

S

he said sweetly. "My father does not want me to talk to men. You know that is so, Señor Perona."

It grounded him. "Why—"

"Is it not so?"

"Y-yes, but I am not—"

"A man?" Little imp! She relished impaling him upon the shafts of her ridicule. Her sport was interrupted by the arrival of Spawn. He had left me at the mine and come directly back home. Jetta heard his heavy tread on the garden path, then his voice:

"Ah, Perona."

And Perona: "Jetta will not come out and talk to me." The waxen mustached Minister of Nareda's Internal Affairs was like a sulky child. But Spawn was unimpressed. Spawn said:

"Well, let her alone. We have more important things to engage us. I have the American occupied at the mine. You heard from De Boer?"

"I went last night. All is ready as we planned. But Spawn, this fool of an American, this Grant—"

"Hush! Not so loud, Perona!"

"I am telling you—!" Perona was excited. His voice rose shrilly, but Spawn checked him.

"Shut up: you waste time. Tell me exactly the arrangements with De Boer. *Le grand coup!* now; tonight most important of nights—and you rant of your troubles with a girl!"

T

hey were standing by the pergola, quite near Jetta's shaded window. She crouched there, listening to them. None of this was entirely new to Jetta. She had always been aware more or less of her father's secret business activities. As a child she had not understood them. Nor did she now, with any clarity. Spawn, had always talked freely within her hearing, ignoring her, though occasionally he threatened her to keep her mouth shut.

She heard now fragments of this discussion between her father and Perona. They moved away from the pergola and sat by the fountain, speaking too low for her to hear. And then they paced the path, coming nearer, and she caught their voices again. And occasionally they grew excited, or vehement, and then their raised tones were plainly audible to her.

And this that she heard, with what she knew already, and with what subsequently transpired, enables me

now to piece together the facts into a connected explanation.

In the establishment of his cinnabar mine some years before, Spawn was originally financed by Perona. The South American was then newly made Minister of Nareda's Internal Affairs. He became Spawn's business partner. They kept the connection secret. Spawn falsified his production records; and Perona with his governmental position was enabled to pass these false accounts of the mine's production. Nareda was systematically cheated of a portion of its legal share.

But this, after a time, did not satisfy the ambitious Perona and Spawn. They began to plan how they might engage in smuggling some of their quicksilver into the United States.

Perona, during these years, had had ambitions of his own in other directions. President Markes, of Nareda, was an honest official. He handicapped Perona considerably. There were many ways by which Perona could have grown rich through a dishonest handling

of the government affairs. It was done almost universally in all the small Latin governments. But Markes as President made it dangerous in Nareda. Even the duplicity with the mine was a precarious affair.

T

here was at this time in Nareda a young adventurer named De Boer. A handsome, swaggering fellow in his late twenties. He was a good talker; he spoke many languages; he could orate with fluency and skilful guile. His smile, his colorful personality, and his gift for oratory, made it easy for him to stir up dissatisfaction among the people.

De Boer became known as a patriot. A revolution in Nareda was brewing. Perona, as Nareda's Minister, was De Boer's political enemy. The Nareda Government ran De Boer out, ending the potential revolution. But Perona and Spawn had always secretly been friends with De Boer. It would have been very

handy to have this unscrupulous young scoundrel as President.

When De Boer was banished with some of his most loyal followers, he began a career of petty banditry in the Lowland's depths. Spawn and Perona kept in communication with him, and, by a method which was presently made startlingly clear to Jetta and me, De Boer smuggled the quicksilver for Perona and Spawn. It was this activity which had finally aroused my department and caused Hanley to send me to Nareda.

This however, was a dangerous, precarious occupation. De Boer did not seem to think so, or care. But Perona and Spawn, with their established positions in Nareda, were always fearful of exposure. Even without my coming, they had planned to disconnect from De Boer.

"And for more than that," as Jetta had one day heard Perona remark to her father. "I'll tell to you that this De Boer is not very straight with us, Spawn." De Boer would, upon occasion, fail to make proper return for the smuggled product.

S

o now they had planned a last coup in which De Boer was to help, and then they would be done with him: the two of them, Spawn and Perona, would remain as honest citizens of Nareda, and De Boer had agreed to take himself away and pursue his banditry elsewhere.

It was a simple plan; it promised to yield a high stake quickly. A final fling at illicit activity; then virtuous reformation, with Perona marrying the little Jetta.

B

eneath the strong room at the mine, Perona and Spawn had secretly built a cleverly concealed little vault. De Boer, this night just before the midnight hour, was to attack the mine. Spawn and Perona had bribed the police guards to submit to this attack. The guards did not know the details: they only knew that

De Boer and his men would make a sham attack, careful to harm none of them—and then De Boer would withdraw. The guards would report that they had been driven away by a large force. And when the excitement was over, the ingots of radiumized quicksilver would have vanished!

De Boer, making away into distant Lowland fastnesses, would obviously be supposed to have taken the treasure. But Perona, hidden alone in the strong-room, would merely carry the ingots down into the secret vault, to be disposed of at some future date. The ingots were well insured, by an international company, against theft. The Nareda government would receive one-third of that insurance as recompense for the loss of its share. Perona and Spawn would get two-thirds—and have the treasure as well.

S

uch was the present plan, into which, all unknown to

me, I had been plunged. And my presence complicated things considerably. So much so that Perona grew vehement, this afternoon in the garden, explaining why. His shrill voice carried clearly to Jetta, in spite of Spawn's efforts to shut him up.

"I tell to you that Americano agent will undo us."

"How?" demanded the calmer Spawn.

"Already he has made Markes suspicious."

"Chut! You can befool Markes, Perona. You have for years been doing it."

"This meddling fellow, he has met Jetta!"

"I do not believe it." There was a sudden grimness to Spawn's tone at the thought. "I do not believe it. Jetta would not dare."

"You should have seen him flush when Markes mentioned at the conference this morning that I am to marry Jetta. No one could miss it. He has met her—I

tell it to you—and it must have been last night."

"So, you say?" Jetta could see her father's face, white with suppressed rage. "You think that? And it is that this Grant might be your rival, that worries you? Not our plans for to-night, which have real importance—but worrying over a girl."

"She would not talk to me. She would not come out. He has no doubt put wild ideas into her head. Spawn, you listen to me. I have always been more clever than you at scheming. Is it not so? You have always said it. I have a plan now, it fits our arrangements with De Boer, but it will rid us of this Americano. When all is done and I have married Jetta—"

Spawn interrupted impatiently. "You will marry Jetta, never fear. I have promised her to you."

And because, as Jetta well knew, Perona had made it part of his bargaining in financing Spawn. But this they did not now mention.

"To get rid of this Grant—well, that sounds meritorious. He is dangerous around here. To that I agree."

"And with Jetta—"

"Have done, Perona!" With sudden decision Spawn leaped to his feet. "I do not believe she would have dared talk to Grant. We'll have her out and ask her. If she has, by the gods—"

It fell upon Jetta before she had time to gather her wits. Spawn strode to her door, and found it fastened on the inside.

"Jetta, open at once!"

He thumped with his heavy fists. Confused and trembling she unsealed it, and he dragged her out into the sunlight of the garden.

"Now then, Jetta, you have heard some of what we have been saying, perhaps?"

"Father—"

"About this young American? This Grant?"

She stood cringing in his grasp. Spawn had never used physical violence with Jetta. But he was white with fury now.

"Father, you—you are hurting me."

Perona interposed. "Wait Spawn! Not so rough! Let me talk to her. Jetta, *chica mia*, your Greko is worried —"

"To the hell with that!" Spawn shouted. But he released the girl and she sank trembling to the little seat by the pergola.

Spawn stood over her. "Jetta, look at me! Did you meet—did you talk to Grant last night?"

She wanted to deny it. She clung to his angry gaze. But the habit of all her life of truthfulness with him prevailed.

"Y-yes," she admitted.

Chapter 9: Trapped

"Spawn! Hold!"

There was an instant when it seemed that Spawn would strike the girl. The blood drained from his face, leaving his dark eyes blazing like torches. His hamlike fist went back, but Perona sprang for him and clutched him.

"Hold, Spawn: I will talk to her. Jetta, so you did—"

The torrent of emotion swept Spawn; weakened him so that instead of striking Jetta, he yielded to Perona's clutch and dropped his arm. For a moment he stood gazing at his daughter.

"Is it so? And all my efforts, going for nothing, just like your mother!" He no more than murmured it, and as Perona pushed him, he sank to the bench beside Jetta. But did not touch her, just sat staring. And she stared back, both of them aghast at the enormity of this, her first disobedience.

I never had opportunity to know Spawn, except for the few times which I have mentioned. Perhaps he was at heart a pathetic figure. I think, looking back on it now that Spawn is dead, that there was a pathos to him. Spawn had loved his wife, Jetta's mother. As a young man he had brought her to the Lowlands to seek his fortune. And when Jetta was an infant, his wife had left him. Run away, abandoning him and their child.

Perhaps Spawn was never mentally normal after that. He had reared Jetta with the belief that sin was inherent in all females. It obsessed him. Warped and twisted all his outlook as he brooded on it through the years. Woman's instincts; woman's love of pleasure, pretty clothes—all could lead only to sin.

And so he had kept Jetta secluded. He had fought what he seemed to see in her as she grew and flowered into girlhood, and denied her everything which he thought might make her like her mother.

Spawn met his death within a few hours of this afternoon I am describing. Perhaps he was no more

than a scheming scoundrel. We are instinctively lenient with our appraisal of the dead. I do not know.

"Jetta," Perona said to her accusingly, "that is true, then: you did talk with that miserable Americano last night? You sinful, lying girl."

The contrition within Jetta at disobeying her father faded before this attack.

"I am not sinful." The trembling left her and she sat up and faced the accusing Perona. "I did but talk to him. You speak lies when you say I am sinful."

"You hear, Spawn? Defiant: already changed from the little Jetta I—"

"Yes, I am changed. I do not love you, Señor Perona. I think I hate you." Her tears were very close, but she finished: "I—I won't marry you. I won't!"

It stung Spawn. He leaped to his feet. "So you talk like that! It has gone so far as this, has it? Get to your room! We will see what you will and what you won't!"

Again the crafty Perona was calmest of them all. He thrust himself in front of Spawn.

"Jetta, to-night you plan to see him again, no? To-night?—here?"

"No," she stammered.

"You lie!"

"No."

"You lie! Spawn look at her! Lying! She has planned to meet him to-night! That is all we want to know." He broke into a cackling chuckle. "That fits my new plan, Spawn. A tryst with Jetta, here in the garden."

"Get to your room," Spawn growled. He dragged her back, and Perona followed them.

"You lie there." Spawn flung her to her couch. "After this night's work is done, we'll see whether you will or you won't."

"She may not stay in here." Perona suggested.

"She will stay."

"You seal her in?"

"I will seal her in."

Perona's eyes roved the little bedroom. One window oval and a door, both overlooking the patio.

"But suppose she should get out? There is no way to seal that window properly from outside. A cord!"

A long stout silken tassel-cord had been draped by Jetta at the window curtain. Perona snatched it down.

"If her ankles and wrists were tied with this—"

"No!" burst out Jetta. And then a fear for me rushed over her. A realization, forgotten in the stress of this conflict with her father, now swept over her. They were planning harm to me.

"No, do not bind me."

A sudden caution came to her. She was making it worse for me. Already she had done me immense harm.

She said suddenly, "Do what you like with me. I was wrong. I have no interest in that American. It is you, Greko, I—I love."

Spawn did not heed her. Perona insisted, "I would tie her with care."

He helped Spawn rope her ankles, and then her wrists, crossed behind her.

"A little gag, Spawn? She might cry out: we want no interference to-night." He was ready with a large silken handkerchief. They thrust it into her mouth and tied it behind her neck.

"There," growled Spawn. "You will and you won't: we shall see about that. Lie still, Jetta. If I have need to come again to you—"

They left her. And this time she heard them less

clearly. But there were fragments:

Perona: "I will meet him again. After dark, to-night. Yes, he expects me. For his money, Spawn, his pay in advance. This De Boer works not for nothing."

Spawn: "You will arrange about your police on the streets? He can get here to my house safely?"

"Oh yes, at the tri-evening hour, certainly before midnight, before the attack on the mine. You must stay here, Spawn. Pretend to be asleep: it will lure the fool Americano out in to the moonlight."

Jetta could piece it together fairly well. They would have De Boer come and abduct me. Not tell him I was a government agent, with the micro-safety alarm which they suspected I carried, but just tell De Boer that I was a rich American, who could be abducted and held for a big ransom.

Perona's voice rose with a fragment: "If he springs his alarm, here in the moonlight, you can be here, Spawn, and pretend to try and rescue him. A radio-image of

that flashed to Hanley's office will exonerate us of suspicion."

Perona would promise De Boer that the Nareda government would pay the ransom quickly, collecting it later from the United States.

Spawn said, "You think De Boer will believe that?"

"Why should he not? I am skilful at persuasion, no? Let him find out later that the United States Government trackers are after him!" Perona cackled at the thought of it. "What of that? Let him kill this Grant. All the better."

Spawn said abruptly: "The United States may catch De Boer. Have you thought of that, Perona? The fellow would not shield us, but would tell everything."

"And who will believe him? The wild tale of a trapped bandit! Against your word, Spawn? You, an honest and wealthy mine owner? And I—I, Greko Perona, Minister of Internal Affairs of the Sovereign Power of Nareda! Who will dare to give me the lie because a

bandit tells a wild tale with no real facts to prop it?"

"Those police guards at the mine to-night?"

"Admit that they took your bribes? You are witless, Spawn! Let them but admit it to me and of a surety I will fling them into imprisonment! Now listen with care, for the after noon is going...."

Their voices lowered, then faded, and Jetta was left alone and helpless. Spawn went back to the mine to meet me. We returned and had supper, Jetta could dimly hear us.

There was silence about the house during the mid-evening. I had slipped out and followed Perona to his meeting with De Boer. Then Spawn had discovered my absence and had rushed to join Perona and tell him.

But Jetta knew nothing of this. The hour of her tryst with me was approaching. In the darkness of her room as she lay bound and gagged on her couch, she could see the fitful moonlight rising to illumine the

window oval.

She squirmed at the cords holding her, but could not loosen them. They cut into her flesh; her limbs were numb.

The evening wore on. Would I come to the garden tryst?

Jetta could not break her bonds. But gradually she had mouthed the gag loose. Then she heard my hurried footsteps in the patio; then my tense voice.

And at her answer I was pounding on her door. But it had been stoutly sealed by Spawn. I flung my shoulder against it, raging, thumping. But the heavy metal panels would not yield; the seal held intact.

"Jetta!"

"Philip, run away! They want to catch you! De Boer, the bandit, is coming!"

"I know it!"

Fool that I was, to pause with talk! There was no time: I must get Jetta out of here. Break down this door.

But it would not yield. A gas torch would melt this outer seal. Was there a torch here at Spawn's? But I had no time to search for a torch! Or a bar with which to ram this door—

A panic seized me, with the fresh realization that any instant De Boer and his men would arrive. I beat with futile fists on the door, and Jetta from within, calling to me to get away before I was caught.

This accursed door between us!

And then—after no more than half a minute, doubtless—I thought of the window. My momentary panic left me. I dashed to the window oval. Sealed. But the shutter curtain, and the glassite pane behind it, were fragile.

"Jetta, are you near the window?"

"No. On the bed. They have tied me."

"Look out; I'm breaking through!"

There were loose rocks, as large as my head, set to mark the garden path. I seized one and hurled it. With a crash it went through the window and fell to the floor of the room. A jagged hole showed.

"All right, Jetta?"

"Yes! Yes, Philip."

I squirmed through the oval and dropped to the floor. My arms were cut from the jagged glassite, though I did not know it then. It was dim inside the room, but I could see the outline of the bed with her lying on it.

Her ankles and wrists were tied. I cut the cords with my knife.

She was gasping. "They're planning to capture you. Philip! You should not be here! Get away!"

"Yes. But I'm going to take you with me. Can you stand up?"

I set her on her feet in the center of the room. A shaft of moonlight was coming through the hole in the window.

"Philip! You're bleeding!"

"It is nothing. Cut myself on the glassite. Can you stand alone?"

"Yes."

But her legs, stiffened and numb from having been bound so many hours, bent under her. I caught her as she was falling.

"I'll be—all right in a minute. But Philip, if you stay here—"

"You're going with me!"

"Oh!"

I could carry her, if she could not run. But it would be slow; and it would be difficult to get her through the window. And on the street we would attract too much attention.

"Jetta, try to stand. Stamp your feet. I'll hold you."

I steadied her. Then I bent down, chafing her legs with my hands. Her arms had been limp, but the blood was in them now. She murmured with the tingling pain, and then bent over, frantically helping me rub the circulation back into her legs.

"Better?"

"Yes." She took a weak and trembling step.

"Wait. Let me rub them more, Jetta."

Precious minutes!

"I'll knock out the rest of the window with that rock! We'll run; we'll be out of here in a moment."

"Run where?"

"Away. Into hiding—out of all this. The United States patrol-ship is coming from Porto Rico. It will take us from here."

"Where?"

"Away. To Great New York, maybe. Away from all this; from that old fossil, Perona."

I was stooping beside her.

"I'm all right now, Philip."

I rose up, and suddenly found myself clasping her in my arms; her slight body in the boy's ragged garb pressed against me.

"Jetta, dear, do you trust me? Will you come?"

"Yes. Oh, yes—anywhere, Philip, with you."

For only a breathless instant I lingered, holding her. Then I cast her off and seized the rock from the floor.

The jagged glassite fell away under my blows.

"Now, Jetta. I'll go first—"

But it was too late! I stopped, stricken by the sound of a voice outside!

"He's there! In the girl's room! That's her window!"

Cautious voices in the garden! The thud of approaching footsteps.

I shoved Jetta back and rushed to the broken window oval. The figures of De Boer and his men showed in the moonlight across the patio. They had heard me breaking the glassite. And they saw me, now.

"There he is, De Boer!"

We were trapped!

Chapter 10: The Murder in the Garden

"Hans, keep back! I will go!"

"But Commander—"

"Armed? The hell he is not! Spawn said no. Spawn!
Where is Spawn? He was here."

I had dropped back from the window, and, gripping Jetta, stood in the center of the room.

"Jetta, dear."

"Oh. Philip!"

"There's no other way out of here?"

"No! No!"

Only the heavy sealed door, and this broken window.
The bandits in the garden had paused at sight of me.
Someone had called.

"He may be armed, De Boer."

They had stopped their forward rush and darted into the shelter of the pergola. I might be armed!

We could hear their low voices not ten feet from us. But I was not armed, except for my knife. Futile weapon, indeed.

"Jetta, keep back. If they should fire—"

I got a look through the oval. De Boer was advancing upon it, with his barreled projector half levelled. He saw me again. He called:

"You American, come out!"

I crouched on the floor, pushing Jetta back to where the shadows of the bed hid her.

"You American!"

He was close outside the window. "Come out—or I am coming in!"

I said abruptly, "Come!"

My blade was in my hand. If he showed himself I could slash his throat, doubtless. But what about Jetta? My thoughts flashed upon the heels of my defiant invitation. Suppose, as De Boer climbed in the window, I killed him? I could not escape, and his infuriated fellows would rush us, firing through the oval, sweeping the room, killing us both. But Jetta now was in no danger. Her father was outside, and these bandits were her father's friends. I would have to yield.

I called, louder, "Why don't you come in?"

Could I hold them off? Frighten them off, for a time, and make enough noise so that perhaps someone passing in the nearby street would give the alarm and bring help?

There was a sudden silence in the patio. The bandits had so far made as little commotion as possible. Presently I could hear their low voices.

I heard an oath. De Boer's head and shoulders appeared in the window oval! His levelled projector

came through. Perhaps he would not have fired, but I did not dare take the chance. I was crouching almost under the muzzle, so I straightened, gripped it, and flung it up. I then slashed at his face with my knife, but he gripped my wrist with powerful fingers. My knife fell as he twisted my wrist. His projector had not fired. It was jammed between us. One of his huge arms reached in and encircled me.

"Damn you!"

He muttered it, but I shouted, "Fool! De Boer, the bandit!"

I was aware of a commotion out in the garden.

"... Bring all Nareda on our ears? De Boer, shut him up!"

I was gripping the projector, struggling to keep its muzzle pointed upwards. With a heave of his giant arms De Boer lifted me and jerked me bodily through the window. I fell on my feet, still fighting. But other hands seized me. It was no use. I yielded suddenly. I

panted:

"Enough!"

They held me. One of them growled. "Another shout and we will leave you here dead. Commander, *look!*"

My shirt was torn open. The electrode band about my chest was exposed! De Boer towered head and shoulders over me. I gazed up, passive in the grip of two or three of his men, and saw his face. His heavy jaw dropped as he gazed at my little diaphragms, the electrode.

He knew now for the first time that this was no private citizen he had assaulted. This official apparatus meant that I was a Government agent.

There was an instant of shocked silence. An expression grim and furious crossed the giant bandit's face.

"So this is it? Hans, careful—hold him!"

Jetta was still in her room, silent now. I heard Spawn's voice, close at hand in the patio.

"De Boer! Careful!" It was the most cautious of half-whispers.

Abruptly someone reached for my chest; jerked at the electrode; tore its fragile wires—the tiny grids and thumbnail amplifiers; jerked and ripped and flung the whole little apparatus to the garden path. But it sang its warning note as the wires broke. Up in Great New York Hanley knew then that catastrophe had fallen upon me.

For a brief instant the crestfallen bandit mumbled at what he had done. Then came Spawn's voice:

"Got him, De Boer? Good!"

Triumphant Spawn! He advanced across the garden with his heavy tread. And to me, and I am sure to De Boer as well, there came the swift realization that Spawn had been hiding safely in the background. But my detector was smashed now. It might have imaged

De Boer assailing me: but now that it was smashed, Spawn could act freely.

"Good! So you have him! Make away to the mine!"

I did not see De Boer's face at that instant. But I saw his weapon come up—an act wholly impulsive, no doubt. A flash of fury!

He levelled the projector, not at me, but at the oncoming Spawn.

"You damn liar!"

"De Boer—" It was a scream of terror from Spawn. But it came too late. The projector hissed; spat its tiny blue puff. The needle drilled Spawn through the heart. He toppled, flung up his arms, and went down, silently, to sprawl on his face across the garden path.

De Boer was cursing, startled at his own action. The men holding me tightened their grip. I heard Jetta cry out, but not at what had happened in the garden: she was unaware of that. One of the bandits had left the

group and climbed into her room. Her cry now was suppressed, as though the man's hand went over her mouth. And in the silence came his mumbled voice:

"Shut up, you!"

There was the sound of a scuffle in there. I tore at the men holding me.

"Let me go! Jetta! Come out!"

De Boer dashed for the window. I was still struggling. A hand cuffed me in the face. A projector rammed into my side.

"Stop it, fool American!"

De Boer came back with a chastened bandit ahead of him. The man was muttering and rubbing his shoulder, and De Boer said:

"Try anything like that again, Cartner, and I won't be so easy on you."

De Boer was dragging Jetta, holding her by a wrist. She looked like a terrified, half-grown boy, so small was she beside this giant. But the woman's lines of her, and the long dark hair streaming about her white face and over her shoulders, were unmistakable.

"His daughter." De Boer was chuckling. "The little Jetta."

All this had happened in certainly no more than five minutes. I realized that no alarm had been raised: the bandits had managed it all with reasonable quiet.

There were six of the bandits here, and De Boer, who towered over us all. I saw him now as a swaggering giant of thirty-odd, with a heavy-set smooth-shaved, handsome face.

He held Jetta off. "Damn, how you have grown, Jetta."

Someone said, "She knows too much."

And someone else, "We will take her with us. If you leave her here, De Boer—"

"Why should I leave her? Why? Leave her—for Perona?"

Then I think that for the first time Jetta saw her father's body lying sprawled on the path. She cried, "Philip!" Then she half turned and murmured: "Father!"

She wavered, almost falling. "Father—" She went down, fainting, falling half against me and against De Boer, who caught her slight body in his arms.

"Come, we'll get back. Drag him!"

"But you can't carry that girl out like that, De Boer."

"Into the house: there is an open door. Hans, go out and bring the car around to this side. Give me the cloaks. There is no alarm yet."

De Boer chuckled again. "Perona was nice to keep the police off this street to-night!"

We went into the kitchen. An auto-car, which to the

village people might have been there on Spawn's mining business, slid quietly up to the side entrance. A cloak was thrown over Jetta. She was carried like a sack and put into the car.

I suddenly found an opportunity to break loose. I leaped and struck one of the men. But the others were too quickly on me. The kitchen table went over with a crash.

Then something struck me on the back of the head: I think it was the handle of De Boer's great knife. The kitchen and the men struggling with me faded. I went into a roaring blackness.

Chapter 11: Aboard the Bandit Flyer

I was dimly conscious of being inside the cubby of the car, with bandits sitting over me. The car was rolling through the village streets. Ascending. We must be heading for Spawn's mine. I thought of Jetta. Then I heard her voice and felt her stir beside me.

The roaring in my head made everything dreamlike. I sank half into unconsciousness again. It seemed an endless interval, with only the muttering hiss of the car's mechanism and the confused murmurs of the bandits' voices.

Then my strength came. The cold sweat on me was drying in the night breeze that swept through the car as it climbed the winding ascent. I could see through its side oval a vista of bloated Lowland crags with moonlight on them.

It seemed that we should be nearly to the mine. We stopped. The men in the car began climbing out.

De Boer's voice: "Is he conscious now? I'll take the

girl."

Someone bent over me. "You hear me?"

"Yes," I said.

I found myself outside the car. They held me on my feet. Someone gratuitously cuffed me, but De Boer's voice issued a sharp, low-toned rebuke.

"Stop it! Get him and the girl aboard."

There seemed thirty or forty men gathered here. Silent dark figures in black robes. The moonlight showed them, and occasionally one flashed a hand search-beam. It was De Boer's main party gathered to attack the mine.

I stood wavering on my feet. I was still weak and dizzy, with a lump on the back of my head where I had been struck. The scene about me was at first unfamiliar. We were in a rocky gully. Rounded broken walls. Caves and crevices. Dried ooze piled like a ramp up one side. The moonlight struggled down

through a gathering mist overhead.

I saw, presently, where we were. Above the mine, not below it: and I realized that the car had encircled the mine's cauldron and climbed to a height beyond it. Down the small gully I could see where it opened into the cauldron about a hundred feet below us. The lights of the mine winked in the blurred moonlight shadows.

The bandits led me up the gully. The car was left standing against the gully side where it had halted. De Boer, or one of his men, was carrying Jetta.

The flyer was here. We came upon it suddenly around a bend in the gully. Although I had only seen the nose if it earlier in the evening. I recognized this to be the same. It was in truth a strange looking flyer: I had never seen one quite like it. Barrel-winged, like a Jantzen: multi-propellored: and with folding helicopters for the vertical lifts and descent. And a great spreading fan-tail, in the British fashion. It rested on the rocks like a fat-winged bird with its long cylindrical body puffed out underneath. A seventy-foot

cabin: fifteen feet wide, possibly. A line of small window-ports; a circular glassite front to the forward control-observatory cubby, with the propellers just above it, and the pilot cubby up there behind them. And underneath the whole, a landing gear of the Fraser-Mood springed-cushion type: and an expanding, air-coil pontoon-bladder for landing upon water.

All this was usual enough. Yet, with the brief glimpses I had as my captors hurried me toward the landing incline, I was aware of something very strange about this flyer. It was all dead black, a bloated-bellied black bird. The moonlight struck it, but did not gleam or shimmer on its black metal surface. The cabin window-ports glowed with a dim blue-gray light from inside. But as I chanced to gaze at one a green film seemed to cross it like a shade, so that it winked and its light was gone. Yet a hole was there, like an eye-socket. An empty green hole.

We were close to the plane now, approaching the bottom of the small landing-incline. The wing over my head was like a huge fat barrel cut length-wise in half.

I stared up; and suddenly it seemed that the wing was melting. Fading. Its inner portion, where it joined the body, was clear in the moonlight. But the tips blurred and faded. An aspect curiously leprous. Uncanny. Gruesome.

They took me up the landing-incline. A narrow vaulted corridor ran length-wise of the interior, along one side of the cabin body. To my left as we headed for the bow control room, the corridor window-ports showed the rocks outside. To the right of the corridor, the ship's small rooms lay in a string. A metal interior. I saw almost nothing save metal in various forms. Grid floor and ceiling. Sheet metal walls and partitions. Furnishings and fabrics, all of spun metal. And all dead black.

We entered the control room. The two men holding me flung me in a chair. I had been searched. They had taken from me the tiny, colored magnesium light-flashes. How easy for the plans of men to go astray! Hanley and I had arranged that I was to signal the Porto Rican patrol-ship with those flares.

"Sit quiet!" commanded my guard.

I retorted, "If you hit me again, I won't."

De Boer came in, carrying Jetta. He put her in a chair near me, and she sat huddled tense. In the dim gray light of the control room her white face with its big staring dark eyes was turned toward me. But she did not speak, nor did I.

The bandits ignored us. De Boer moved about the room, examining a bank of instruments. Familiar instruments, most of them. The usual aero-controls and navigational devices. A radio audiphone transmitter and receiver, with its attendant eavesdropping cut-offs. And there was an ether-wave mirror-grid. De Boer bent over it. And then I saw him fastening upon his forehead an image-lens. He said:

"You stay here, Hans. You and Gutierrez. Take care of the girl and this fellow Grant. Don't hurt them."

Gutierrez was a swarthy Latin American. He smiled.

"For why would I hurt him? You say he is worth much

money to us, De Boer. And the girl, ah—"

De Boer towered over him. "Just lay a finger on her and you will regret it, Gutierrez! You stay at your controls. Be ready. This affair it will take no more than half an hour."

A man came to the control room entrance. "You come, Commander?"

"Yes. Right at once."

"The men are ready. From the mine we might almost be seen here. This delay—"

"Coming, Rausch."

But he lingered a moment more. "Hans, my finder will show you what I do. Keep watch. When we come back, have all ready for flight. This Grant had an alarm-detector. Heaven only knows what eavesdropping and relaying he has done. And for sure there is hell now in Spawn's garden. The Nareda police are there, of course. They might track us up

here."

He paused before me. "I think I would not cause trouble, Grant."

"I'm not a fool."

"Perhaps not." He turned to Jetta. "No harm will come to you. Fear nothing."

He wound his dark cloak about his giant figure and left the control room. In a moment, through the rounded observing pane beside me, I saw him outside on the moonlit rocks. His men gathered about him. There were forty of them, possibly, with ten or so left here aboard to guard the flyer.

And in another moment the group of dark-cloaked figures outside crept off in single file like a slithering serpent, moving down the rock defile toward where in the cauldron pit the lights of the mine shone on its dark silent buildings.

Chapter 12: The Attack on the Mine

There was a moment when I had an opportunity to speak with Jetta. Gutierrez sat watchfully by the archway corridor entrance with a needle projector across his knees. The fellow Hans, a big, heavy-set half-breed Dutchman with a wide-collared leather jerkin and wide, knee-length pantaloons, laid his weapon carefully aside and busied himself with his image mirror. There would soon be images upon it, I knew: De Boer had the lens-finder on his forehead, and the scenes at the mine, as De Boer saw them would be flashed back to us here.

This Gutierrez was very watchful. A move on my part and I knew he would fling a needle through me.

My thoughts flew. Hanley had notified Porto Rico. The patrol-ship had almost enough time to get here by now.

I felt Jetta plucking at me. She whispered:

"They have gone to attack the mine."

"Yes."

"I heard it planned. Señor Perona—"

Her hurried whispers told me further details of Perona's scheme. So this was a pseudo attack! Perona would take advantage of it and hide the quicksilver. De Boer would return presently and escape. And hold me for ransom. I chuckled grimly. Not so easy for a bandit, even one as clever as De Boer at hiding in the Lowland depths to arrange a ransom for an agent of the United States. Our entire Lowland patrol would be after him in a day.

Jetta's swift whispers made it all clear to me. It was Perona's scheme.

She ended, "And my father—" Her voice broke; her eyes flooded suddenly with tears "Oh, Philip, he was good to me, my poor father."

I saw that the mirror before Hans was glowing with its coming image. I pressed Jetta's hand.

"Yes, Jetta."

One does not disparage the dead. I could not exactly subscribe to Jetta's appraisal of her parent, but I did not say so.

"Jetta, the mirror is on."

I turned away from her toward the instrument table. Gutierrez at the door raised his weapon. I said hastily, "Nothing. I—we just want to see the mirror."

I stood beside Hans. He glanced at me and I tried to smile ingratiatingly.

"This attack will be successful, eh, Hans?"

"Damn. I hope so."

The mirror was glowing. Hans turned a switch to dim the tube-lights of the room so that we might see the images better. It brought a protest from Gutierrez.

I swung around. "I'm not a fool! You can see me

perfectly well: kill me if I make trouble. I want to see the attack."

"*Por Dios*, if you try anything—"

"I won't!"

"Shut!" growled Hans. "The audiphone is on. The big adventure—and the commander—leaves me here just to watch!"

A slit in the observatory pane was open. The dark figure of one of the bandits on guard outside came and called softly up to us.

"Started. Hans?"

"Starting."

"Should it go wrong, call out."

"Yes. But it will not."

"There was an alarm, relayed probably to Great New York, the commander said, from Spawn's garden.

These cursed prisoners—"

"Shut! You keep watch out there. It is starting."

The guard slunk away. My attention went back to the mirror. An image was formed there now, coming from the eye of the lens upon De Boer's forehead. It swayed with his walking. He was evidently leading his men, for none of them were in the scene. The dark rocks were moving past. The lights of the mine were ahead and below, but coming nearer.

The audiphone hummed and crackled. And through it, De Boer's low-voiced command sounded:

"To the left is the better path. Keep working to the left."

The image of the rocks and the mine swung with a dizzying sweep as De Boer turned about. Then again he was creeping forward.

The mine lights came closer. De Beer's whispered voice said: "There they are!"

I could see the lights of the mine's guards flash on. A group of Spawn's men gathered before the smelter building. The challenge sounded.

"Who are you? Stop!"

And De Boer's murmur: "That is correct, as Perona said. They expect us. Well," he ended with a sardonic laugh, "expect us."

His projector went up. He fired. In the silence of the control room we could hear the audiphoned hiss of it, and see the flash in the mirror-scene. He had fired into the air.

Again his low voice to his men: "Hold steady. They will run."

The group of figures at the smelter separated, waved and scattered back into the deeper shadows. Their hand-lights were extinguished, but the moonlight caught and showed them. They were running away; hiding in the crags. They fired a shot or two, high in the air.

De Boer was advancing swiftly now. The image swayed and shifted, raised and lowered rhythmically as he ran. And the dark shape of the smelter building loomed large as he neared it.

I felt Jetta beside me: heard her whisper: "Why, he should attack and then come back! Greko told my father—"

But De Boer was not coming back! He was dashing for the smelter entrance. Spawn's guards must have known then that there was something wrong. Their shots hissed, still fired high, and our grid sounded their startled shouts. Then as De Boer momentarily turned his head, I saw what was taking place to the side of him. A detachment of the bandits had followed the retreating guards. The bandits' shots were levelled now. Dim stabs of light in the gloom. One of the guards screamed as he was struck.

T

he attack was real! But it was over in a moment. Spawn's men, those who were not struck down, plunged away and vanished. Perona had disconnected the mine's electrical safeguards. The smelter door was sealed, but it gave before the blows of a metal bar two of De Boer's men were carrying.

In the unguarded, open strong-room, Perona, alone, was absorbed in his task of carrying the ingots of quicksilver down into the hidden compartment beneath its metal floor.

Our mirror was vague and dim now with a moving interior of the main smelter room as De Boer plunged through. At the strong-room entrance he paused, with his men crowding behind him. The figure of Perona showed in the vague light: he was stooping under the weight of one of the little ingots. Beside him yawned the small trap-opening leading downward.

He saw De Boer. He straightened, startled, and then shouted with a terrified Spanish oath. De Boer's projector was levelled: the huge, foreshortened muzzle of it blotted out half our image. It hissed its

puff of light—a blinding flash on our mirror—in the midst of which the dark shape of Perona's body showed as it crumpled and fell. Like Spawn, he met instant death.

Jetta was gripping me. "Why—" Gutierrez was with us. Hans was bending forward, watching the mirror. He muttered, "Got him!"

I saw a chance to escape, and pulled at Jetta. But at once Gutierrez stepped backward.

"Like him I will strike you dead!" he said.

No chance of escape. I had thought Gutierrez absorbed by the mirror, but he was not. I protested vehemently:

"I haven't moved, you fool. I have no intention of moving."

And now De Boer and his men were carrying up the ingots. A man for each bar. A confusion of blurred swaying shapes, and low-voiced, triumphant murmurs

from our disc.

Then De Boer was outside the smelter house, and we saw a little queue of the bandits carrying the treasure up the defile. Coming back here to the flyer. There was no pursuit; the mine guards were gone.

The triumphant bandits would be here in a few moments.

"*Ave Maria, que magnifico!*" Gutierrez had retreated to our doorway, more alert than ever upon me and Jetta. Hans called through the window-slit:

"All is well, Franks!"

"Got it?"

"Yes! Make ready."

There was a stir outside as several of the bandits hastened down the defile to meet De Boer. And the tread of others, inside the flyer at their posts, preparing for hasty departure.

Hans snapped off the audiphone and mirror. He bent over his control panel. "All is well, Gutierrez. In a moment we start."

Through the observatory window I saw the line of De Boer's men coming: Abruptly Hans gave a cry. "Look!"

A glow was in the room. A faint aura of light. And our disconnected instruments were crackling, murmuring with interference. Eavesdropping waves were here! Hans realised it: so did I.

But there was no need for theory. From outside came shouts.

"Patrol-ship!"

"Hurry!"

The ship, suddenly exposing its lights, was perfectly visible above us. Five thousand feet up, possibly. A tiny silver bird in the moonlight: but even with the naked eye I could see by its light pattern that it was the official Porto Rican patrol-liner. It saw us down

here: recognized this bandit flyer, no doubt.

And it was coming down!

There was a confusion as the bandits rushed aboard. The patrol was dropping in a swift spiral. I watched tensely, holding Jetta, with the turmoil of the embarking bandits around me. Gutierrez stood with levelled weapon.

"They have not moved, Commander."

De Boer was here. The treasure was aboard.

"Ready, Hans. Lift us."

The landing portes clanged as they closed. Hans shoved at his switches. I heard the helicopter engines thumping. A vertical lift: there was no space in this rocky defile for any horizontal take-away.

He was very calm, this De Boer. He sat in a chair at a control-bank of instruments unfamiliar to me.

"Full power, Hans: I tell you. Lift us!"

The ship was quivering. We lifted. The rocks of the gully dropped away. But the patrol-ship was directly over us. Was De Boer rushing into a collision?

"Now, forward, Hans."

We poised for the level flight. Did De Boer think he could out-distance this patrol-ship, the swiftest type of flyer in the Service? I knew that was impossible.

The silver ship overhead was circling, watchful. And as we levelled for forward flight it shot a warning searchlight beam down across our bow, ordering us to land.

De Boer laughed. "They think they have us!"

I saw his hand go to a switch. A warning siren resounded through our corridor, warning the bandits of De Boer's next move. But I did not know it then: the thing caught me unprepared.

De Boer flung another switch. My senses reeled. I heard Jetta cry out. My arm about her tightened.

A moment of strange whirling unreality. The control room seemed fading about me. The tube-lights dimmed. A green glow took their place—a lurid sheen in which the cubby and the tense faces of De Boer and Hans showed with ghastly pallor. Everything was unreal. The voices of De Boer and Hans sounded with a strange tonelessness. Stripped of the timber that made one differ from the other. Hollow ghosts of human voices. By the sound I could not tell which was De Boer and which was Hans.

The corridor was dark; all the lights on the ship faded into this horrible dead green. The window beside me had a film on it. A dead, dark opening where moonlight had been. Then I realized that I was beginning to see through it once more. Starlight. Then the moonlight.

We had soared almost level with the descending patrol-ship. We went past it, a quarter of a mile away. Went past, and it did not follow. It was still circling.

I knew then what had happened. And why this bandit ship had seemed of so strange an aspect. We were invisible! At four hundred yards, even in the moonlight, the patrol could not distinguish us. Only ten of these X-flyers were in existence: they were the closest secret of the U. S. Anti-War Department. No other government had them except in impractical imitations. I had never even seen one before.

But this bandit ship was one. And I recalled that a year ago, a suppressed dispatch intimated that the Service had lost one—wrecked in the Lowlands and never found.

So this was that lost invisible flyer? De Boer, using it for smuggling, with Perona and Spawn as partners. And now, De Boer making away in it with Spawn's treasure!

The bandit's hollow, toneless, unreal chuckle sounded in the gruesome lurid green of the control room.

"I think that surprised them!"

The tiny silver shape of the baffled local patrol-ship faded behind us as we flew northward over heavy, fantastic crags; far above the tiny twinkling lights of the village of Nareda—out over the sullen dark surface of the Nares Sea.

Chapter 13: The Flight to the Bandit Stronghold

Suring this flight of some six hours—north, and then, I think, northeast—to the remote Lowland fastness where De Boer's base was located, I had no opportunity to learn much of the operation of this invisible flyer. But it was the one which had been lost. Wrecked, no doubt, and the small crew aboard it all killed. The vessel, however, was not greatly damaged: the crew were killed doubtless by escaping poisonous gases when the flyer struck.

How long it lay unfound, I cannot say. Perhaps, for days, it still maintained its invisibility, while the frantic planes of the U. S. Anti-War Department tried in vain to locate it. And then, with its magnetic batteries exhausting themselves, it must have become visible. Perona, making a solo flight upon Nareda business to Great London, came upon it. Perona, Spawn and De Boer were then in the midst of their smuggling activities. They salvaged the vessel secretly. De Boer, with an incongruous flair for mechanical science, was enabled in his bandit camp, to recondition the flyer—building a workshop for the

purpose, with money which Perona freely supplied.

Some of this I learned from De Boer, some is surmise: but I am sure it is close to the facts.

I have since had an opportunity—through my connection with this adventure which I am recording—of going aboard one of the X-flyers of the Anti-War Department, and seeing it in operation with its technical details explained to me. But since it is so important a Government secret, I cannot set it down here. The principles involved are complex: the postulates employed, and the mathematical formulae developing them in theory, are far too intricate for my understanding. Yet the practical workings are simple indeed. Some of them were understood as far back as 1920 and '30, when that pioneer of modern astrophysics, Albert Einstein, first proved that a ray of light is deflected from its normal straight path when passing through a magnetic field.

I am sorry that I cannot give here more than this vague hint of the workings of the fantastic invisible flyers which to-day are so often the subject of

speculation by the general public which never has seen them, and perhaps never will. But I think, too, that a lengthy pedantic discourse here would be out of place. And tiring. After all, I am trying to tell only what happened to me in this adventure. And to little Jetta.

A very strangely capable fellow, this young De Boer. A modern pirate: no other age could have produced him. He did not spare Perona's money, that was obvious. From his hidden camp he must have made frequent visits to the great Highland centers, purchasing scientific equipment: until now, when his path crossed mine. I found him surrounded by most of the every-day devices of our modern world. The village of Nareda was primitive: backward. Save for its modern lights, a few local audiphones and image-finders, and its official etheric connections with other world capitals, it might have been a primitive Latin American village of a hundred years ago.

But not so De Boer's camp, which presently I was to see. Nor this, his flyer, with which his smuggling activities had puzzled Hanley's Office for so many

months. There was nothing primitive here.

De Boer himself was a swaggering villain. I saw him now with his cloak discarded, in the normal tubelights of the control room when, after a time, the mechanism of invisibility of the flyer was shut off. A fellow of six feet and a half at the very least, this De Boer. Heavy, yet with his great height and strength, lean and graceful. He wore a fabric shirt, with a wide-rolled collar. A wide belt of tanned hide, with lighters, a little electron drink-cooler and other nick-nackeries hanging from tasseled cords—and a naked, ugly-looking knife blade clipped beside a holster which held an old-fashioned exploding projector of leaden steel-tipped bullets.

His trousers were of leather, wide-flaring, ending at his brawny bare knees, with wide-cut, limp leather boots flapping about his calves in ancient piratical fashion. They had flaring soles, these shoes, for walking upon the Lowland caked ooze. The uppers were useless: I rather think he wore them because they were picturesque. He was a handsome fellow, with rough-hewn features. A wide mouth, and very

white, even teeth. A cruel mouth, when it went grim. But the smile was intriguing: I should think particularly so to women.

He had a way with him, this devil-may-care bandit. Strange mixture of a pirate of old and an outlaw of our modern world. With a sash at his waist, a red handkerchief about his forehead, and a bloody knife between his teeth. I could have fancied him a fabled pirate of the Spanish Main. A few hundred years ago when these dry Lowlands held the tossing seas. But I had seen him, so far, largely seated quietly in his chair at his instrument table, a cigarette dangling from his lips, and, instead of a red bandanna about his forehead, merely the elastic band holding the lens of his image-finder. It caught in the locks of his curly black hair. He pushed it askew; and then, since he did not need it now, discarded it altogether.

Where we went I could not surmise, except that we flew low over the sullen black waters of the Nares Sea and then headed northeast. We kept well below the zero-height, with the dark crags of the Lowlands passing under us.

The night grew darker. Storm clouds obscured the moon; and it was then that De Boer shut off the mechanism of invisibility. The control room, with only the watchful Gutierrez now in it—besides De Boer, Jetta and myself—was silent and orderly. But there were sounds of roistering from down the ship's corridor. The bandits, with this treasure of the radiumized quicksilver ingots aboard, were already triumphantly celebrating.

I sat whispering with Jetta. De Boer, busy with charts and navigational instruments, ignored us, and Gutierrez, so long as we did not move, seemed not to object to our whispers.

The night slowly passed. De Boer served us food, calling to one of his men to shove a slide before us. For himself, he merely drank his coffee and an alcoholic drink at his instrument table, while absorbed in his charts.

The roistering of the men grew louder. De Boer leaped to his feet, cursed them roundly, then went back to his calculations. He stood once before Jetta,

regarding her with a strange, slow smile which made my heart pound. But he turned away in a moment.

The bandits, for all De Boer's admonitions, were now ill-conditioned for handling this flyer. But I saw, through the small grid-opening in the control room ceiling, the pilot in his cubby upon the wing-top. He sat alert and efficient, with his lookout beside him.

The night presently turned really tumultuous, with a great wind overhead, and storm clouds of ink, shot through occasionally by lightning flashes. We flew lower, at minus 2,000 feet, on the average. The heavy air was sultry down here, with only a dim blurred vista of the depths beneath us. I fancied that now we were bending eastward, out over the great basin pit of the mid-Atlantic area. No vessels passed us, or, if they did, I did not sight them.

De Boer had a detector on his table. Occasionally it would buzz with calls: liners or patrols in our general neighborhood. He ignored them with a sardonic smile. Once or twice, when our dim lights might have been sighted, he altered our course sharply. And,

when at one period we passed over the lights of some Lowland settlement, he flung us again into invisibility until we were beyond range.

I had, during these hours, ample opportunity to whisper with Jetta. But there was so little for us to say. I knew all of Spawn's and Perona's plot. Both were dead: it was De Boer with whom we were menaced now. And as I saw his huge figure lounging at his table, and his frowning, intent face, the vision of the aged, futile Perona, who had previously been my adversary, seemed inoffensive indeed.

De Boer obviously was pleased with himself. He had stolen half a million dollars of treasure, and was making off with it to his base in the depths. He would smuggle these ingots into the world markets at his convenience; months from now, probably. Meanwhile, what did he intend to do with me? And Jetta? Ransom me? I wondered how he could manage it. And the thought pounded me. What about Jetta? I felt now that she was all the world to me. Her safety, beyond any thought of smugglers or treasure, was all that concerned me. But what was I going to do about it?

I pressed her hand. "Jetta, you're not too frightened, are you?"

"No, Philip."

Her mind, I think, was constantly on her father, lying dead back there on his garden path. I had not spoken of him, save once. She threatened instant tears, and I stopped.

"Do not be too frightened. We'll get out of this."

"Yes."

"He can't escape. Jetta; he can't hide. Why, in a day or so all the patrols of the United States Lowland Service will be after us!"

But if the patrol-ships assailed De Boer, if he found things going badly—he could so easily kill Jetta and me. He might be caught, but we would never come through it alive.

My thoughts drifted along, arriving nowhere, just

circling in the same futile rounds. I was aware of Jetta falling asleep beside me, her face against my shoulder, her fingers clutching mine. She looked like a half grown, slender, ragged boy. But her woman's hair lay thick on my arm, and one of the dark tresses fell to my hand. I turned my fingers in it. This strange little woman. Was my love for her foredoomed to end in tragedy? I swore then that I would not let it be so.

Chapter 14: Jetta Takes a Hand

I came from my reverie to find De Boer before me. He was standing with legs planted wide, arms folded across his deep chest, and on his face an ironic smile.

"So tired! My little captives, *di mi!* You look like babes lost in a wood."

I disengaged myself from Jetta, resting her against a cushion, and she did not awaken. I stood up, fronting De Boer.

"What are you going to do with me?" I demanded.

He held his ironic smile. "Take you to my camp. You'll be well hidden, no one can follow me. My X-flyer's a very handy thing to have, isn't it?"

"So you're the smuggler I was sent after?"

That really amused him. "Er—yes. Those tricksters, Perona and Spawn—we were what you would call partners. He had—the perfumed Perona—what he

thought was a clever scheme for us. I was to take all the risk, and he and Spawn get most of the money. Chah! They thought I was imbecile—pretending to attack a treasure and being such a fool that I would not seize it for myself! Not De Boer!" He chuckled. "Well, so very little did they know me. No treasure yet touched De Boer's fingers without lingering!"

He was in a talkative mood, and drew up his chair and slouched in it. I saw that he had been drinking some alcholite beverage, not enough to befuddle him, but enough to take the keen edge off his wits, and make him want to talk.

"Sit down, Grant."

"I'll stand."

"As you like."

"What are you going to do with me?" I demanded again. "Try to ransom me for a fat price from the United States?"

He smiled sourly. "You need not be sarcastic, young lad. The better for you if I get a ransom."

"Then I hope you get it."

"Perona's idea," he added. "I will admit it looked possible: I did not know then you had Government protection." He went grim. "That was Perona and Spawn's trickery. Well, they paid for it. No one plays De Boer false and lives to tell it. Perona and Spawn wanted to get rid of you—because you annoyed them."

"Did I?"

"With the little Jetta, I fancy." His gaze went to the sleeping Jetta and back to me. "Perona was very sensitive where this little woman was concerned. Why not? An oldish fool like him—"

I could agree with that, but I did not say so.

I said, "You'd better cast me loose, Jetta and me. I suppose you realize, De Boer, that you'll have the

patrols like a pack of hounds after you. Jetta is a Nareda citizen: the United States will take that up. There's the theft of the treasure. And as you say, I'm a Government agent."

He nodded. "Your Government is over-zealous in protecting its agents. That I know, Grant. I might have left you alone, there in the garden, when I realized it. But that, by damn, was too late! Live men talk. Any way, if I cannot ransom you, to kill you is very easy. And dead men are shut-mouthed."

"I'm still alive, De Boer."

He eyed me. "You talk brave."

This condescending, amused giant!

I retorted. "How are you going to ransom me?"

"That," he said. "I have not yet planned it. A delicate business."

I ventured, "And Jetta?" My heart was beating fast.

"Jetta," he said with a sudden snap, "is none of your business."

Again his gaze went toward her. "I might marry her: why not? I am not wholly a villain. I could marry her legally in Cape Town, with all the trappings of clergy—and be immune from capture under the laws there. If she is seventeen. I have forgotten her age, it's been so long since I knew her. Is she seventeen? She does not look it."

I said shortly. "I don't know how old she is."

"But we can ask her when she awakens, can't we?"

He was amusing himself with me. And yet, looking back on it now, I believe he was more than half serious. From his pouch he drew a small cylinder.

"Have a drink, Grant. After all I bear you no ill-will. A man can but follow his trade: you were trying to be a good Government agent."

"Thanks."

"And then you may make it possible for me to pick a nice ransom. Here."

"I hope so." I declined the drink.

"Afraid for your wits?"

I said impulsively, "I want all my wits to make sure you handle this ransom properly, De Boer. I'm as interested as you are: in that at least, we are together."

He grinned, tipped the cylinder at his lips for a long drink.

"Quite so—a mutual interest. Let us be friends over it."

His gaze wandered back to Jetta. He added slowly:

"She is very lovely, Grant. A little woodland flower, just ready for plucking." A sentimental tone, but there was in his expression a ribald flippancy that sent a shudder through me. "She has quite overcome you,

Grant. Well, why not me as well? I am certainly more of a man than you. We must admit that Perona had a good eye."

My thoughts were wandering. Suppose I could not find an opportunity to escape with Jetta? De Boer might successfully ransom me and take her to Cape Town. Or if he feared that to try for the ransom would be too dangerous, doubtless he would kill me out of hand. An ill outcome indeed! Nor could I forget that there was half a million of treasure involved.

It was obvious to me that Hanley would not permit the patrol-ships to attack De Boer with the lives of Jetta and myself at stake. Hanley knew, or suspected, that De Boer was operating an invisible flyer, but I did not see how that could help Hanley much. Markes, acting for Nareda, would doubtless be willing to ransom Jetta: the United States would ransom me. I must urge the ransom plan, because for all the money in the world I would not endanger Jetta, nor let this bandit carry her off.

Or could I escape with her, and still find some means

to save the treasure? It was Jetta's treasure now, two-thirds of it, for it had legally belonged to her father. Could I save it, and her as well?

Not by any move of mine, here now on this flyer. That was impossible. In De Boer's camp, perhaps. But that, too, I doubted. He was too clever a scoundrel to be lax in guarding me.

But in the effecting of a ransom—the exchange of me, and perhaps Jetta, for a sum of money—that would be a delicate transaction, and some little thing could easily go wrong for De Boer. There would be my chance. I would have to make something go wrong! Get in his confidence now so that I would have some say in arranging the details of the ransom. Make him think I was only concerned for my own safety. Appear clever in helping plan the exchange. And then so manipulate the thing that I could escape with Jetta and save the treasure—and the ransom money as well. And capture De Boer, since that was what Hanley had sent me out to accomplish.

Thoughts fly swiftly. All this flashed to me. I had no

details as yet. But that I must get into De Boer's confidence stood but clearly.

I said abruptly, "De Boer, since we are to be friends—"

"So you prefer to sit down now?"

"Yes." I had drawn a small settle to face him. "De Boer, do you intend to ask a ransom for Jetta?"

"You insist with that question?"

"That is my way. Then we can understand each other. Do you?"

"No," he said shortly.

I frowned. "I think I could get you a big price."

"I think I should prefer the little Jetta, Grant."

I held myself outwardly unmoved. "I don't blame you. But you will ransom me? It can be worked out. I have some ideas."

"Yes," he agreed. "It can be worked perhaps. I have not thought of details yet. You are much concerned for your safety, Grant? Fear not."

An amused thought evidently struck him. He added. "It occurs to me how easy, if I am going to ransom you, it will be for me to send you back dead. You might, if I send you back alive, tell them a lot of things about me."

"I will not talk."

"Not," he said, "if I close your mouth for good."

I had no retort. There was no answering such logic; and with his murders of Spawn and Perona, and the deaths of some of the police guards at the mine, the murder of me would not put him in much worse a position.

He was laughing ironically. Suddenly he checked himself.

"Well, Jetta! So you have awakened?"

Jetta was sitting erect. How long she had been awake, what she had heard. I could not say. Her gaze went from De Boer to me, and back again.

"Yes, I am awake."

It seemed that the look she flashed me carried a warning. But whatever it was, I had no chance of pondering it, for it was driven from my mind by surprise at her next words.

"Awake, yes! And interested, hearing this Grant bargain with you for his life."

It surprised De Boer as well. But the alcholate had dulled his wits, and Jetta realized this, and presumed upon it.

"Ho!" exclaimed De Boer. "Our little bird is angry!"

"Not angry. It is contempt."

Her look to me now held contempt. It froze me with startled chagrin; but only for an instant, and then the

truth swept me. Strange Jetta! I had thought of her only as a child; almost, but not quite a woman. A frightened little woodland fawn.

"Contempt, De Boer. Is he not a contemptuous fellow, this American?"

Again I caught her look and understood it. This was a different Jetta. No longer helplessly frightened, but a woman, fighting. She had heard De Boer calmly saying that he might send me back dead—and she was fighting now for me.

De Boer took another drink, and stared at her. "What is this?"

She turned away. "Nothing. But if you are going to ransom me—"

"I am not, little bird."

She showed no aversion for him, and it went to his head, stronger than the drink. "Never would I ransom you!"

He reached for her, but nimbly she avoided him. Acting, but clever enough not to overdo it. I held myself silent: I had caught again the flash of a warning gaze from her. She had fathomed my purpose. Get his confidence. Beguile him. And woman is so much cleverer than the trickiest man at beguiling!

"Do not touch me, De Boer! He tried that. He held my hand in the moonlight—to woo me with his clever words."

"Hah! Grant, you hear her?"

"And I find him now not a man, but a craven—"

"But you will find me a man, Jetta." De Boer was hugely amused. "See Grant, we are rivals! You and Perona, then you and me. It is well for you that I fear you not, or I would run my knife through you now."

I could not mistake Jetta's shudder. But De Boer did not see it, for she covered it by impulsively putting her hand upon his arm.

"Did you—did you kill my father?" She stumbled over the question. But she asked it with a childlike innocence sufficiently real to convince him.

"I? Why—" He recovered from his surprise. "Why no, little bird. Who told you that I did?"

"No one. I—no one has said anything about it." She added slowly, "I hoped that it was not you, De Boer."

"Me? Oh no: it was an accident." He shot me a menacing glance. "I will explain it all. Jetta. Your father and I were friends for years—"

"Yes. I know. Often he spoke to me of you. Many times I asked him to let me meet you."

They were ignoring me. But Gutierrez, lurking in the door oval, was not: I was well aware of that.

"I remember you from years ago, little Jetta."

"And I remember you."

I understand the rationality of her purpose. She could easily get De Beer's confidence. She had known him when a child. Her father had been his business partner, presumably his friend. And I saw her now cleverly altering her status here. She had been a captive, allied with me. She was changing that. She was now Spawn's daughter, here with her dead father's friend.

She turned a gaze of calm aversion upon me. "Unless you want him here, De Boer. I would rather talk to you—without him."

He leaped to his feet. "Hah! that pleases me, little Jetta! Gutierrez, take this fellow away."

The Spanish-American came slouching forward. "The girl's an old friend, Commander? You never told me that."

"Because it is no business of yours. Take him away. Seal him in D-cubby."

I said sullenly. "I misjudged both of you."

Jetta's gaze avoided me. As Gutierrez shoved me roughly down the corridor, De Boer laughed, and his voice came back: "Do not be afraid. We will find some safe way of ransoming you—dead or alive!"

I was flung on a bunk in one of the corridor cubbies, and the door sealed upon me.

Part 3

Chapter 15: In the Bandit Camp

The dark cave, with its small spots of tube-light mounted upon movable tripods, was eerie with grotesque swaying shadows. The bandit camp. Hidden down here in the depths of the Mid-Atlantic Lowlands. An inaccessible retreat, this cave in what once was the ocean floor. Only a few years ago water had been here, water black and cold and soundless. Tremendous pressure, with three thousand or more fathoms of the ocean above it. Fishes had roamed these passages, no doubt. Strange monsters of the deeps: sightless, or with eyes like phosphorescent torches.

Black-garbed figures move in ghastly greenness as the invisible flyer speeds on its business of ransom.

But the water was gone now. Blue ooze was caked upon the cave floor. Eroded walls; niches and tiny gullies; crevices and an arching dome high overhead. A fantastic cave—no one, seeing it as I saw it that morning at dawn, could have believed it was upon this earth. From where De Boer had put me—on the

flat top of a small, butte-like dome near the upper end of the sloping cave floor—all the area of this strange bandit camp was visible to me.

A little tent of parchment was set upon the dome-top.

"Yours," said De Boer, with a grin. "Make yourself comfortable. Gutierrez will be your willing servant, until we see about this ransom. It will have to be one very large, for you are a damn trouble to me, Grant. And a risk. Food will come shortly. Then you can sleep: I think you will want it."

He leaped from the little butte, leaving the taciturn ever-watchful Gutierrez sitting cross-legged on the ledge near me, with his projector across his knees.

The cave was irregularly circular, with perhaps, a hundred-feet diameter and a ceiling fifty feet high. A drift of the fetid, Lowland air went through it—into a rift at this upper end, and out through the lower passage entrance which sloped downward thirty feet and debouched upon a rippled ramp of ooze outside. It was daylight out there now. From my perch I could

see the sullen heavy walls of a ridge. Mist hung against them, but the early morning sunlight came down in shafts penetrating the mist and striking the oily surface of a spread of water left here in the depths of a cauldron.

De Boer's flyer was outside. We had landed by the shore of the sea, and the bandits had pushed the vehicle into an arching recess which seemed as though made to hide it. All this camp was hidden. Arching crags of the ridge-wall jutted out over the cave entrance. From above, any passing flyer—even though well below the zero-height—would see nothing but this black breathing sea, lapping against its eroded, fantastic shore-line.

Within the cave, there was only a vague filtering daylight from the lower entrance, a thin shaft from the rift overhead, and the blue tube-light, throwing great shadows of the tents and the men against the black rock walls.

There seemed perhaps a hundred of the bandits here. A semi-permanent camp, by its aspect. Grey

parchment tents were set up about the floor, some small, others more elaborate. It seemed as though it were a huddled little group of buildings in the open air, instead of in a cave. One tent, just at the foot of my dome, seemed De Boer's personal room. He went into it after leaving me, and came out to join the main group of his fellows near the center of the cave where a large electron stove, and piped water from a nearby subterranean freshet, and a long table set with glassware and silver, stood these men for kitchen and eating place.

The treasure had not yet been brought in from the flyer. But, from what I overheard, it seemed that the radiumized ingots of the ill-fated Spawn and Perona were to be stored for a year at least, here in this cave. I could see the strong-room cubby. It was hewn from the rock of the cave wall, its sealed-grid door-oval set with metal bars.

I saw also what seemed a small but well-equipped machine shop, in a recess room at one side of the cave. Men were working in there under the light of tubes. And there was a niche hollowed out in the wall

to make a room for De Boer's instruments—ether-wave receivers and transmitters, the aerial receiving wires of which stretched in banks along the low ceiling.

There was no activity in there now, except for one man who was operating what I imagined might be an aerial insulator, guarding the place from any prying search-vibrations.

The main cave was a bustle of activity. The arriving bandits were greeting their fellows and exchanging news. The men who had been left here were jubilant at the success of the Chief's latest enterprise. Bottles were unsealed and they began to prepare the morning meal.

My presence caused considerable comment. I was a complication at which most of the men were ill pleased, especially when the arriving bandits told who I was, and that the patrols of the United States were doubtless even now trying to find me.

But De Boer silenced the grumbling with rough

words.

"My business, not yours. But you will take your share of his ransom, won't you? Have done!"

And Jetta, she had caused comment also. But when the bottles were well distributed the grumbling turned to ribald banter which made me shudder that it should fall upon Jetta's ears. De Boer had kept his men away from her, shoving them aside when they crowded to see her. She was in a little tent now, not far from the base of my ledge.

My meal presently was brought from where most of the bandits now were roistering at the long table in the center of the cave.

"Eat," said Gutierrez. "I eat with you, Americano. *Madre Mia*, when you are ransomed away from here it will please me! De Boer is fool, with taking such a chance."

With the meal ended, another guard came to take Gutierrez' place and I was ordered into my tent. The

routine of the camp, it seemed, was to use the daylight hours for the time of sleep. There were lookouts and guards at the entrance, and a little arsenal of ready weapons stocked in the passage. The men at the table were still at their meal. It would end, I did not doubt, by most of them falling into heavy alcoholic slumber.

I was tired, poisoned by the need of sleep. I lay on fabric cushions piled in one corner of my tent. But sleep would not come; my thoughts ran like a tumbling mountain torrent, and as aimlessly. I hoped that Jetta was sleeping. De Boer was now at the center table with his men. Hans was guarding Jetta. He was a phlegmatic, heavy Dutchman, and seemed decent enough.

I wondered what Hanley might be doing to rescue me. But as I thought about it, I could only hope that his patrols would not find us out here. An attack and most certainly De Boer and his men in their anger would kill me out of hand. And possibly Jetta also.

I had not had a word alone with Jetta since that scene

in the control room. When we disembarked, she had stayed close by De Boer. But I knew that Jetta had fathomed my purpose, that she was working to the same end. We must find a way of arranging the ransom which would give us an opportunity to escape.

I pondered it. And at last an idea came to me, vague in all its details, as yet. But it seemed feasible, and I thought it would sound plausible to De Boer. I would watch my chance and explain it to him. Then I realized how much aid Jetta would be. She would agree with my plan, and help me convince him. And when the crucial time came, though I would be a captive, watched by Gutierrez, bound and gagged, perhaps—Jetta would be at liberty. De Boer and Gutierrez would not be on their guard with her.

I drifted off to sleep, working out the details of my plan.

Chapter 16: Planning The Ransom

I was awakened by the sound of low voices outside my tent. Jetta's voice, and De Boer's, and, mingled with them, the babble of the still hilarious bandits in the center of the cave. But there were only a few left now; most of them had fallen into heavy slumber. I had been asleep for several hours, I figured. The daylight shadows outside the cave entrance showed that it was at least noon.

I lay listening to the voices which had awakened me. De Boer was saying:

"But why, Jetta, should I bother with your ideas? I know what is best. This ransom is too dangerous to arrange." His voice sounded calmly good humored; I could hear in it now more than a trace of alcoholic influence. He added, "I think we had better kill him and have done. My men think so, too; already I have caused trouble with them, by bringing him."

It jolted me into full wakefulness.

Jetta's voice: "No! I tell you it can be arranged, Hendrick. I have been thinking of it, planning it—"

"Child! Well what? The least I can do is listen; I am no pig-headed American. Say it out. What would you do to ransom him safely?"

They were just at the foot of my ledge, in front of De Boer's tent. Their voices rose so that I could hear them plainly. For all my start at being awakened to hear my death determined upon, I recall that I was almost equally startled by Jetta's voice. Her tone, her manner with De Boer. Whatever opportunities they had had for talking together, the change in their relationship was remarkable. De Boer was now flushed with drink, but for all that he had obviously still a firm grip upon his wits. And I heard Jetta now urging her ideas upon him with calm confidence. An outward confidence; yet under it there was a vibrant emotion suppressed within her even tone; a hint of tremulous fright; a careful calculation of the effect she might be making upon De Boer. Had he not been intoxicated—with drink and with her—he might have sensed it. But he did not.

"Hendrick, it can be done. A big price. Why not?"

"Because if we are trapped and caught, of what use is the price we might have gotten? Tell me that, wise one?"

"We will not be trapped. And suppose you kill him—won't they track you just the same, Hendrick?"

"No. We would leave his body on some crag where it would be found. The patrols would more quickly tire of chasing a killer when the damage is done. They want Grant alive."

"Then let them have him alive—for a big price. Hendrick, listen—"

"Well, what?" he demanded again. "What is your plan?"

"Why—well, Hendrick, like this—"

She stammered, and I realized that she had no plausible plan. She was fumbling, groping, urging

upon De Boer that I must be ransomed alive. But she had not good reason for it.

"Well?" he prompted impatiently.

"You—can you raise Great New York on the audiphone, Hendrick?"

"Yes," he said.

"Hanley's office?"

"Yes, no doubt. Chah—that would give him a start, wouldn't it? De Boer calmly calling him!"

He was laughing. I heard what sounded as though he were gulping another drink. "By damn, Jetta, you are not the timid bird you look. Call Hanley, eh?"

"Yes. Can it be done and still bar his instruments from locating us?"

"Yes, and bar his television. Believe it, Jetta. I have every device for hiding. But—call Hanley!"

"Why not? ... Hendrick, stop!"

I started. It seemed that he was embracing her; forcing half drunken caresses upon her.

I scrambled through my tent doorway, but Gutierrez, who had come back on guard, at once seized me.

"*Hui*—so haste! Back, you."

The Spaniard spoke softly, and he was grinning. "The chief plays with woman's words, no? Charming señorita, though she dresses like a boy. But that is the more charming, eh? Listen to her, Grant."

He gripped me, and prodded my side with the point of his knife blade. "Lie down Americano: we will listen."

Jetta was insisting. "Hendrick, stop!"

"Why?"

I could see them now. They were seated before the opening of De Boer's tent. A little stove in front of

them. Coffee for Jetta, who was seated cross-legged, pouring it; a bowl of drink for De Boer. And some baked breadstuff dainties on a platter.

"Hendrick—"

She pushed him away as he leaned to embrace her. Although she was laughing with him, I could only guess at the chill of fear that might be in her heart.

"Foolish, Hendrick!"

"Foolish little bird, Jetta mine."

"You—it is you who are foolish, Hendrick." She slid from his embrace and held her brimming coffee cup balanced before her, to ward him off. "You think I am really clever, so trust me, Hendrick. Oh there is a great future for us: you say I inspire you; let me! Hendrick De Boer, Chieftain of the Lowlands! My father would have helped you become that. You can build a little empire. Hendrick—why not? Father wanted to make you President of Nareda. Why not build your own Lowland Empire? We have a hundred

men now? Why not gather a thousand? Ten thousand?
An empire!"

"*Ave Maria*," from Gutierrez. "This *niña* thinks big thoughts!"

De Boer raised his bowl. "An empire—De Boer of the Lowlands! Go on; you amuse me. We have a nice start, with this treasure."

"Yes. And the ransom money. But you will take me first to Cape Town, Hendrick? We can be married there: I am seventeen in a month."

"Of course, Jetta. Haven't I promised?" There was no convincingness to me in the way he said it. "Of course. To Cape Town for our marriage."

"Stop! Hendrick, be serious!" He had reached for her again. "Don't be a fool, Hendrick."

"Very well," he said. "I am all serious. What is your plan?"

She was more resourceful this time. She retorted, "This craven Grant, he fears for his life—but he is very smart, Hendrick. I think he is scheming every moment how he can be safely ransomed."

"Hah! No doubt of that!"

"And he has had experience with Chief Hanley. He knows Hanley's methods, how Hanley will act. Let us see what Grant says of this."

She had no plan of her own, but she hoped that by now I had one! And she was making an opportunity for me to put it before De Boer.

He said, "There is sense to that, Jetta. If there is any way to fool Hanley, that craven American has no doubt thought it out."

She held another drink before him. "Yes. Let us see what he says."

He drank; and again as they were near together he caressed her.

"What a schemer you are, little bird. You and I are well matched, eh?"

"Gutierrez may be watching us!" she warned.

They suddenly looked up and saw Gutierrez and me.

"Hah!" Fortunately it struck De Boer into further good humor. "Hah—we have an audience! Bring down the prisoner, Gutierrez! Let us see if his wits can get him out of this plight. Come down, Grant!"

Gutierrez shoved me down the ladder ahead of him. De Boer stood up and seized me. His great fingers dug into my shoulders.

"Sit down, American! It seems you are not to die. *Perhaps* not."

The strength of his fingers was hurting me: he hoped I would wince. Mine was now an ignominious role, indeed, yet I knew it was best.

I gasped. "Don't do that: you hurt!"

He chuckled and cast me loose. I added, with a show of spirit, "You are a bullying giant. Just because you are bigger than I am—"

"Hear that, Jetta? The American finds courage with his coming ransom!"

He shoved me to the ground. Gutierrez grinned, and withdrew a trifle. Jetta avoided meeting my gaze.

"Have some coffee," De Boer offered. "Alcohol is not good for you. Now say: have you any suggestions on how I can safely ransom you?"

It seemed that Jetta was holding her breath with anxiety. But I answered with an appearance of ready eagerness. "Yes. I have. I can arrange it with complete safety to you, if you give me a chance."

"You've got your chance. Speak out."

"You promise you will return me alive? Not hurt me?"

"De duvel—yes! You have my promise. But your plan

had better be very good."

"It is."

I told it carefully. The details of it grew with my words. Jetta joined in it. But, most of all, it did indeed sound feasible. "But it must be done at once," I urged. "The weather is right; to-night it will be dark; overcast; not much wind. Don't you think so?"

He sent Gutierrez to the cave's instrument room to read the weather forecast instruments. My guess was right.

"To-night then," I said. "If we linger, it only gives Hanley more time to plan trickery."

"Let us try and raise him now," Jetta suggested.

The Dutchman, Hans, had joined us. He too, seemed to think my ideas were good.

Except for the guards at the cave entrance, all the other bandits were far gone in drink. With Hans and

Gutierrez, we went to the instrument room to call Hanley. As we crossed the cave, with Hans and De Boer walking ahead together, De Boer spoke louder than he realized, and the words came back to me.

"Not so bad, Hans? We will use him—but I am not a fool. I'll send him back dead, not alive! A little knife-thrust, just at the end! Safest for us, eh, Hans?"

Chapter 17: Within the Black Sack

We left the bandit stronghold just after nightfall that same day. There were five of us on the X-flyer. Jetta and De Boer, Hans and Gutierrez and myself. The negotiations with Hanley had come through satisfactorily; to De Boer, certainly, for he was in a triumphant mood as they cast off the aero and we rose over the mist-hung depths.

It was part of my plan, this meager manning of the bandit ship. But it was mechanically practical: there was only Hans needed at the controls for this short-time flight: with De Boer plotting his course, working out his last details—and with Gutierrez to guard me.

De Boer had been quite willing to take no other men—and most of them were too far gone in their cups to be of much use. I never have fathomed De Boer's final purpose. He promised Jetta now that when I was successfully ransomed he would proceed to Cape Town by comfortable night flights and marry her. It pleased Gutierrez and Hans, for they wanted none of their comrades. The treasure was still on the flyer.

The ransom gold would be added to it. I think that De Boer, Gutierrez and Hans planned never to return to their band. Why, when the treasure divided so nicely among three, break it up to enrich a hundred?

I shall never forget Hanley's grim face as we saw it that afternoon on De Boer's image-grid. My chief sat at his desk with all his location detectors impotent, listening to my disembodied voice explaining what I wanted him to do. My humble, earnest, frightened desire to be ransomed safely at all costs! My plea that he do nothing to try and trap De Boer!

It hurt me to appear so craven. But with it all, I knew that Hanley understood. He could imagine my leering captor standing at my elbow, prompting my words, dictating my very tone—prodding me with a knife in the ribs. I tried, by every shade of meaning, to convey to Hanley that I hoped to escape and save the ransom money. And I think that he guessed it, though he was wary in the tone he used for De Boer to hear. He accepted, unhesitatingly, De Boer's proposition: assured us he would do nothing to assail De Boer; and never once did his grim face convey a hint of anything

but complete acquiescence.

We had President Markes on the circuit. De Boer, with nothing to lose, promised to return Jetta with me. In gold coin, sixty thousand U. S. dollar-standards for me; a third as much from Nareda, for Jetta.

The details were swiftly arranged. We cut the circuit. I had a last look at Hanley's face as the image of it faded. He seemed trying to tell me to do the best I could; that he was powerless, and would do nothing to jeopardize my life and Jetta's. Everything was ready for the affair to be consummated at once. The weather was right; there was time for Hanley and De Boer each comfortably to reach the assigned meeting place.

We flew, for the first hour, nearly due west. The meeting place was at 35 deg. N. by 59 deg. W., a few hundred miles east by north of the fairy-like mountaintop of the Bermudas. Our charts showed the Lowlands there to run down to what once was measured as nearly three thousand fathoms—called now eighteen thousand feet below the zero-height. A

broken region, a depth-ridge fairly level, and no Lowland sea, nor any settlements in the neighborhood.

The time was set at an hour before midnight. No mail, passenger or freight flyers were scheduled to pass near there at that hour, and, save for some chance private craft, we would be undisturbed. The ransom gold was available to Hanley. He had said he would bring it in his personal Wasp.

The details of the exchange were simple. Hanley, with only one mechanic, would hover at the zero-height, his Wasp lighted so that we could see it plainly. The wind drift, according to forecast, would be southerly. At 11 P.M. Hanley would release from his Wasp a small helium-gas balloon-car—a ten-foot basket with the supporting gas bag above it, weighted so that it would slowly descend into the depths, with a southern drift.

Our flyer, invisible and soundless, would pick up the balloon-car at some point in its descent. The gold would be there, in a black casket. De Boer would take

the gold, deposit Jetta and me in the car, and release it again. And when the balloon finally settled to the rocks beneath, Hanley could pick it up. No men would be hidden by Hanley in that basket. De Boer had stipulated that when casting loose the balloon, its car must be swept by Hanley with a visible electronic ray. No hidden men could withstand that blast!

Such was the arrangement with Hanley. I was convinced that he intended to carry it out to the letter. He would have his own invisible X-flyer in the neighborhood, no doubt. But it would not interfere with the safe transfer of Jetta and me.

That De Boer would carry out his part, Hanley could only trust. He had said so this afternoon bluntly. And De Boer had laughed and interposed his voice in our circuit.

"Government money against these two lives, Hanley! Of course you have to trust me!"

It was a flight, for us, of something less than four hours to the meeting place. Hans was piloting, seated

alone in the little cubby upon the forward wing-base, directly over the control room. De Boer, with Jetta at his side, worked over his course and watched his instrument banks. I was, at the start of the flight, lashed in a chair of the control room, my ankles and wrists tied and Gutierrez guarding me.

Jetta did not seem to notice me. She did not look at me, nor I at her. She pretended interest only in the success of the transfer; in her father's treasure on board, the coming ransom money, and then a flight to Cape Town, dividing the treasure only with Hans and Gutierrez; and in her marriage with De Boer. She said she wanted me returned to Hanley alive; craven coward that I was, still I did not deserve death. De Boer had agreed. But I knew that at last, as they tumbled me into the basket, someone would slip a knife into me!

I had, as we came on board, just the chance for a few whispered sentences with Jetta. But they were enough! We both knew what we had to do. Desperate expedient, indeed! It seemed more desperate now as the time approached than it had when I planned it.

The weather at 7 P.M. was heavily overcast. Sultry, breathless, with solid, wide-flung cloud areas spread low over the zero-height. Night settled black in the Lowlands. The mists gathered.

We flew well down—under the minus two thousand-foot level—so that out of the mists the highest dome peaks often passed close beneath us.

At 8 P.M. De Boer flung on the mechanism of invisibility. The interior of the ship faded to its gruesome green darkness. My senses reeled as the current surged through me. Lashed in my chair, I sat straining my adjusting eyes, straining my hearing to cope with this gruesome unreality. And my heart was pounding. Would Jetta and I succeed? Or was our love—unspoken love, born of a glance and the pressure of our hands in that moonlit Nareda garden—was our love star-crossed, foredoomed to tragedy? A few hours, now, would tell us.

De Boer was taking no chances. He was using his greatest intensity of power, with every safeguard for complete invisibility and silence. From where I sat I

could make out the black form of Hans through the ceiling grid, at his pilot controls in the overhead cubby. A queer glow like an aura was around him. The same green radiance suffused the control room. It could not penetrate the opened windows of the ship; could not pass beyond the electro-magnetic field enveloping us. Nor could the curious hum which permeated the ship's interior get past the barrage barrier. From outside, I knew, we were invisible and inaudible.

Strange unreality, here in the control room! The black-garbed figures of De Boer and Jetta at their table were unreal, spectral. At the door oval, which I could barely see, Gutierrez lurked like a shadow. All of them, and Hans in the cubby above, were garbed in tight-fitting dead-black suits of silklene fabric. Thin, elastic as sheer silk web, opaque, lustreless. It covered their feet, legs and bodies; and their arms and hands like black, silk gloves. Their heads were helmeted with it. And they had black masks which as yet were flapped up and fastened to the helmet above their foreheads. Their faces only were exposed, tinted

a ghastly, lurid green by this strange light. It glowed and glistened like phosphorescence on their eyeballs, making them the eyes of animals in a hunter's torchlight, at night.

De Boer moved upon an errand across the control room. He was a burly black spectre in the skin-tight suit. His footfalls faintly sounded on the metal floor. They were toneless footfalls. Unreal. They might have been bells, or jangling thuds; they had lost their identity in this soundless, vibrating hum.

And he spoke, "We are making good progress, Jetta. We will be on time."

Ghastly voice! So devoid of every human timbre, every overtone shade to give it meaning, that it might have been a man's voice, or a woman's, the voice of something living, or something dead. Sepulchral. A stripped shell of voice. Yet to me, inside here with it, it was perfectly audible.

And Jetta said, "Yes, Hendrick, that is good."

A voice like his: no different.

Gruesome. Weird.

I try now to picture the scene in detail, for out of these strange conditions Jetta and I were to make our opportunity.

9 P.M. De Boer was a methodical fellow. He checked his position on the chart. He signalled the routine orders to Hans. And he gestured to Gutierrez. The movements and acts of everyone had been definitely planned. And this, too, Jetta and I had anticipated.

"Time to make him ready, Gutierrez. Bring the sack in here. I'll fasten him away."

I was not garbed like the others. They could move out on the wing runway under Hanley's eyes at short range, or climb in and out of the balloon car, and not be visible.

Gutierrez brought the sack. A dead-black fabric.

"Shall I cut him loose now from his chair,
Commander?"

"I'll do it."

De Boer drew a long knife blade, coated black, and thin and sharp as a half-length rapier. Gutierrez had one of similar fashion. No electronic weapons were in evidence, probably because the hiss of one fired would have been too loud for our barrage, and its flash too bright. But a knife thrust is dark and silent!

The Spaniard's eyes were gleaming as he approached me with the bag, as though he were thinking of that silent knife thrust he would give me at the last.

Dr. Boer said, "Stand up, Grant." He cut the fastenings that held me in my chair. But my ankles and wrists remained tied.

"Stand up, can't you?"

"Yes."

I got unsteadily to my feet. In the blurred green darkness I could see that Jetta was not looking at me. Gutierrez held the mouth of the sack open. As though I were an upright log of wood, De Boer lifted me.

"Pull it up over his feet, Gutierrez."

The oblong sack was longer than my body. They drew it over me, and bunched its top over my head. And De Boer laid me none too gently on the floor.

"Lie still. Do you get enough air?"

"Yes."

The black fabric was sufficiently porous for me to breathe comfortably inside the sack.

"All right, Gutierrez, I have the gag."

I felt them carrying me from the control room, twenty feet or so along the corridor, where a door-porte opened to a small balcony runway hung beneath the forward wing. Jutting from it was a little take-off

platform some six feet by twelve in size. It was here that the balloon-basket was to be boarded. The casket containing the ransom gold would be landed here, and the sack containing me placed in the car and cast loose. It was all within the area of invisibility of our flyer.

De Boer knelt over me, and drew back the top of the sack to expose my face.

"A little gag for you, Grant, so you will not be tempted to call out."

"I won't do that."

"You might. Well, good-by, American."

"Good-by." And I breathed, "Good-by Jetta." Would I ever see her again? Was this the end of everything for us?

He forced the gag into my mouth, tied it, and verified that my ankles and wrists were securely lashed. In the green radiance he and Gutierrez were like ghouls

prowling over me, and their muffled toneless voices, tomblike.

The sack came up over my head.

"Good-by, Grant." I could not tell which one said it. And the other chuckled.

I could feel them tying the mouth of the sack above my head. I lay stiff. Then I heard their steps. Then silence.

I moved. I might have rolled, but I did not try it. I could raise my knees within the sack—double up like a folded pocket knife—but that was all.

A long, dark silence. It seemed interminable. Was Gutierrez guarding me here in the corridor? I could not tell; I heard nothing save the vague hum of the electronite current.

It had been 9 o'clock. Then I fancied that it must be 10. And then, perhaps, almost 11. I wondered what the weather outside was like. Soon we would be

nearing the meeting place. Would Hanley be there? Would Jetta soon, very soon now, be able to do her part? I listened, horribly tense, with every interval between the thumps of my heart seeming so long a gap of waiting.

I heard a sound! A toneless, unidentifiable sound. Another like it; a little sequence of faint sounds. Growing louder. Approaching footsteps? Jetta's? I prayed so.

Then a low voice. Two voices. Both the same in quality. But from the words I could identify them.

"Hello, Gutierrez."

"*Niña*, hello."

Jetta! She had come!

"The captive is safe? No trouble?"

"No. He has not moved."

"Careful of him, Gutierrez. He is worth a lot of money to us."

"Well you say it. Señorita. In half an hour now, we will be away. Santa Maria, when this is over I shall breathe with more comfort!"

"We'll have no trouble, Gutierrez. We're almost there. In ten minutes now, or a little more."

"So soon? What time is it?"

"Well, after half-past ten. When it's over, Gutierrez, we head for Cape Town. Clever of me, don't you think, to persuade Hendrick to take us to Cape Town? Just you three men to divide all this treasure. It would be foolish to let a hundred others have it."

"True, *Niña*; true enough."

"I insisted upon you and Hans—Gutierrez, what is that?"

A silence.

"I heard nothing."

"A voice, was it?"

"The Americano?"

"No! No—the commander calling? Was it? Calling you, Gutierrez? Perhaps we have sighted Hanley's Wasp. Go! I'll stand here, and come quickly back."

Footsteps. Now! Our chance, come at last! I twisted over on my side, and lay motionless. Ah, if only those were Gutierrez' fading footfalls! And Jetta, here alone with me in the green darkness! Just for this one vital moment.

Fingers were fumbling at the top of my sack, unfastening the cord. Hands and arms came swiftly in. Fingers ran down my back as I lay on my side to admit them quickly. Fingers went fumbling at the cords that lashed my crossed wrists behind me. A knee pressed against me. A hurried, panting, half sobbing breath close over me—

Just a hurried moment. The hands withdrew. The sack went back over my head. The knees, the slight weight against me, was gone. A few seconds only.

Footsteps. The voices again.

"Was it the commander, Gutierrez?"

"No. I do not know what it was. Nothing, probably."

"The Wasp in sight?"

"Not yet, *Niña*. You had best go back: De Boer, he might be jealous of us, no? He is busy with his instruments, but should he realize you are here, talking with me—"

"Senseless, Gutierrez!"

"Is it so, *Niña*? I have no attraction? Go back to him. Gold I want, not trouble over you!"

Faint laughter.

"When we sight the Wasp, I'll call and tell you,

Gutierrez. Too bad you won't let me stay with you. I like you."

"Yes. But go now!"

Faint laughter. Footsteps. Then silence.

Our vital moment had come and passed. And Jetta had done her part; the role of action upon this dim lurid stage was now mine to play.

My hands were free.

Chapter 18: The Combat in the Green Darkness

Another interval. A dead, dark silence. I did not dare move. Gutierrez was here, within a few feet of me, probably. I wondered if he could see the outlines of the black sack. Doubtless they were very vague. But if I exposed my flesh, my face, my hands, that would at once attract his attention.

I worked the loosened cords from my wrists; moved my stiffened hands until, with returning blood, the strength came to them. I could not reach my bound ankles without doubling up my knees. I did not dare chance such a movement of the sack. But, after a moment, I got my hands in front of me.

Then I took the gag from my mouth and, with a cautious hand, pried at the top of the sack where it was bunched over my head. Its fastening was loose.

Another interval. A dim muffled voice; "The Wasp is in sight, Gutierrez!"

A movement—a sound like footsteps. Probably

Gutierrez moving to the corridor window to glance at Hanley's distant hovering flyer. I hoped it might be that: I had to take the chance.

I slid the bag from my face. I feared an abrupt alarm, or Gutierrez leaping upon me. But there was silence, and I saw his vague dark outlines at the window oval, five feet from me.

I got my ankles loose and slid the bag off. I was unsteady on my feet, but desperation aided me.

Gutierrez half turned as I gripped him from behind. My hand on his mouth stifled his outcry. His black knife blade waved blindly. Then my clenched knuckle caught his temple, and dug with the twisting Santus blow. I was expert at it, and I found the vulnerable spot.

He crumpled in my grasp, and I slid his falling body across the narrow corridor into the nearest cubby oval.

Almost soundless; and in the control room Jetta and

De Boer were murmuring and gazing at Hanley's ship, which hung ahead and above us at the zero-height.

I had planned all my movements. No motion was lost. Gutierrez was about my height and build. I stripped his black suit from him, donned it, then tied his ankles and wrists, and gagged him against the time when he would recover consciousness. Then I stuffed his body in the sack and tied its top.

This black suit had a mask, rolled up and fastened to the helmet. I loosed it, dropping it over my face. Knife in hand, I stood at the corridor window.

It was all black outside. The clouds were black overhead; the highest Lowland crags, several thousand feet beneath us, were all but blotted out in the murky darkness. Only one thing was to be seen: a quarter of a mile ahead, now, and a thousand feet higher than our level, the shining, bird-like outlines of Hanley's hovering little Wasp. It stood like a painted image of an aero, alone on a dead-black background. Red and green signal-lights dotted it, and on its stern tip a small, spreading searchlight bathed the wings

and the body with a revealing silver radiance.

Our forward flight had been checked, and we, too, were hovering. Hans doubtless would remain for a time in the pilot cubby; De Boer and Jetta were in the control room. It was only twenty feet away, but I could barely see its oval entrance.

"Gutierrez!"

One of them was calling. My hollow empty voice echoed back as I softly responded:

"Yes?"

"Be ready. We are arrived."

"Yes, Commander. All is well."

I continued to stand at the window. Hanley's little balloon-car was visible now. Then he cut it away. We had moved forward in the interval. The tiny car floated out almost above us.

My gaze searched the void of darkness outside. Did Hanley have an invisible flyer out there? Perhaps so. But it could accomplish nothing as yet. It would not even dare approach, for fear of collision with us.

The tiny car, with a white pilot light in it, swayed with a slow descent. The basket beneath the supporting balloon oscillated in a wide swing, then steadied. A sudden flash showed up there—a flashing electronic stream, from Hanley's Wasp to the basket. The shot swept the basket interior. No one could be hidden there and survive.

It was Hanley's proof to us that he was following instructions.

"Hah! He obeys properly, Jetta!"

The voice floated back to me from the control room. Could I creep in there, surprise De Boer now, and kill him? Doubtless. But it would alarm Hans. I must await my chance to get them together.

"Gutierrez! Hans, get us under it! Gutierrez!"

The vague outline of De Boer came toward me in the corridor, burly dark blob. His mask was down now. There were points of light, glowing like faint distant stars, to mark his eyes.

"Gutierrez."

"Yes."

A small black figure followed after him. Jetta.

"Yes, De Boer." I stood over the sack. "I am ready."

De Boer's giant shape towered beside me. Now! My knife thrust now! But Hans was coming toward us. He would take alarm before I could reach him.

"Open the side porte, Gutierrez. Hurry, the car is here. Hans, you should have stayed up there!"

"The drift is calculated; the car is just here."

We were all swift-moving shadows; disembodied voices.

"Get that porte open."

"Yes." I opened it.

We went outside on the runway. I passed close to Jetta, and just for an instant pressed my gloved fingers on the black fabric of her arm—and she knew.

"Now, seize it."

"Here, Hans, climb up."

"I have it. Pull it, Gutierrez!"

The car drifted at us from the black void. We caught it.

"Hold it, Gutierrez."

"Hans, clip the balloon. Up with you."

In the blurred haste, I could not get them together. I did not want to kill one and have the other leap upon me.

We fastened the little balloon and dragged the car onto the take-off platform. The shape of Hans leaped into the car.

"It is here! The ransom money!"

"Lift it to me. Heavy?"

"Yes."

"Gutierrez, help me. Hurry! If Hanley tries any trickery—"

Our aero was drifting downward and southward in the slight wind. Hanley's Wasp still hovered at the zero-height.

"In, Gutierrez."

Hans and I hauled out the heavy casket and placed it on the wing runway. De Boer pried up its lid. The gold was there. I could not tell where Jetta was; I prayed she would keep away from this.

Then the shape of De Boer was missing! But in a moment he appeared, dragging the sack.

"Lift him, Gutierrez. Hans, unclip the balloon and shove off the car!"

We were all standing at the two-foot rail of the runway. The car-basket, floating now, was off side and level with us. My chance!

"In with him, Gutierrez."

I shoved the body, encased in its black sack, with Hans helping me. And suddenly De Boer's knife came down at the sack! A stab. But an instinct to save the poor wretch within swept me. I struck at De Boer's arm and deflected the blow. The sack tumbled into the car.

I had neglected whatever chance had existed. Too late now!

"What in the hell!"

De Boer's shape seized me.

"What—"

It sent me into a sudden confusion. I flung him off. I stumbled against the shape of Hans.

The car was almost loose; drifting away.

Without thought—a frantic impulse—I pushed Hans over the brink. He fell into the car. It swayed into an oscillation with the impact. The balloon sank below our wing level and was gone, with only Hans, muffled shouts floating up.

And De Boer came leaping at me from behind. I whirled around. My danger was too much for the watching Jetta. She screamed.

"Philip, look out for him!"

"Hah! The American. By damn, what is this?"

It gave De Boer pause. He gripped a wing stay-wire

for a second.

Then he came with a rush.

The corridor door was open behind me. I flung myself into it—and collided with a shape.

"Philip!"

I shoved at her frantically.

"Jetta, get back! Away from us!"

I pulled at her, half falling. De Boer's shape came through the doorway into the corridor. And was blotted out in the green darkness as he turned the other way, to avoid me if I struck.

A silence. The shadow of Jetta was behind me. I stood with poised knife, listening, straining my eyes through the faint green darkness. De Boer was here, knife in hand, fallen now into craftly, motionless silence. He might have been close here down the corridor. Or in any one of these nearby cubby

doorways.

I slid forward along the wall. The corridor was solid black down its length: the green radiance seemed brighter at the control room behind me. Had De Boer gone into this solid blackness, to lure me?

I

stopped my advance. Stood again, trying to see or hear something.

And then I saw him! Two small glowing points of light. Distant stars. His eyes! Five feet ahead of me? Or ten? Or twenty?

A rustle. A sound.

His dark form materialized as he came—a huge, black blob overwhelming me, his arm and knife blade striking.

I dropped to the floor-grid, and his blade went over me. And as I dropped, I struck with an upward thrust. My knife met solidity; sank into flesh.

I twisted past him on the floor as he fell. My knife was gone: buried in him.

Words were audible; choking gasps. I could see his form rising, staggering. The open porte was near him; he swayed through it.

Did he know he was mortally wounded? I think so. He swayed on the wing runway, and I slid to the door and stood watching. And was aware of the shadow of Jetta creeping to join me.

"Is he—?"

"Quiet, Jetta."

He stood under the wing, swaying, gripping a stay. Then his voice sounded, and it seemed like a laugh.

"The craven American—wins." He moved a step. "Not

to see—me die—"

He toppled at the rail. "Good-by, Jetta."

A great huddled shadow. A blob, toppling, falling....

Far down there now the crags and peaks of the Lowland depths were visible. The darkness swallowed his whirling body. We could not hear the impact.

Chapter 19: Episode of the Lowlands

There is but little remaining for me to record. I could not operate the mechanism of invisibility of De Boer's X-flyer. But its pilot controls were simple. With Jetta at my side, trembling now that our gruesome task was over, we groped our way through the green darkness and mounted to the pilot cubby. And within ten minutes I had lowered the ship into the depths, found a landing place upon the dark rocks, and brought us down.

Hanley's Wasp had landed: we saw its lights half a mile from us. And then the lights of another ship—an X-flyer convoying Hanley—slowly materializing nearby.

And then reunion. Jetta and I left De Boer's invisible vessel and clambered over the rocks. And presently Hanley, staring at our grotesque black forms, came rushing forward and greeted us.

We were an hour locating De Boer's flyer, for all that Jetta and I had just left it and thought we could find

our way back. But we stumbled onto it at last. Hanley felt his way aboard and brought it to visibility. It has since been returned to the Anti-War Department, with the compliments of Hanley's Office.

The ransom money was restored to its proper source. Spawn's treasure of radiumized quicksilver we shipped back to Nareda, where it was checked and divided, and Jetta's share legally awarded to her.

De Boer was dead when Hanley found him that night on the rocks. Jetta and I did not go to look at him....

The balloon basket landed safely. Hanley and his men were down there in time to seize it. Hans was caught; and Gutierrez, within the sack, was found to be uninjured. They are incarcerated now in Nareda. They were willing to tell the location of the bandit stronghold. A raid there the following day resulted in the capture of most of De Boer's men.

All this is now public news. You have heard it, of course. Yet in my narrative, setting down the events as I lived them, I have tried to give more vivid details

than the bare facts as they were blared through the public audiphones.

An episode of the strange, romantic, fantastic Lowlands. A very unimportant series of incidents mingled with the news of a busy world—just a few minutes of the newscasters' time to tell how a band of depth smugglers was caught.

But it was a very important episode to me. It changed, for me, a clanking, thrumming machine-made world into a shining fairyland of dreams come true. It gave me little Jetta.

#48 The Terrible Tentacles, Of L-472, By Sewell Peaslee Wright:

Commander John Hanson of the Special Patrol Service records another of his thrilling interplanetary assignments.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:



- - -

lurching toward us

It was a big mistake. I should not have done it. By birth, by instinct, by training, by habit, I am a man of action. Or I was. It is queer that an old man cannot remember that he is no longer young.

Commander John Hanson of the Special Patrol Service records another of his thrilling interplanetary assignments.

But it was a mistake for me to mention that I had recorded, for the archives of the Council, the history of a certain activity of the Special Patrol—a bit of secret history which may not be mentioned here. Now they insist—by "they" I refer to the Chiefs of the Special Patrol Service—that I write of other achievements of the Service, other adventures worthy of note.

Perhaps that is the penalty of becoming old. From commander of the *Budi*, one of the greatest of the Special Patrol ships, to the duties of recording ancient history, for younger men to read and dream about. That is a shrewd blow to one's pride.

But if I can, in some small way, add luster to the record of my service, it will be a fitting task for a man grown old and gray in that service; work for hands too weak and palsied for sterner duties.

But I shall tell my stories in my own way; after all, they are my stories. And I shall tell the stories that appeal to me most. The universe has had enough and too much of dry history; these shall be adventurous tales to make the blood of a young man who reads them run a trifle faster—and perhaps the blood of the old man who writes them.

This, the first, shall be the story of the star L-472. You know it to-day as Ibit, port-o'-call for interplanetary ships, and source of ocrate for the universe, but to me it will always be L-472, the world of terrible tentacles.

My story begins nearly a hundred years ago—reckoned in terms of Earth time, which is proper, since I am a native of Earth—when I was a young man. I was sub-commander, at the time, of the *Kalid*, one of the early ships of the Special Patrol.

We had been called to Zenia on special orders, and Commander Jamison, after an absence of some two hours, returned to the *Kalid* with his face shining, one of his rare smiles telling me in advance that he had news—and good news.

He hurried me up to the deserted navigating room and waved me to a seat.

"Hanson," he said. "I'm glad to be the first to congratulate you. You are now Commander John Hanson, of the Special Patrol Ship *Kalid*!"

"Sir." I gasped, "do you mean—"

His smile broadened. From the breast pocket of the trim blue and silver uniform of our Service he drew a long, crackling paper.

"Your commission," he said. "I'm taking over the *Borelis*."

It was my turn to extend congratulations then; the *Borelis* was the newest and greatest ship of the

Service. We shook hands, that ancient gesture of good-fellowship on Earth. But, as our hands unclasped, Jamison's face grew suddenly grave.

"I have more than this news for you, however," he said slowly. "You are to have a chance to earn your comet hardly."

I smiled broadly at the mention of the comet, the silver insignia, worn over the heart, that would mark my future rank as commander, replacing the four-rayed star of a sub-commander which I wore now on my tunic.

"Tell me more, sir," I said confidently.

"You have heard of the Special Patrol Ship *Filanus*?" asked my late commander gravely.

"Reported lost in space," I replied promptly.

"And the *Dorlos*?"

"Why—yes; she was at Base here at our last call," I

said, searching his face anxiously. "Peter Wilson was Second Officer on her—one of my best friends. Why do you ask about her, sir?"

"The *Dorlos* is missing also," said Commander Jamison solemnly. "Both of these ships were sent upon a particular mission. Neither of them has returned. It is concluded that some common fate has overtaken them. The *Kalid*, under your command, is commissioned to investigate these disappearances.

"You are not charged with the mission of these other ships; your orders are to investigate their disappearance. The course, together with the official patrol orders, I shall hand you presently, but with them go verbal orders.

"You are to lay and keep the course designated, which will take you well out of the beaten path to a small world which has not been explored, but which has been circumnavigated a number of times by various ships remaining just outside the atmospheric envelope, and found to be without evidence of intelligent habitation. In other words, without cities,

roads, canals, or other evidence of human handiwork or civilization.

I believe your instructions give you some of this information, but not all of it. This world, unnamed because of its uninhabited condition, is charted only as L-472. Your larger charts will show it, I am sure. The atmosphere is reported to be breathable by inhabitants of Earth and other beings having the same general requirements. Vegetation is reported as dense, covering the five continents of the world to the edges of the northern and southern polar caps, which are small. Topographically, the country is rugged in the extreme, with many peaks, apparently volcanic, but now inactive or extinct, on all of its five large continents."

"And am I to land there, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Your orders are very specific upon that point," said Commander Jamison. "You are not to land until you have carefully and thoroughly reconnoitered from above, at low altitude. You will exercise every possible precaution. Your specific purpose is simply this: to

determine, if possible, the fate of the other two ships, and report your findings at once. The Chiefs of the Service will then consider the matter, and take whatever action may seem advisable to them."

Jamison rose to his feet and thrust out his hand in Earth's fine old salute of farewell.

"I must be going, Hanson," he said. "I wish this patrol were mine instead of yours. You are a young man for such a responsibility."

"But," I replied, with the glowing confidence of youth, "I have the advantage of having served under Commander Jamison!"

He smiled as we shook again, and shook his head.

"Discretion can be learned only by experience," he said. "But I wish you success, Hanson; on this undertaking, and on many others. Supplies are on their way now; the crew will return from leave within the hour. A young Zenian, name of Dival, I believe, is detailed to accompany you as scientific observer—purely unofficial capacity, of course. He has been

ordered to report to you at once. You are to depart as soon as feasible: you know what that means. I believe that's all—Oh, yes! I had almost forgotten.

"Here, in this envelope, are your orders and your course, as well as all available data on L-472. In this little casket is—your comet, Hanson. I know you will wear it with honor!"

"Thank you, sir!" I said, a bit huskily. I saluted, and Commander Jamison acknowledged the gesture with stiff precision. Commander Jamison always had the reputation of being something of a martinet.

When he had left, I picked up the thin blue envelope he had left. Across the face of the envelope, in the—to my mind—jagged and unbeautiful Universal script, was my name, followed by the proud title: "*Commander, Special Patrol Ship Kalid.*" My first orders!

There was a small oval box, of blue leather, with the silver crest of the Service in bas-relief on the lid. I opened the case, and gazed with shining eyes at the

gleaming, silver comet that nestled there.

Then, slowly, I unfastened the four-rayed star on my left breast, and placed in its stead the insignia of my commandership.

Worn smooth and shiny now, it is still my most precious possession.

Kincaide, my second officer, turned and smiled as I entered the navigating room.

"L-472 now registers maximum attraction, sir," he reported. "Dead ahead, and coming up nicely. My last figures, completed about five minutes ago, indicate that we should reach the gaseous envelope in about ten hours." Kincaide was a native of Earth, and we commonly used Earth time-measurements in our conversation. As is still the case, ships of the Special Patrol Service were commanded without exception by natives of Earth, and the entire officer personnel hailed largely from the same planet, although I have had several Zenian officers of rare ability and courage.

I nodded and thanked him for the report. Maximum attraction, eh? That, considering the small size of our objective, meant we were much closer to L-472 than to any other regular body.

Mechanically, I studied the various dials about the room. The attraction meter, as Kincaide had said, registered several degrees of attraction, and the red slide on the rim of the dial was squarely at the top, showing that the attraction was coming from the world at which our nose was pointed. The surface-temperature gauge was at normal. Internal pressure, normal. Internal moisture-content, a little high. Kincaide, watching me, spoke up:

"I have already given orders to dry out, sir," he said.

"Very good, Mr. Kincaide. It's a long trip, and I want the crew in good condition." I studied the two charts, one showing our surroundings laterally, the other vertically, all bodies about us represented as glowing spots of green light, of varying sizes; the ship itself as a tiny scarlet spark. Everything shipshape: perhaps, a degree or two of elevation when we were a little

closer—

"May I come in sir?" broke in a gentle, high-pitched voice.

"Certainly, Mr. Dival," I replied, answering in the Universal language in which the request had been made. "You are always very welcome." Dival was a typical Zenian of the finest type: slim, very dark, and with the amazingly intelligent eyes of his kind. His voice was very soft and gentle, and like the voice of all his people, clear and high-pitched.

"Thank you," he said. "I guess I'm over-eager, but there's something about this mission of ours that worries me. I seem to feel—" He broke off abruptly and began pacing back and forth across the room.

I studied him, frowning. The Zenians have a strange way of being right about such things; their high-strung, sensitive natures seem capable of responding to those delicate, vagrant forces which even now are only incompletely understood and classified.

"You're not used to work of this sort," I replied, as bluffly and heartily as possible. "There's nothing to worry about."

"The commanders of the two ships that disappeared probably felt the same way, sir," said Dival. "I should have thought the Chiefs of the Special Patrol Service would have sent several ships on a mission such as this."

"Easy to say," I laughed bitterly. "If the Council would pass the appropriations we need, we might have ships enough so that we could send a fleet of ships when we wished. Instead of that, the Council, in its infinite wisdom, builds greater laboratories and schools of higher learning—and lets the Patrol get along as best it can."

"It was from the laboratories and the schools of higher learning that all these things sprang," replied Dival quietly, glancing around at the array of instruments which made navigation in space possible.

"True," I admitted rather shortly. "We must work

together. And as for what we shall find upon the little world ahead, we shall be there in nine or ten hours. You may wish to make some preparations."

"Nine or ten hours? That's Earth time, isn't it? Let's see: about two and a half enaros."

"Correct," I smiled. The Universal method of reckoning time had never appealed to me. For those of my readers who may only be familiar with Earth time measurements, an enar is about eighteen Earth days, an enaren a little less than two Earth days, and an enaro nearly four and a half hours. The Universal system has the advantage, I admit, of a decimal division; but I have found it clumsy always. I may be stubborn and old-fashioned, but a clock face with only ten numerals and one hand still strikes me as being unbeautiful and inefficient.

"Two and a half enaros," repeated Dival thoughtfully. "I believe I shall see if I can get a little sleep now; I should not have brought my books with me, I'm afraid. I read when I should sleep. Will you call me should there be any developments of interest?"

I assured him that he would be called as he requested, and he left.

"Decent sort of a chap, sir," observed Kincaide, glancing at the door through which Dival had just departed.

"A student," I nodded, with the contempt of violent youth for the man of gentler pursuits than mine, and turned my attentions to some calculations for entry in the log.

Busied with the intricate details of my task, time passed rapidly. The watch changed, and I joined my officers in the tiny, arched dining salon. It was during the meal that I noticed for the first time a sort of tenseness; every member of the mess was unusually quiet. And though I would not, have admitted it then, I was not without a good deal of nervous restraint myself.

"Gentlemen," I remarked when the meal was finished, "I believe you understand our present mission. Primarily, our purpose is to ascertain, if possible, the

fate of two ships that were sent here and have not returned. We are now close enough for reasonable observation by means of the television disc, I believe, and I shall take over its operation myself.

"There is no gainsaying the fact that whatever fate overtook the two other Patrol ships, may lay in wait for us. My orders are to observe every possible precaution, and to return with a report. I am going to ask that each of you proceed immediately to his post, and make ready, in so far as possible, for any eventuality. Warn the watch which has just gone off to be ready for instant duty. The disintegrator ray generators should be started and be available for instant emergency use, maximum power. Have the bombing crews stand by for orders."

"What do you anticipate, sir?" asked Correy, my new sub-commander. The other officers waited tensely for my reply.

"I don't know, Mr. Correy," I admitted reluctantly. "We have no information upon which to base an assumption. We do know that two ships have been

sent here, and neither of them have returned. Something prevented that return. We must endeavor to prevent that same fate from overtaking the *Kalid*—and ourselves."

Hurrying back to the navigating room, I posted myself beside the cumbersome, old-fashioned television instrument. L-472 was near enough now to occupy the entire field, with the range hand at maximum. One whole continent and parts of two others were visible. Not many details could be made out.

I waited grimly while an hour, two hours, went by. My field narrowed down to one continent, to a part of one continent. I glanced up at the surface temperature gauge and noted that the hand was registering a few degrees above normal. Correy, who had relieved Kincaide as navigating officer, followed my gaze.

"Shall we reduce speed, sir?" he asked crisply.

"To twice atmospheric speed," I nodded. "When we enter the envelope proper, reduce to normal atmospheric speed. Alter your course upon entering

the atmosphere proper, and work back and forth along the emerging twilight zone, from the north polar cap to the southern cap, and so on."

"Yes, sir!" he replied, and repeated the orders to the control room forward.

I pressed the attention signal to Dival's cubicle, and informed him that we were entering the outer atmospheric fringe.

"Thank you, sir!" he said eagerly. "I shall be with you immediately."

In rapid succession I called various officers and gave terse orders. Double crews on duty in the generator compartment, the ray projectors, the atomic bomb magazines, and release tubes. Observers at all observation posts, operators at the two smaller television instruments to comb the terrain and report instantly any object of interest. With the three of us searching, it seemed incredible that anything could escape us. At atmospheric altitudes even the two smaller television instruments would be able to pick

out a body the size of one of the missing ships.

Dival entered the room as I finished giving my orders.

"A strange world, Dival," I commented, glancing towards the television instrument. "Covered with trees, even the mountains, and what I presume to be volcanic peaks. They crowd right down to the edge of the water."

He adjusted the focusing lever slightly, his face lighting up with the interest of a scientist gazing at a strange specimen, whether it be a microbe or a new world.

"Strange ... strange ..." he muttered. "A universal vegetation ... no variation of type from equator to polar cap, apparently. And the water—did you notice its color, sir?"

"Purple," I nodded. "It varies on the different worlds, you know. I've seen pink, red, white and black seas, as well as the green and blue of Earth."

"And no small islands," he went on, as though he had not ever heard me. "Not in the visible portion, at any rate."

I was about to reply, when I felt the peculiar surge of the *Kalid* as she reduced speed. I glanced at the indicator, watching the hand drop slowly to atmospheric speed.

"Keep a close watch, Dival," I ordered. "We shall change our course now, to comb the country for traces of two ships we are seeking. If you see the least suspicious sign, let me know immediately."

He nodded, and for a time there was only a tense silence in the room, broken at intervals by Correy as he spoke briefly into his microphone, giving orders to the operating room.

Perhaps an hour went by. I am not sure. It seemed like a longer time than that. Then Dival called out in sudden excitement, his high, thin voice stabbing the silence:

"Here, sir! Look! A little clearing—artificial, I judge—and the ships! Both of them!"

"Stop the ship, Mr. Correy!" I snapped as I hurried to the instrument. "Dival, take those reports." I gestured towards the two attention signals that were glowing and softly humming and thrust my head into the shelter of the television instrument's big hood.

Dival had made no mistake. Directly beneath me, as I looked, was a clearing, a perfect square with rounded corners, obviously blasted out of the solid forest by the delicate manipulation of sharply focused disintegrator rays. And upon the naked, pitted surface thus exposed, side by side in orderly array, were the missing ships!

I studied the strange scene with a heart that thumped excitedly against my ribs.

What should I do? Return and report? Descend and investigate? There was no sign of life around the ships, and no evidence of damage. If I brought the *Kalid* down, would she make a third to remain there,

to be marked "lost in space" on the records of the Service?

Reluctantly, I drew my head from beneath the shielding hood.

"What were the two reports, Dival?" I asked, and my voice was thick. "The other two television observers?"

"Yes, sir. They report that they cannot positively identify the ships with their instruments, but feel certain that they are the two we seek."

"Very good. Tell them, please, to remain on watch, searching space in every direction, and to report instantly anything suspicious. Mr. Correy, we will descend until this small clearing becomes visible, through the ports, to the unaided eye. I will give you the corrections to bring us directly over the clearing." And I read the finder scales of the television instrument to him.

He rattled off the figures, calculated an instant, and gave his orders to the control room, while I kept the

television instrument bearing upon the odd clearing and the two motionless, deserted ships.

As we settled, I could make out the insignia of the ships, could see the pitted, stained earth of the clearing, brown with the dust of disintegration. I could see the surrounding trees very distinctly now: they seemed very similar to our weeping willows, on Earth, which, I perhaps should explain, since it is impossible for the average individual to have a comprehensive knowledge of the flora and fauna of the entire known Universe, is a tree of considerable size, having long, hanging branches arching from its crown and reaching nearly to the ground. These leaves, like typical willow leaves, were long and slender, of rusty green color. The trunks and branches seemed to be black or dark brown: and the trees grew so thickly that nowhere between their branches was the ground visible.

"Five thousand feet, sir," said Correy. "Directly above the clearing. Shall we descend further?"

"A thousand feet at a time, Mr. Correy," I replied,

after a moment's hesitation. "My orders are to exercise the utmost caution. Mr. Dival, please make a complete analysis of the atmosphere. I believe you are familiar with the traps provided for the purpose?"

"Yes. You propose to land, sir?"

"I propose to determine the fate of those two ships and the men who brought them here," I said with sudden determination. Dival made no reply, but as he turned to obey orders, I saw that his presentiment of trouble had not left him.

"Four thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

I nodded, studying the scene below us. The great hooded instrument brought it within, apparently, fifty feet of my eyes, but the great detail revealed nothing of interest.

The two ships lay motionless, huddled close together. The great circular door of each was open, as though opened that same day—or a century before.

"Three thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

"Proceed at the same speed," I replied. Whatever fate had overtaken the men of the other ships had caused them to disappear entirely—and without sign of a struggle. But what conceivable fate could that be?

"Two thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

"Good," I said grimly. "Continue with the descent, Mr. Correy."

Dival hurried into the room as I spoke. His face was still clouded with foreboding.

"I have tested the atmosphere, sir," he reported. "It is suitable for breathing by either men of Earth or Zenia. No trace of noxious gases of any kind. It is probably rather rarified, such as one might find on Earth or Zenia at high altitudes."

"One thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

I hesitated an instant. Undoubtedly the atmosphere

had been tested by the other ships before they landed. In the case of the second ship, at any rate, those in command must have been on the alert against danger. And yet both of those ships lay there motionless, vacant, deserted.

I could feel the eyes of the men on me. My decision must be delayed no further.

"We will land, Mr. Correy," I said grimly. "Near the two ships, please."

"Very well, sir," nodded Correy, and spoke briefly into the microphone.

"I might warn you, sir," said Dival quietly, "to govern your activities, once outside: free from the gravity pads of the ship, on a body of such small size, an ordinary step will probably cause a leap of considerable distance."

"Thank you, Mr. Dival. That is a consideration I had overlooked. I shall warn the men. We must—"

At that instant I felt the slight jar of landing. I glanced up; met Correy's grave glance squarely.

"Grounded, sir," he said quietly.

"Very good, Mr. Correy. Keep the ship ready for instant action, please, and call the landing crew to the forward exit. You will accompany us, Mr. Dival?"

"Certainly, sir!"

"Good. You understand your orders, Mr. Correy?"

"Yes, sir!"

I returned his salute, and led the way out of the room, Dival close on my heels.

The landing crew was composed of all men not at regular stations; nearly half of the *Kalid's* entire crew. They were equipped with the small atomic power pistols as side-arms, and there were two three-men disintegrator ray squads. We all wore menores, which were unnecessary in the ship, but decidedly useful

outside. I might add that the menore of those days was not the delicate, beautiful thing that it is to-day: it was comparatively crude, and clumsy band of metal, in which were imbedded the vital units and the tiny atomic energy generator, and was worn upon the head like a crown. But for all its clumsiness, it conveyed and received thought, and, after all, that was all we demanded of it.

I caught a confused jumble of questioning thoughts as I came up, and took command of the situation promptly. It will be understood, of course, that in those days men had not learned to blank their minds against the menore, as they do to-day. It took generations of training to perfect that ability.

"Open the exit," I ordered Kincaide, who was standing by the switch, key in the lock.

"Yes, sir," he thought promptly, and unlocking the switch, released the lever.

The great circular door revolved swiftly, backing slowly on its fine threads, gripped by the massive

gimbals which, as at last the ponderous plug of metal freed itself from its threads, swung the circular door aside, like the door of a vault.

Fresh clean air swept in, and we breathed, it gratefully. Science can revitalize air, take out impurities and replace used-up constituents, but it cannot give it the freshness of pure natural air. Even the science of to-day.

"Mr. Kincaide, you will stand by with five men. Under no circumstances are you to leave your post until ordered to do so. No rescue parties, under any circumstances, are to be sent out unless you have those orders directly from me. Should any untoward thing happen to this party, you will instantly reseal this exit, reporting at the same time to Mr. Correy, who has his orders. You will not attempt to rescue us, but will return to the Base and report in full, with Mr. Correy in command. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," came back his response instantly; but I could sense the rebellion in his mind. Kincaid and I were old friends, as well as fellow officers.

I smiled at him reassuringly, and directed my orders to the waiting men.

"You are aware of the fate of the two ships of the Patrol that have already landed here," I thought slowly, to be sure they understood perfectly. "What fate overtook them, I do not know. That is what we are here to determine."

"It is obvious that this is a dangerous mission. I'm ordering none of you to go. Any man who wishes to be relieved from landing duty may remain inside the ship, and may feel it no reproach. Those who do go should be constantly on the alert, and keep in formation; the usual column of twos. Be very careful, when stepping out of the ship, to adjust your stride to the lessened gravity of this small world. Watch this point!" I turned to Dival, motioned him to fall in at my side. Without a backward glance, we marched out of the ship, treading very carefully to keep from leaping into the air with each step.

Twenty feet away, I glanced back. There were fourteen men behind me—not a man of the landing

crew had remained in the ship!

"I am proud of you men!" I thought heartily: and no emanation from any man was ever more sincere.

Cautiously, eyes roving ceaselessly, we made our way towards the two silent ships. It seemed a quiet, peaceful world: an unlikely place for tragedy. The air was fresh and clean, although, as Dival had predicted, rarefied like the air at an altitude. The willow-like trees that hemmed us in rustled gently, their long, frond-like branches with their rusty green leaves swaying.

"Do you notice, sir," came a gentle thought from Dival, an emanation that could hardly have been perceptible to the men behind us, "that there is no wind—and yet the trees, yonder, are swaying and rustling?"

I glanced around, startled. I had not noticed the absence of a breeze.

I tried to make my response reassuring:

"There is probably a breeze higher up, that doesn't dip down into this little clearing," I ventured. "At any rate, it is not important. These ships are what interest me. What will we find there?"

"We shall soon know," replied Dival. "Here is the *Dorlos*; the second of the two, was it not?"

"Yes." I came to a halt beside the gaping door. There was no sound within, no evidence of life there, no sign that men had ever crossed that threshold, save that the whole fabric was the work of man's hands.

"Mr. Dival and I will investigate the ship, with two of you men," I directed. "The rest of the detail will remain on guard, and give the alarm at the least sign of any danger. You first two men, follow us." The indicated men nodded and stepped forward. Their "Yes, sirs" came surging through my menore like a single thought. Cautiously, Dival at my side, the two men at our backs, we stepped over the high threshold into the interior of the *Dorlos*.

The *ethon* tubes overhead made everything as light as

day, and since the *Dorlos* was a sister ship of my own *Kalid*, I had not the slightest difficulty in finding my way about.

There was no sign of a disturbance anywhere. Everything was in perfect order. From the evidence, it would seem that the officers and men of the *Dorlos* had deserted the ship of their own accord, and—failed to return.

"Nothing of value here," I commented to Dival. "We may as well—"

There was a sudden commotion from outside the ship. Startled shouts rang through the hollow hull, and a confused medley of excited thoughts came pouring in.

With one accord the four of us dashed to the exit, Dival and I in the lead. At the door we paused, following the stricken gaze of the men grouped in a rigid knot just outside.

Some, forty feet away was the edge of the forest that hemmed us in. A forest that now was lashing and

writhing as though in the grip of some terrible hurricane, trunks bending and whipping, long branches writhing, curling, lashing out—

"Two of the men, sir!" shouted a non-commissioned officer of the landing crew, as we appeared in the doorway. In his excitement he forgot his menore, and resorted to the infinitely slower but more natural speech. "Some sort of insect came buzzing down—like an Earth bee, but larger. One of the men slapped it, and jumped aside, forgetting the low gravity here. He shot into the air, and another of the men made a grab for him. They both went sailing, and the trees—*look!*"

But I had already spotted the two men. The trees had them in their grip, long tentacles curled around them, a dozen of the great willow-like growths apparently fighting for possession of the prizes. And all around, far out of reach, the trees of the forest were swaying restlessly, their long, pendulous branches, like tentacles, lashing out hungrily.

"The rays, sir!" snapped the thought from Dival, like a flash of lightning. "Concentrate the beams—strike at

the trunks—"

"Right!" My orders emanated on the heels of the thought more quickly than one word could have been uttered. The six men who operated the disintegrator rays were stung out of their startled immobility, and the soft hum of the atomic power generators deepened.

"Strike at the trunks of the trees! Beams narrowed to minimum! Action at will!"

The invisible rays swept long gashes into the forest as the trainers squatted behind their sights, directing the long, gleaming tubes. Branches crashed to the ground, suddenly motionless. Thick brown dust dropped heavily. A trunk, shortened by six inches or so, dropped into its stub and fell with a prolonged sound of rending wood. The trees against which it had fallen tugged angrily at their trapped tentacles.

One of the men rolled free, staggered to his feet, and came lurching towards us. Trunk after trunk dropped onto its severed stub and fell among the lashing

branches of its fellows. The other man was caught for a moment in a mass of dead and motionless wood, but a cunningly directed ray dissolved the entangling branches around him and he lay there, free but unable to arise.

The rays played on ruthlessly. The brown, heavy powder was falling like greasy soot. Trunk after trunk crashed to the ground, slashed into fragments.

"Cease action!" I ordered, and instantly the eager whine of the generators softened to a barely discernible hum. Two of the men, under orders, raced out to the injured man: the rest of us clustered around the first of the two to be freed from the terrible tentacles of the trees.

His menore was gone, his tight-fitting uniform was in shreds, and blotched with blood. There was a huge crimson welt across his face, and blood dripped slowly from the tips of his fingers.

"*God!*" he muttered unsteadily as kindly arms lifted him with eager tenderness. "They're alive! Like

snakes. They—they're *hungry*!"

"Take him to the ship," I ordered. "He is to receive treatment immediately," I turned to the detail that was bringing in the other victim. The man was unconscious, and moaning, but suffering more from shock than anything else. A few minutes under the helio emanations and he would be fit for light duty.

As the men hurried him to the ship, I turned to Dival. He was standing beside me, rigid, his face very pale, his eyes fixed on space.

"What do you make of it, Mr. Dival?" I questioned him.

"Of the trees?" He seemed startled, as though I had aroused him from deepest thought. "They are not difficult to comprehend, sir. There are numerous growths that are primarily carnivorous. We have the fital vine on Zenia, which coils instantly when touched, and thus traps many small animals which it wraps about with its folds and digests through sucker-like growths.

"On your own Earth there are, we learn, hundreds of varieties of insectivorous plants: the Venus fly-trap, known otherwise as the *Dionaea Muscipula*, which has a leaf hinged in the median line, with teeth-like bristles. The two portions of the leaf snap together with considerable force when an insect alights upon the surface, and the soft portions of the catch are digested by the plant before the leaf opens again. The pitcher plant is another native of Earth, and several varieties of it are found on Zenia and at least two other planets. It traps its game without movement, but is nevertheless insectivorous. You have another species on Earth that is, or was, very common: the *Mimosa Pudica*. Perhaps you know it as the sensitive plant. It does not trap insects, but it has a very distinct power of movement, and is extremely irritable.

"It is not at all difficult to understand a carnivorous tree, capable of violent and powerful motion. This is undoubtedly what we have here—a decidedly interesting phenomena, but not difficult of comprehension."

It seems like a long explanation, as I record it here, but emanated as it was, it took but an instant to complete it. Mr. Dival went on without a pause:

"I believe, however, that I have discovered something far more important. How is your menore adjusted, sir?"

"At minimum."

"Turn it to maximum, sir."

I glanced at him curiously, but obeyed. New streams of thought poured in upon me. Kincaide ... the guard at the exit ... *and something else*.

I blanked out Kincaide and the men, feeling Dival's eyes searching my face. There was something else, something—

I focused on the dim, vague emanations that came to me from the circlet of my menore, and gradually, like an object seen through heavy mist, I perceived the message:

"Wait! Wait! We are coming! Through the ground. The trees ... disintegrate them ... all of them ... all you can reach. But not the ground ... not the ground...."

"Peter!" I shouted, turning to Dival. "That's Peter Wilson, second officer of the *Dorlos*!"

Dival nodded, his dark face alight.

"Let us see if we can answer him," he suggested, and we concentrated all our energy on a single thought: "We understand. We understand."

The answer came back instantly:

"Good! Thank God! Sweep them down, Hanson: every tree of them. Kill them ... kill them ... kill them!" The emanation fairly shook with hate. "We are coming ... to the clearing ... wait—and while you wait, use your rays upon these accursed hungry trees!"

Grimly and silently we hurried back to the ship. Dival, the savant, snatching up specimens of earth and rock here and there as we went.

The disintegrator rays of the portable projectors were no more than toys compared with the mighty beams the *Kalid* was capable of projecting, with her great generators to supply power. Even with the beams narrowed to the minimum, they cut a swath a yard or more in diameter, and their range was tremendous; although working rather less rapidly as the distance and power decreased, they were effective over a range of many miles.

Before their blasting beams the forest shriveled and sank into tumbled chaos. A haze of brownish dust hung low over the scene, and I watched with a sort of awe. It was the first time I had ever seen the rays at work on such wholesale destruction.

A startling thing became evident soon after we began our work. This world that we had thought to be void of animal life, proved to be teeming with it. From out of the tangle of broken and harmless branches, thousands of animals appeared. The majority of them were quite large, perhaps the size of full-grown hogs, which Earth animal they seemed to resemble, save that they were a dirty yellow color, and had strong,

heavily-clawed feet. These were the largest of the animals, but there were myriads of smaller ones, all of them pale or neutral in color, and apparently unused to such strong light, for they ran blindly, wildly seeking shelter from the universal confusion.

Still the destructive beams kept about their work, until the scene changed utterly. Instead of resting in a clearing, the *Kalid* was in the midst of a tangle of fallen, wilting branches that stretched like a great, still sea, as far as the eye could see.

"Cease action!" I ordered suddenly. I had seen, or thought I had seen, a human figure moving in the tangle, not far from the edge of the clearing. Correy relayed the order, and instantly the rays were cut off. My menore, free from the interference of the great atomic generators of the *Kalid*, emanated the moment the generators ceased functioning.

"Enough. Hanson! Cut the rays; we're coming."

"We have ceased action; come on!"

I hurried to the still open exit. Kincaide and his guards were staring at what had been the forest; they were so intent that they did not notice I had joined them—and no wonder!

A file of men were scrambling over the debris; gaunt men with dishevelled hair, practically naked, covered with dirt and the greasy brown dust of the disintegrator ray. In the lead, hardly recognizable, his menore awry upon his tangled locks, was Peter Wilson.

"Wilson!" I shouted; and in a single great leap I was at his side, shaking his hand, one arm about his scarred shoulders, laughing and talking excitedly, all in the same breath. "Wilson, tell me—in God's name—what has happened?"

He looked up at me with shining, happy eyes, deep in black sockets of hunger and suffering.

"The part that counts," he said hoarsely, "is that you're here, and we're here with you. My men need rest and food—not too much food, at first, for we're

starving. I'll give you the story—or as much of it as I know—while we eat."

I sent my orders ahead; for every man of that pitiful crew of survivors, there were two eager men of the *Kalid's* crew to minister to him. In the little dining salon of the officers' mess, Wilson gave us the story, while he ate slowly and carefully, keeping his ravenous hunger in check.

"It's a weird sort of story," he said. "I'll cut it as short as I can. I'm too weary for details.

"The *Dorlos*, as I suppose you know, was ordered to L-472 to determine the fate of the *Filanus*, which had been sent here to determine the feasibility of establishing a supply base here for a new interplanetary ship line.

"It took us nearly three days, Earth time, to locate this clearing and the *Filanus*, and we grounded the *Dorlos* immediately. Our commander—you probably remember him, Hanson: David McClellan? Big, red-faced chap?"

I nodded, and Wilson continued.

"Commander McClellan was a choleric person, as courageous a man as ever wore the blue and silver of the Service, and very thoughtful of his men. We had had a bad trip; two swarms of meteorites that had worn our nerves thin, and a faulty part in the air-purifying apparatus had nearly done us in. While the exit was being unsealed, he gave the interior crew permission to go off duty, to get some fresh air, with orders, however, to remain close to the ship, under my command. Then, with the usual landing crew, he started for the *Filanus*.

"He had forgotten, under the stress of the moment, that the force of gravity would be very small on a body no larger than this. The result was that as soon as they hurried out of the ship, away from the influence of our own gravity pads, they hurtled into the air in all directions."

Wilson paused. Several seconds passed before he could go on.

"Well, the trees—I suppose you know something about them—reached out and swept up three of them.

McClellan and the rest of the landing crew rushed to their rescue. They were caught up. *God!* I can see them ... hear them ... even now!

"I couldn't stand there and see that happen to them. With the rest of the crew behind me, we rushed out, armed only with our atomic pistols. We did not dare use the rays; there were a dozen men caught up everywhere in those hellish tentacles.

"I don't know what I thought we could do. I knew only that I must do something. Our leaps carried us over the tops of the trees that were fighting for the ... the bodies of McClellan and the rest of the landing crew. I saw then, when it was too late, that there was nothing we could do. The trees ... had done their work. They ... they were *feeding*....

"Perhaps that is why we escaped. We came down in a tangle of whipping branches. Several of my men were snatched up. The rest of us saw how helpless our position was ... that there was nothing we could do.

We saw, too, that the ground was literally honeycombed, and we dived down these burrows, out of the reach of the trees.

"There were nineteen of us that escaped. I can't tell you how we lived—I would not if I could. The burrows had been dug by the pig-like animals that the trees live upon, and they led, eventually, to the shore, where there was water—horrible, bitter stuff, but not salty, and apparently not poisonous."

We lived on these pig-like animals, and we learned something of their way of life. The trees seem to sleep, or become inactive, at night. Not unless they are touched do they lash about with their tentacles. At night the animals feed, largely upon the large, soft fruit of these trees. Of course, large numbers of them make a fatal step each night, but they are prolific, and their ranks do not suffer.

"Of course, we tried to get back to the clearing, and the *Dorlos*; first by tunneling. That was impossible, we found, because the rays used by the *Filanus* in clearing a landing place had acted somewhat upon

the earth beneath, and it was like powder. Our burrows fell in upon us faster than we could dig them out! Two of my men lost their lives that way.

"Then we tried creeping back by night; but we could not see as can the other animals here, and we quickly found that it was suicide to attempt such tactics. Two more of the men were lost in that fashion. That left fourteen.

"We decided then to wait. We knew there would be another ship along, sooner or later. Luckily, one of the men had somehow retained his menore. We treasured that as we treasured our lives. To-day, when, deep in our runways beneath the surface, we felt, or heard, the crashing of the trees, we knew the Service had not forgotten us. I put on the menore; I—but I think you know the rest, gentlemen. There were eleven of us left. We are here—all that is left of the *Dorlos* crew. We found no trace of any survivor of the *Filanus*; unaware of the possibility of danger, they were undoubtedly, all the victims of ... the trees."

Wilson's head dropped forward on his chest. He

straightened up with a start and an apologetic smile.

"I believe, Hanson," he said slowly, "I'd better get ... a little ... rest," and he slumped forward on the table in the death-like sleep of utter exhaustion.

There the interesting part of the story ends. The rest is history, and there is too much dry history in the Universe already.

Dival wrote three great volumes on L-472—or Ibit, as it is called now. One of them tells in detail how the presence of constantly increasing quantities of volcanic ash robbed the soil of that little world of its vitality, so that all forms of vegetation except the one became extinct, and how, through a process of development and evolution, those trees became carnivorous.

The second volume is a learned discussion of the tree itself; it seems that a few specimens were spared for study, isolated on a peninsula of one of the continents, and turned over to Dival for observation and dissection. All I can say for the book is that it is

probably accurate. Certainly it is neither interesting nor comprehensible.

And then, of course, there is his treatise on ocrate: how he happened to find the ore, the probable amount available on L-472—or Ibit, if you prefer—and an explanation of his new method of refining it. I saw him frantically gathering specimens while we were getting ready to leave, but it wasn't until after we had departed that he mentioned what he had found.

I have a set of these volumes somewhere; Dival autographed them and presented me with them. They established his position, I understand, in his world of science, and of course, the discovery of this new source of ocrate was a tremendous find for the whole Universe; interplanetary transportation wouldn't be where it is to-day if it were not for this inexhaustible source of power.

Yes, Dival became famous—and very rich.

I received the handshakes and the gratitude of the eleven men we rescued, and exactly nine words of

commendation from the Chief of my squadron: *"You are a credit to the Service, Commander Hanson!"*

Perhaps, to some who read this, it will seem that Dival fared better than I. But to men who have known the comradeship of the outer space, the heart-felt gratitude of eleven friends is a precious thing. And to any man who has ever worn the blue and silver uniform of the Special Patrol Service, those nine words from the Chief of Squadron will sound strong.

Chiefs of Squadrons in the Special Patrol Service—at least in those days—were scanty with praise. It may be different in these days of soft living and political pull.

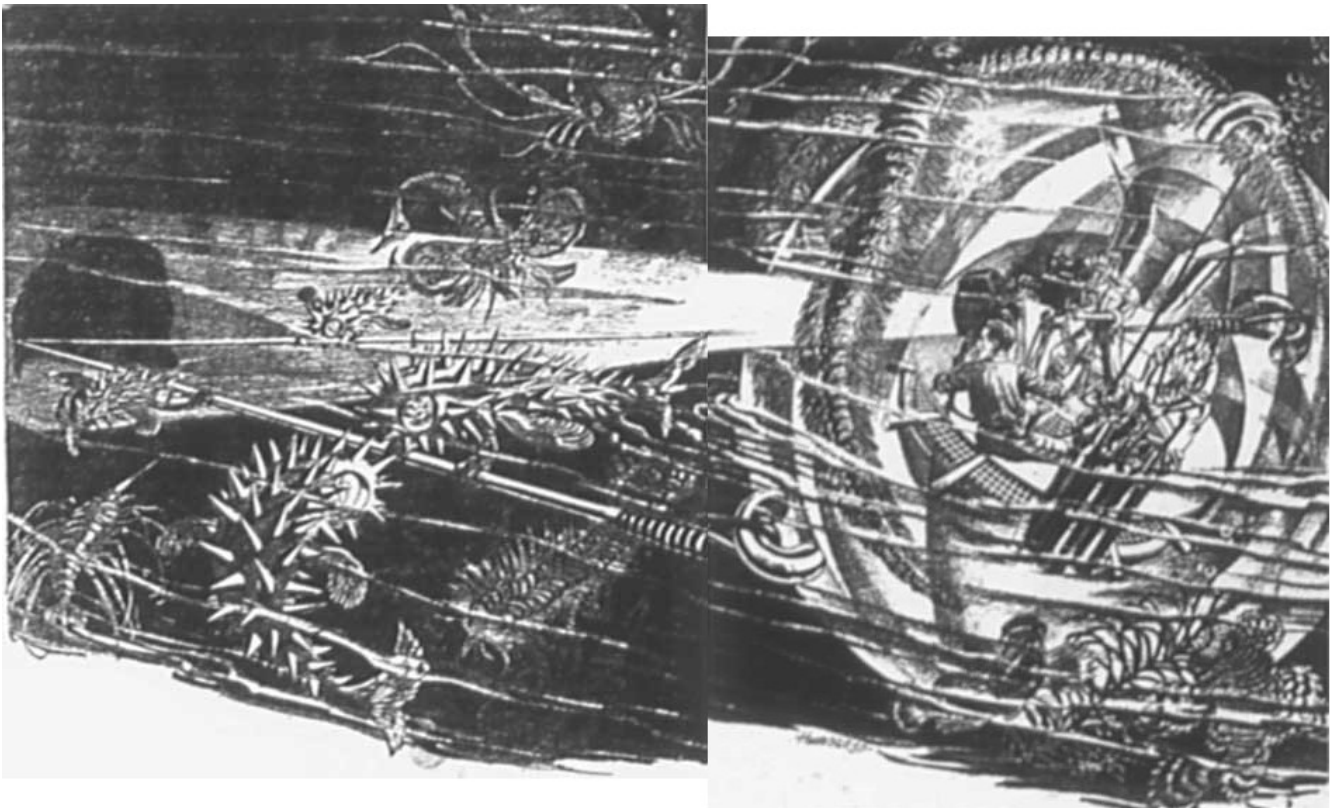
#49 Marooned Under The Sea, By Paul Ernst:

Three men stick out a strange and desperate adventure among the incredible monsters of the dark sea floor.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:



look at the cable

- - -

(Editor's note: This document, written on a curious kind of parchment and tied to a piece of driftwood, was reported to have been picked out of the sea near the Fiji Islands. The first and last pages were so water soaked as to be indecipherable.)

Yacht *Rosa* was due to leave the San Francisco harbor in two hours.

We were going on some mysterious cruise to the South Seas, the details of which I did not know.

"Professor George Berry, the famous zoologist, and myself are going to do some exploring that is hazardous in the extreme," Stanley had said. "For purely mechanical reasons we need a third. You are young and have no family ties, so I thought I'd ask you to go with us. I'd rather not tell you what it's all about until we are on our way."

"Look at the cable!" called Stanley.

That was all the explanation he had given. It was sufficient. I was fed-up with life just then: I had enough money to avoid work and was tired of playing.

Three men stick out a strange and desperate adventure among the incredible monsters of the dark sea floor.

"I must warn you that you'll risk your life in this," he had continued, in answer to my acceptance of his invitation.

And I had replied that the hazard, whatever it might be, only made the trip appear more desirable.

So here I was, on board the yacht, about to sail for far places on some scientific mission which had so far been kept veiled in secrecy and which was represented as "hazardous in the extreme." It sounded attractive!

Stanley came aboard accompanied by a lean, wiry man with iron gray hair and cool, alert black eyes.

"Hello, Martin," Stanley greeted me. "I want you to meet Professor Berry, the real leader of this expedition. Professor, this young red-head is Martin Grey, a sort of nephew by adoption who knows more about night life than most cabaret proprietors—and not much of anything else. He has shaken the dangers of the gold-diggers to face with us the dangers of the tropic seas."

The professor gripped my hand, and his cool black eyes gazed into mine with a kind of friendly frostiness.

"Don't pay any attention to him," he advised me.

"Twenty years ago, when I first met him, he was on his way to Africa to shoot elephants because some revue beauty had just thrown him over and he felt he ought to do something big and heroic about it. It was shortly afterward that he decided to stay a bachelor all his life, and became such a confirmed woman hater."

He smiled thinly at Stanley's prod in the ribs, and the two went below, talking and laughing with the

intimacy of old friendship.

I stayed on deck and soon found myself watching, with no little wonder, an enormous truck and trailer arrangement that drew up on the dock heavily loaded with a single immense crate. It was for us. I speculated as to what it could possibly contain.

It was a twenty or twenty-five-foot cube solidly braced with strap-iron and steel brackets. It evidently contained something fragile. The yacht's donkey engine lowered a hook for it, and swung it over the side and into the hold as daintily as though it had been packed with explosives.

The last of the ship's stores followed it over the side: the group of newspaper reporters who had been trying to pump the captain and first mate for a story were warned to leave, and we were ready to go. Precisely where and for what purpose?

I was to find out almost immediately.

Even as the yacht nosed superciliously away from the

dock, the steward approached me with the information that lunch was ready. I went to the small, compactly furnished dining salon, where I was joined by Stanley and the professor.

There were only the three of us at the table. Stanley Browne, noted big game hunter and semi-retired owner of the great Browne Glassworks at Altoona, a man fifteen years my senior but tanned and fit looking; Professor Berry, well known in scientific circles; and myself, known in no branch of activity save the one Stanley had jested about—the night life of my home city, Chicago.

"It's time you knew just what you're up against," said Stanley to me after the consomme had been served. "Now that we've actually sailed, there's no longer any need for secrecy. Indeed there never has been urgent need of it: the Professor and myself merely thought we might provoke incredulity and comment if we stated the purpose of our trip publicly."

He buttered a roll.

"We—the Professor and you and I—are going in for some deep sea diving. And when I say deep, I mean deep. We are going to investigate conditions as they exist one mile down from the surface of the ocean."

"A mile!" I exclaimed. "Why—"

There I stopped. I had only a layman's knowledge of such matters. But I knew that the limit of man's submersion, till then at any rate, was a matter of a few hundred feet.

"Sounds incredible, doesn't it," said Stanley with a smile. "But that's what we're going to do—if the Professor's gadget works as he seems to think it will."

"I don't think it, I know it," retorted the Professor. "And man, man, the things we may see down there! New and unknown species—a world no human has ever seen before—perhaps the secret of all of life—"

"Dragons, sea-serpents, and what not!" Stanley finished with a grin.

"Or, possibly—nothing at all." The Professor shrugged. "I mustn't let my scientific curiosity run away with me. Perhaps we'll find no new thing down down. Our deep sea dredging and classification may already embrace most of the forms of life in the greater depths."

"If it does I want my money back," said Stanley. "When you asked me to finance this expedition for you, I agreed on condition that you would show me a thrill—some *real* big game, even if I would not be able to shoot it. If we draw blank—"

"The mere descent should satisfy you, my adventuring friend," replied the Professor brusquely. "I think you'll find that thrilling enough."

"But—a mile under the surface!" I marveled, feeling not entirely comfortable. "The pressure! Enormous! It can't be done! That is, I mean, can it be done?"

"It had better be," said Stanley with a humor that I did not entirely appreciate. "If it isn't, the three of us are going to be pressed out like three sheets of tissue

paper! For we are assuredly going down that far in the Professor's gadget."

"Was that the thing I saw hoisted aboard just before we left?"

"That was it. We'll stroll around after lunch and look it over."

If I had taken this cruise in search of distraction—I was surely going to be successful! That was plain!

"Just where are we going?" I asked. "You said something about the South Seas, but you've named no special part of them."

"We're bound for Penguin Deep. That's a delightful little dimple in the Kermadec Trough, which," Stanley explained, "is north-northeast of New Zealand almost halfway up to the Fiji Islands. Penguin Deep is ticketed at five thousand one hundred and fifty feet, but it probably runs deeper in spots."

The rest of the meal was consumed in silence. I

hardly tasted what I ate; I remember that. Over five thousand feet down—where no man had ever ventured before! Could we make it?

I tried to recall my neglected physics lessons and compute the pressure that far down. I couldn't. But I knew it must be an appalling total of tons to the square inch. What possible arrangement could they have brought in which to make that awful descent?

And, if the descent were accomplished, what in the world would we see when we got down there? Gigantic, hitherto unknown fishes? Marine growths, half animal and half vegetable?

Decidedly, hot rolls and salad, cutlets and baked potatoes, good as they were, could not distract attention from the crowding questions that assailed me. And I could see that Stanley and the Professor were also far away in their thoughts—probably already exploring Penguin Deep.

After lunch we went forward to look at the Professor's gadget, as Stanley insisted on calling it.

It had been carefully unpacked by the crew while we ate, and it shimmered in the electric lighted hold like a great bubble.

It was a giant glass sphere, polished and flawless. Inside it could be made out various objects—a circular bench arrangement on a wooden flooring, batteries that filled the cup between the floor and the bottom arc of the sphere, tall metal cylinders, a small searchlight set next to a mechanism that was indeterminate. At three equidistant points on the sides there were glass handles, as thick as a man's thigh, cast integral with the walls. On the top there was a smaller handle.

At first glance the sphere seemed all in one piece, with the central objects cast inside like a toy ship in a sealed bottle. Then a mathematically precise ring of prismatic reflections showed me that the top third of the ball was a separate piece, fitting conically down like the tapered glass stopper of a monstrous perfume bottle. The handle on the top was for the purpose of lifting this giant's teapot lid, and allowing entrance into the sphere.

"Isn't it a beauty?" murmured Stanley. "It ought to be," he added. "It cost me eighty-six thousand to make it in my own glass factory. Eleven castings before this one came along that was reasonably free of flaws. Twenty-two feet six inches over all, walls five feet thick, new formula unbreakable glass, four men working a month to grind the lid into place, tolerance limits plus or minus zero."

He slapped the Professor's shoulders. "Let's go in and look over the apparatus."

To accommodate the huge ball a well had been constructed in the Rosa's hold. This brought the deck we were standing on up to within six feet of the top ring, above which was rigged a chain hoist for lifting the ponderous lid.

The hoist was revolved, the conical top was swung free, and we clambered into our unique diving shell.

The tall cylinders were revealed as great flasks of compressed air. The indeterminate thing beside the searchlight turned out to be a hand pump, geared to

work against heavy pressure. From the suction chamber of this three tubes extended.

"We inhale the air of the chamber," the Professor explained to me, "and exhale through the tubes into the pump cylinder. Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. The pump piston is forced down by this geared handle, sending the used air out of the shell through this sixteenth-inch hole. A ball check valve keeps the water from squirting in when the exhaust pressure is released."

He pointed to a telegraphic key which completed a circuit from the batteries in the bottom of the ball to a thread of copper cast through the lid.

"That's your plaything, Martin. You are to raise or lower us by pressing that key. It controls the donkey engine electrically, so that we guide our own destinies though we are a mile beneath our power plant. Stanley works the pump. I direct the searchlight, write down notes, and, I sincerely hope, take snapshots of deep sea life."

For a moment my part of the labor seemed so easy as to be unfair. Merely to sit there and punch a little key at raising and lowering time! But as I thought it over it began to appear more difficult.

The *Rosa* could not anchor, of course, in a mile of water. We would drift helplessly. If we approached an undersea cliff I must raise us at once to prevent us being smashed against it. And if the cliff were too lofty to be cleared in time....

I mentioned this to the Professor.

"That would be unfortunate," he said, with his frosty smile. "Stanley assures us this glass is unbreakable. He means commercially unbreakable. What would happen to it if it were submitted to the strain of being flung against a rock pile—in addition to the enormous stress of the water pressure—I don't know. It's your job to see that we don't have to find out!"

It had been planned to test the sphere empty first to see how it stood the strain.

We drifted to a full stop over the center of Penguin Deep where we were to gamble our lives in a game with Neptune. Sea anchors were rigged to lessen our drift and the donkey engine was geared to the first cable drum.

There was an impressive row of these drums, each holding an interminable length of three-quarter-inch cable. The bulk of a mile of steel cable has to be seen to be believed!

The glass sphere was lifted from the hold, delicately for all its enormous weight, and swung over the rail preparatory to being lowered into the depths.

Not until that moment did I notice two things: that there was no fastening of any kind to keep the thick lid in place: and that the three-quarter-inch cable looked like a pack thread in comparison to the ponderous bulk it strained to support.

"We couldn't use a heavier cable," said the Professor, "because of the strain. We're overloading the hoist as it is. As for the lid being fastened down—I think you'll

find it will be pressed into place securely enough!"

There was unanimous silence as the great globe slipped into the sea—down and down until the last reflection of the morning sun ceased to shimmer from its surface. Drum after drum was played out, till the first mate held his hand up to check the engineer.

"Five thousand feet, sir," he called to Stanley.

"Haul it back up. And let us hope," Stanley added fervently, "that we'll find the gadget in one piece."

The engine began to snort rhythmically. Dripping, vibrating, the coils of cable began to crawl back in place on the drums. There was a glint under the surface again as the sunlight reflected on the nearing sphere.

The great ball flashed out of the water, and a cheer burst from the throats of all of us. It was absolutely unharmed. Only—there was a beading of fine moisture inside the thick globe. What that could mean, none of us could figure out.

"Difference in temperature?" worried the Professor. "No, it's as cold inside as out. Molecules of water driven by sheer pressure through five feet of glass to unite in drops on the inside? Possibly. Well, there's one way to find out. Stanley, Martin—are you ready?"

We nodded, and prepared to visit the bottom a mile below the *Rosa's* keel. The preparation consisted merely in donning heavy, fleece-lined jumpers to protect us from the cold of the sunless depths.

Soberly we entered the ball to undergo whatever ordeal awaited us on the distant ocean floor. How comparative distance is! A mile walk in the country—it is nothing. A mile ascent in an airplane—a trifle. But a mile descent into pitch black, bone chilling depths of water—that is an immense distance!

Copper wire, on a separate drum, was connected from the engine switch to the copper thread that curled through the glass wall to my telegraphic key. We strapped the mouthpieces of the breathing tubes over our heads, and Browne started the slow turning of the compression pump.

The Professor snapped the searchlight on and off several times to see that it was in working shape. He raised his hand, I pressed the key, and the long descent began.

That plunge into the bottomless depths remains in my memory almost as clearly as the far more fantastic adventures that came to us later.

Smoothly, rapidly, the yellow-green of the surface water dimmed to olive. This in turn grew blacker and blacker. Then we were slipping down into pitch darkness—a big bubble lit by a meagre lamp and containing three fragile human beings that dared to trust the soft pulp of their bodies to the crushing weight of the deepest ocean.

The most impressive thing was the utter soundlessness of our descent. At first there had been a pulsing throb of the donkey engine transmitted to us by the sustaining cable. This died as we slid farther from the Rosa. At length it was hushed entirely, cushioned by the springy length of steel. There was no stir, no sound of any kind. As far as our senses

could tell us, we were hanging motionless in the pressing, awesome blackness.

The Professor switched off our light and turned on the searchlight which he trained downward through the wall at as steep an angle as the flooring would permit. Even then the illusion of motionlessness was preserved. There was nothing in the water to mark our progress. We might have been floating in a back void of space.

Down and down we went, for an interminable length of time—till at length we reached the abysmal level where the sun never shone and the eyes of man had never gazed till now.

Words were made to describe familiar articles. I find now when I am faced with the necessity of portraying events and objects beyond the range of normal human experience that I cannot conjure up words to fit. I despair of trying to make you see what we saw, and feel what we felt.

But try to picture yourself in the glass ball with us:

All is profound blackness save for a streak of white, dying about fifty feet away, which is the beam of our searchlight. Twenty feet below is a bare floor of flinty lava and broken shell. This is unrelieved by sea-weed of any kind, appearing like an imagined fragment of Martian or lunar landscape.

The ball sways idly to the push of some explicable submarine current. It is like being in a captive balloon, except that the connecting cable extends stiffly upward instead of downward.

There is a realization, an instinctive *feel* of awful pressure around you. Logic tells you how you are clamped about, but deeper than logic is the intuition that the glass walls are pressing in on themselves—at the point of collapse. Your ears, tingle with the feel of it: your head rings with it.

You are breathing in through your nose—thin, unsatisfying gulps of air that cause your lungs to labor at their task; and you are exhaling through, your mouth, with difficulty, into the barrel of the powerful pump. No bubbles arise from the tiny hole

where the used air is forced into the water. The pressure is too enormous for that. Only a thin, milky line marks its escape from the sphere.

In a ghostly way you see Stanley turning the pump handle. With a handful of waste which he has borrowed from the *Rosa's* engine room, the Professor wipes from the section of wall through which the searchlight plays the moisture that constantly collects there. I sit with my hand near the key, peering downward and ahead like an engineer in a locomotive cab, ready to raise the shell or lower it as occasion warrants.

And always the suffocating awareness of pressure....

Strange and mystic journey as the tortured glass sphere floated over the bottom, following the slow drift of the *Rosa* far above!

The finger of light played along the tilted side of a wrecked tramp steamer. There was a crumpled gash in the bow. From this ragged hole suddenly appeared a great, serpentine form....

The Professor clutched at his camera, pointed it, and clenched his hands in a frenzy of disappointment. The serpent shape had disappeared back into the hull. A little later and we had drifted slowly past the wreck.

"Damn it!" the Professor snatched away his mouthpiece to exclaim: "If we could only *stop*."

The bottom changed character shortly after we had passed the hulk. We began to creep over low, gently rounded mounds.

These were so regular in form that they were puzzling. About fifty feet across and ten in altitude, they looked artificial in their symmetry—like great saucers set on the ocean floor bottom side up. They took on a dirty black hue as our light struck them, and glowed with a faint phosphorescence as they stretched away into the darkness.

A twelve-foot monstrosity, all toad-like head and eyes, swam into the light beam and bumped blindly against the glass ball. For an instant it goggled crazily at us. The Professor took its picture. It blundered away. As

it reached the darkness beyond the beam it, too, showed phosphorescent. A belt of blue-white spots like the portholes of a liner extended down its ugly sides.

Along the bottom, between the curious mounds, writhed a wormlike thing. But it was too huge to be described as truly wormlike—it was eighteen or twenty feet long and a foot thick. It was blood red, almost blunt ended and patently without eyes.

I took my gaze off it for an instant. When I looked again it had disappeared. I blinked at this seeming miracle and then discovered a foot or so of its tail protruding from under the edge of one of the mounds. It was threshing furiously about.

It was at this instant that I suddenly found increased difficulty, and glanced at Stanley.

He had stopped pumping and was clutching at the Professor's arm with one hand while he pointed down with the other. The Professor motioned him toward the pump, and began to click pictures furiously with

the camera pointed at the nearest mound.

Wondering at the urgency of Stanley's gesture and the frantic clicking of the camera shutter, I looked more closely at the curious, saucerlike hump.

Under closer inspection something remarkably like a huge, mud-colored eye was revealed! And as we drifted along, twenty feet away on the farther slope, another appeared!

Paralyzed, I stared at the edges of the thing. They were waving almost imperceptibly up and down, *creeping!*

The mounds were living creatures! Acres and acres of them lying lethargically on the bottom waiting for something to crawl within range of their monstrous edges!

Involuntarily I pressed the key to raise us. But we had gone only a few feet when the Professor called to me.

"Down again, Martin. I don't think these things will

bother us unless we scrape against them. Anyway they can't hurt the shell."

I lowered the ball to our former twenty-foot level, and there we swung just over the monsters' backs.

The Professor had said that the giant inverted saucers would probably not bother us if we did not come in contact with them. It soon became apparent that, in a measure, he was right. The creatures either could not or would not lift their enormous bulks from the sea floor.

A gigantic wriggling thing, all grotesque fringe and tentacles, drifted down into the range of our light. Lower it floated until it hovered just above one of the larger mounds. The Professor got its portrait. At the same instant, as though it had heard the click of the shutter and been frightened by it, the thing dropped another foot—and touched the sloping back.

With the speed of light the inverted saucer became a

cup. Like a clenching fist, the cup closed over one of the straggling tentacles.

There followed a tug of war that was all the more ghastly for its soundlessness. The hunted jerked spasmodically to get away from the hunter. So wild were its efforts that several times it raised the monster clear of the bottom for a foot or so. But the grim clutch could not be broken.

Closer and closer it was dragged. Then, after a supreme paroxysm, the tentacle parted and the prey escaped. The tentacle disappeared into the mass of the baffled hunter. It made no attempt to follow the fleeing creature. It slowly relaxed along the bottom and waited for its next meal.

The unearthly incident gave us fresh confidence, convincing us that the monsters did not move unless they were directly touched. Of course we could not foresee the fatal accident that was going to put us within reach of one of the giant saucers.

We thought for awhile that these great blobs of cold

life were the largest creatures of the depths. It was soon made clear to us how mistaken that notion was!

For a time we gazed spellbound at the nightmare assortment of grotesqueries that gradually assembled around us, attracted no doubt by our light. The things were mainly sightless and of indescribable shape. Most of them were phosphorescent, and they avoided collisions in a way that suggested that they had some buried sense of light perception.

As time passed the Professor emptied his camera, refilled it several times and groaned that he had no more film. Twice as we drifted along I raised us to keep us clear of a gradual upward slope of the smooth floor.

Stanley removed his mouthpiece long enough to suggest that we go back to the surface: we had been submerged for nearly four hours now. But before we could reply a violent movement was felt.

The ball rocked and twirled so that we were forced to cling to the circular bench to avoid being thrown to

the floor. It was as though a hurricane of wind had suddenly penetrated the unruffled depths.

"Earthquake?" called Stanley.

"Don't know," answered the Professor. He swung the searchlight in an arc and focussed it at length on something that appeared only as a field of blurred movement. He wiped the moisture from the wall before the lens, and there was revealed to us a sight that makes my heart pound even now when I recall it to memory.

Something vast and serpentine had ventured too near the bottom—and had been caught by the death traps there!

The creature was a writhing mass of gigantic coils. It was impossible even to guess at its length, but its girth was such that the mound-shaped monsters that had fastened to it could not entirely encircle it.

There it twined and knotted: a mighty serpent of the deepest ocean, snapping its awful length and

threshing its powerful tail in an effort to dislodge the giant leeches that were flattened against it. And every time it touched the bottom in its blind frenzy, more of the teeming deathtraps attached themselves to it, crawling over their fellows in an effort to find unoccupied areas.

Soon the sea-serpent was a distorted, creeping mass. For one appalling instant its head came into our view....

It resembled the head of a crocodile, only it was ten times larger and covered with scale like the armor plate of a destroyer. The jaws, wide open and slashing with enormous, needle-shaped teeth at the huge parasites, were large enough to have held our glass sphere. One eye appeared. It was at least three feet across and of a shimmering amethyst color.

One of the deadly saucers wrapped itself around the great head. The entire mass of attackers and attacked settled slowly to the bottom.

But before it completely succumbed the beaten

monster gave one last, convulsive flick of its tail....

"Good God!" cried Stanley, shrinking away from the pump and staring upward.

I followed his gaze with my own eyes.

In the faint reflected glow of the searchlight I could see row on row of large cups flattened against the top of the ball. As I watched these flattened still more and the big sphere quivered perceptibly.

In its death struggle the mighty serpent had flicked one of the huge leeches against us. It now clung there with blind tenacity, covering nearly two-thirds of our shell with the underside of its body.

I reached for the control key to send us to the surface.

"Don't!" snapped the Professor. "The weight—"

He needed to say no more. My hand recoiled as though the key had been red hot.

The three-quarter-inch cable above us was now sustaining, in addition to its own huge weight, our massive glass ball and the appalling tonnage of this grim blanket of flesh that encircled us. Could it further hold against the strain of lifting that combined tonnage through the press of the water? Almost certainly it could not!

There was nothing we could do but hang there and discover at first hand exactly what happened to things that were clamped in those mighty, living vises!

The Professor turned on the interior bulb. The result was ghastly. It showed every detail of the belly of the thing that gripped us.

Crowded over its entire under surface were gristly, flattened suckers. Now and then a convulsive ripple ran through its surface tissue and great ridges of flesh stood out. With each squeeze the glass shell quivered ominously as though the extreme limit of its pressure resisting power were being reached—and passed.

"A nice fix," remarked the Professor, his calm, dry voice acting like a tonic in that moment of fear. "If we try to go up, the cable would probably break. If we try to outlast the patience of this thing we might run out of air, or actually be staved in."

He paused thoughtfully.

"I suggest, though, that we follow the latter course for awhile at least. It would be just too bad if that cable broke, gentlemen!"

Stanley shuddered, and looked at the dirty white belly that pressed against the glass walls on all sides.

"I vote we stay here for a time."

"And I," was my addition.

I relieved Stanley at the pump. He and the Professor sat down on the bench. Casting frequent glances at the constricted blanket of flesh that covered us, we prepared to wait as composedly as we might for the thing to give up its effort to smash our shell.

The hour that followed was longer than any full day I have ever lived through. Had I not confirmed the passage of time by looking at my watch, I would have sworn that at least twenty hours had passed.

Every half-minute I gazed at that weaving pattern of cup-shaped suckers only five feet away, trying to see if they were relaxing in their pressure. I attempted to persuade myself that they were. But I knew I was only imagining it. Actually they were pressed as flat as ever, and the sphere still quivered at regular intervals as the heavy body squeezed in on itself. There was no sign that its blind, mindless patience was becoming exhausted.

There was little conversation during that interminable hour.

Stanley grinned wryly once and commented on the creature's disappointment if it actually succeeded in getting at us.

"We'd be scattered all over the surrounding half mile by the pressure of the water," he said. "There'd be

nothing left for our pet to feed on but five-foot chunks of broken glass. Not a very satisfying meal."

"We might try to reason with the thing—point out how foolish it is to waste its time on us," I suggested, trying to appear as nonchalant as he was.

The Professor said nothing. He was coolly writing in his notebook, describing minutely the appearance of our abysmal captor.

Finally I chanced to look down through a section of wall not covered by our stubborn enemy. I wiped the moisture from the glass before the searchlight so that I could see more clearly.

The bottom seemed to be heaving up and down. I blinked my eyes and looked again. It was not an illusion. With a regular dip and rise we were approaching to within a few feet of the rocky floor and moving back up again. Also we were floating faster than at anytime previous. The bottom was bare again; we had left the crowding, ominous mounds.

I waved to the Professor. He snapped his notebook shut and stared at the uneasy ocean bottom.

"I've been hoping I was wrong," he said simply. "I thought I felt a wavy motion fifteen minutes ago, and it seemed to me to increase steadily."

The three of us stared at each other.

"You mean ..." began Stanley with a shudder.

"I mean that the *Rosa*, one mile above us, is having difficulties. A storm. Judging from our movement it must be a hurricane: the length of cable would cushion us from any average wave, and we are rising and falling at least fifteen feet."

"My God!" groaned Stanley. "The *Rosa* is already heeled with the weight of us. She could never weather a hurricane!"

The plight of the crew above our heads was as clear to us as though we had been aboard with them.

Should they cut the cable, figuring that the lives of the three of us were certainly not to be set against the thirty on the yacht?

Should they disconnect the electric control and try to haul us up regardless?

Or should they try to ride out the storm in spite of being crippled by the drag of us?

"I think if I were up there I'd cut us adrift," said Stanley grimly. Both the Professor and myself nodded. "Though," he added hopefully, "my captain is a good gambler...."

The cable quivered like a live thing under the terrific strain. At each downward swoop, before the upswing began, there was a sickening sag.

"We no longer have a decision to make," said the Professor. "Press the key, Martin, and God grant we can rise with all this dead weight."

And at that instant the crew of the *Rosa* were also

relieved of the necessity for making a decision.

At the bottom of one of those long, sickening falls there was a jerk—and we continued on down to the ocean floor!

The sphere rolled over, jumbling the equipment in a tangled mess with the three of us in the center, bruised and cut. The light snapped off as the battery connections were torn loose.

There we lay at the bottom of Penguin Deep, in an inert sphere that was dead and dark in the surrounding blackness—a coffin of glass to hold us through the centuries....

"Martin," I heard the Professor's voice after a time. "Stanley—can either of you move? I'm caught."

"I'm caught, too," came Stanley's gasping answer. "Something on my leg—feels like it's broken."

A heavy object was pressing across my body. With an effort I freed myself and fumbled in the pitch

darkness for the other two.

"Lights first," commanded the Professor. "The pump, you know."

I did know! Frantically I scrambled in the dark till I located the batteries. They were right side up and still wired together.

The air grew rapidly foul with no one at the pump. Panting for breath I blundered at the task of connecting the light. After what seemed an eternity I accomplished it.

The light revealed Stanley with an air tank lying across his leg. The mouthpiece of his breathing tube had been forced back over his head, gashing his face in its journey. His face was white with pain.

The Professor was caught under the heavy bench. I freed him and together we attended to Stanley, finding that his leg wasn't broken but only badly bruised.

The mound-shaped monster, dislodged possibly by the fall, was nowhere to be seen.

I resumed work at the pump, the connections of which were so strongly contrived that they had withstood the shock of the upset.

For a moment we were content to rest while the air grew purer. Then we were forced squarely to face our fate.

The Professor summed up the facts in a few concise words.

"We're certainly doomed! Here at the bottom of Penguin Deep we're as out of reach of help as though we were stranded on the moon. We're as good as dead right now."

"If we have nothing left to hope for," whispered Stanley after a time, "we might as well close the air valves and get it over with at once. No use torturing

ourselves...."

The Professor moistened his lips.

"It might be wise." He turned to me. "What's your opinion, Martin?"

But I—I confess I had not the stark courage of these two.

"No! No!" I cried out. "Let's keep on living as long as the air holds out. Something might happen—"

I avoided their eyes as I said it, utterly ashamed of my cowardly quibbling with death. What in the name of God could possibly happen to help us?

The Professor shrugged dully, and nodded.

"I feel with Stanley that we ought to get it over in one short stab. But we have no right to force you...." His voice trailed off.

We readjusted our mouthpieces. I turned

automatically at the pump; and we silently awaited the last suffocating moment of our final doom.

As before, attracted by the light, a strange assortment of deep-sea life wriggled and darted about us, swimming lazily among the looped coils and twists of our cable which had settled down around us.

Among these were certain fish that resembled great porcupines. Spines a foot and a half long, like living knife blades, protected them from the attacks of other species.

They were the only things we saw that were not constantly writhing away from the jaws of some hostile monster—the only things that seemed able to swim about their own affairs without even deigning to watch for danger.

Fascinated, I watched the six-foot creatures. Here were we, reasoning humans, supposed lords of creation, slowly but surely perishing—while only a

few feet away one of the lowest forms of life could exist in perfect safety and tranquility!

Then, as I watched them, I seemed to see a difference in some of them.

The majority of them had two fins just behind the gill slits, typical fish tails and blunt, sloping heads. But now and then I saw a spined monster that was queerly unlike its fellows.

Instead of two front fins, these unique ones had two vacant round holes. The head looked as though it had forgotten to grow; its place was taken by an eyeless, projecting, shield shaped cap. And there was no tail.

Glad to find something to distract my half crazed thoughts, I studied the nearest of these.

They moved slower than their tailed and finned brothers, I noticed. I wondered how they could move at all, lacking in any kind of motive power as they seemed to be.

Next instant the secret of their movement was made clear!

Out of the empty fin holes of the creature I was studying crept two long, powerful looking tentacles. But these were not true tentacles. There were no vacuum discs on them, and they moved as though supported by jointed bones—like arms.

The arms ended in flat paddles that resembled hands. These threshed the water in a sort of breast-stroke, propelling the body forward.

Shortly after the arms had appeared, the spiny head cap was cautiously extended a few inches forward from the main shell. Further it was extended as the head of a turtle might slowly appear from the protection of its bony case. And under it—

"Professor!" I screamed wildly. "My God! Look!"

Both the Professor and Stanley merely stared dully at me. I babbled of what I had seen.

"A man! A human looking thing, anyway! Arms and a head! A man inside a fish's spined hide—like armor!"

They looked pityingly at me. The Professor laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Now, now," he soothed, "don't go to pieces—"

"I tell you I saw it!" I shouted. Then, shrinking from the hysterical loudness of my own voice, I lowered my tone. "Something that looks human has occupied some of those prickly, six-foot shells. I saw arms—and a man's head! I swear it!"

"Nonsense! How could a human being stand the cold, the pressure—"

Here I happened to glance at the wall of the shell through which the searchlight shone.

"Look! See for yourself!"

Squarely in the rays of the light showed a head, projecting from one of the shells and capped with a

wide flat helmet of horned bone.

There were eyes and nose and mouth placed on one side of that head—a face! There were even tabs of flesh or bony protuberances that resembled ears.

"Curious," muttered the Professor, staring. "It certainly looks human enough to talk. But it's only a fish, nevertheless. See—in the throat are gill slits."

"But the eyes! Look at them! They're not the eyes of a fish!"

And they were not. There was in them a light of reason, of intelligence. Those eyes were roaming brightly over us, observing the light, the equipment, seeming to note our amazement as we crowded to look at it.

The sphere rocked slightly. Behind the staring, manlike visitor there was a glimpse of enormous, crocodile jaws and huge, amethyst eyes. Instantly the head and arms receded, leaving an empty-seeming, lifeless shell. An impregnable fortress of spines, the

thing drifted slowly away through the twisted loops of cable.

"It certainly looked like—" began Stanley shakily.

"The creature was just a fish," said the Professor shaking his head at the light in Stanley's eyes. "Some sort of giant parasite that inhabits the shells of other fish."

He opened the valve of the last air cylinder and seated himself resignedly on the bench.

"We have another half hour or so—"

All of us suddenly put out our hands to brace ourselves. The sphere had moved.

"Look at the cable!" called Stanley.

We did so. It was moving, writhing away from us over the bottom as though abruptly given life of its own. Coil after coil disappeared into the further gloom.

At length the cable was straight. The ball moved again—was dragged a few feet along the rocky floor.

Something—possessed of incredibly vast power—had seized the end of the steel cable and was reeling us in as a fisherman reels in a trout!

Slowly, unsteadily, we slid along the ocean floor. Ahead of us appeared a jagged black wall—a cliff. There was a gloomy hole at its base. Toward this we were being dragged by whatever it was that had caught the end of the cable.

Helpless, we watched ourselves engulfed by the murky den. In the beam of the searchlight we saw that the submarine cavern extended on and on for an unguessable depth. The cable, taut with the strain, stretched ahead out of sight.

Time had been lost track of during that mysterious, ominous journey. It was recalled to us by the state of the air we were breathing.

The Professor removed his mouthpiece and cast the

tube aside.

"You might as well stop pumping, Martin," he said quietly. "We're done. There's no more air in the flask."

We stared at each other. Then we shook hands, solemnly, tremulously, taking leave of each other before we departed on that longest of all journeys....

The air in that small space was rapidly exhausted. We lay on the floor, laboring for breath, and closed our eyes....

The Professor, the oldest of the three of us, succumbed first. I heard his breath whistle stertorously and, glancing at him, saw that he was in a coma. In a moment Stanley had joined him in blessed unconsciousness.

I could feel myself drifting off.... Hammers beat at my ears.... Daggers pierced my heaving lungs....

Hazily I could see scores of the bristly, manlike fish when I opened my eyes and glanced through the

walls. It was not one monster then, but many that had brought us to their lair. Abruptly, as though a signal had been given, they all streamed back toward the mouth of the cavern....

My eyesight dimmed.... The hammers pulsed louder.... A veil descended over my senses and I knew no more....

A soft, sustained roar came to my ears. Through my closed eyelids I could sense light. A dank, fishy smell came to my nostrils.

I groaned and moved feebly, finding that I was resting on something soft and pleasant.

Dazedly I opened my eyes and sat up. An exclamation burst from me as I suddenly remembered what had gone before, and realized that somehow, incredibly, I was still living.

Feeling like a man who has waked from a nightmarish sleep to find himself in his tomb, I gazed about.

I was in a long, lofty rock chamber, the uneven floor of which was covered with shallow pools of water. The further end was of smooth-grained stone that resembled cement. The near end was rough like the walls; but in it there was a small, symmetrical arch, the mouth of a passage leading away to some other point in the bowels of the earth.

The place was flooded with clear light that had a rosy tinge. From my position on the floor I could not see what made the light. It streamed from a crevice that extended clear around the cave parallel with the floor and about twelve feet above it. From this groove, along with the light, came the soft roaring hiss.

Beside me was the glass ball, the cover off and lying a few feet away from the opening in the top. There was no trace of Stanley or the Professor.

I rose from my couch, a thick, mattresslike affair of soft, pliant hide, and walked feebly toward the small arch in the near end of the cave.

Even as I approached it I heard footsteps, and voices

resounded in some slurring, musical language. Half a dozen figures suddenly came into view.

They were men, as human as myself! Indeed, as I gazed at them, I felt inclined to think they were even more human!

They were magnificent specimens. The smallest could not have been less than six feet three, and all of them were muscular and finely proportioned. Their faces were arresting in their expression of calm strength and kindliness. They looked like gods, arrayed in soft, thick, beautifully tanned hides in this rosy tinted hole a mile below the ocean's top.

They stared at me for an instant, then advanced toward me. My face must have reflected alarm, for the tallest of them held up his hand, palm outward, in a peaceful gesture.

The leader spoke to me. Of course the slurred, melodious syllable meant nothing to me. He smiled and indicated that I was to follow him. I did so, hardly aware of what I was doing, my brain reeling in an

attempt to grasp the situation.

How marvelous, how utterly incredible, to find human beings here! How many were there? Where had they come from? How had they salvaged us from Penguin Deep? I gave it up, striding along with my towering guards like a man walking in his sleep.

At length the low passageway ended, and I exclaimed aloud at what I saw.

I was looking down a long avenue of buildings, all three stories in height. There were large door and window apertures, but no doors nor window panes. In front of each house was a small square with—wonder of wonders!—a lawn of whitish yellow vegetation that resembled grass. In some of the lawns were set artistic fountains of carved rock.

I might have been looking down any prosperous earthly subdivision, save for the fact that the roofs of the houses were the earth itself, which the building walls, in addition to functioning as partitions, served to support. Also earthly subdivisions aren't usually

illuminated with rosy light that comes softly roaring from jets set in the walls.

We were walking toward a more brightly lighted area that showed ahead of us. On the way we passed intersections where other, similar streets branched geometrically away to right and left. These were smaller than the one we were on, indicating that ours was Main Street in this bizarre submarine city.

Faces appeared at door and window openings to peer at me as we passed. And even in that jumbled moment I had time to realize that these folk could restrain curiosity better than we can atop the earth. There was no hub-bub, no running out to tag after the queerly dressed foreigner and shout humorous remarks at him.

We approached the bright spot I had noticed from afar. It was an open square, about a city block in area, in the center of which was a royal looking building covered with blazing fragments of crystal and so

brilliantly resplendent with light that it seemed to glow at the heart of a pink fire.

I was led toward this and in through a wide doorway. As courteously as though I were a visiting king, I was conducted up a great staircase, down a corridor set with more of the sparkling crystals and into a huge, low room. There my escort bowed and left me.

Still feeling that I could not possibly be awake and seeing actual things, I glanced around.

In a corner was another of the mattresslike couches made of the thick, soft hide that seemed to be the principal fabric of the place. A few feet away was a table set with dishes of food in barbaric profusion. None of the viands looked familiar but all appealed to the appetite. The floor was strewn with soft skins, and comfortable, carved benches were scattered about.

I walked to the window and looked out. Underneath was a plot of the cream colored grass through which ran a tiny stream. This widened at intervals into clear pools beside which were set stone benches. A

hundred yards away was the edge of the square, where the regular, three storied houses began.

While I was staring at this unearthly vista, still unable to think with any coherence. I heard my name called. I turned to face Stanley and the Professor.

Both were pale in the rose light, and Stanley limped with the pain of his bruised leg: but both had recovered from their partial suffocation as completely as had I.

"We thought perhaps you'd decided to swim back up to the *Rosa* and leave us to our fates," said Stanley after we had stopped pumping each other's arms and had seated ourselves.

"And I thought—well, I didn't think much of anything," I replied. "I was too busy straining my eyesight over the wonders of this city. Did you ever see anything like it?"

"We haven't seen it at all, save for a view from the windows," said Stanley. "All we know of the place is that a while ago we woke up in a room like this, only much smaller and less lavish. I wonder why you rate this distinction?"

I described the streets as I had seen them. (It is impossible for me to think of them as anything but streets; it would seem as though the rock roof over all would give the appearance of a series of tunnels; but I had always the impression of airiness and openness.)

"Light and heat are furnished by natural gas," said the Professor when I remarked on the perfection of these two necessities. "That's what makes the low roaring noise—the thousands of burning jets. But the presence of gas here isn't as unusual as the presence of air. Where does that come from? Through wandering underground mazes, from some cave mouth in the Fiji Islands to the north? That would indicate that all the earth around here is honeycombed like a gigantic section of sponge. I wonder—"

"Have you any idea how we were rescued?" I interrupted, a little impatient of his abstract scientific ponderings.

"We have," said Stanley. "A woman told us. We woke up to find her nursing us—gorgeous looking thing—finest woman I've ever seen, and I've seen a good many—"

"She didn't exactly 'tell' us," remarked the Professor with his thin smile. Women were only interesting to him as biological studies. "She drew a diagram that explained it.

"That tunnel, Martin, was like the outer diving chamber of a submarine. We were hauled in on a big windlass—driven by gas turbines, I think. Once we were inside, a twenty-yard, counterbalanced wall of rock was lowered across the entrance. Then the water was drained out through a well, and into a subterranean body of water that extends under the entire city. And here we are."

We fell silent. Here we were. But what was going to

happen to us among these friendly-seeming people; and how—if ever—we were going to get back to the earth's surface, were questions we could not even try to answer.

We ate of the appetizing food laid out on the long table. Shortly afterward we heard steps in the corridor outside the room.

A woman entered. She was ravishingly beautiful, tall, slender but symmetrically rounded. A soft leather robe slanted upward across her breast to a single shoulder fastening and ended just above her knees in a skirt arrangement. Around her head was a regal circlet of silvery gray metal with a flashing bit of crystal set in the center above her broad, low forehead.

She smiled at Stanley who looked dazzled and smiled eagerly back.

She pointed toward the door, signifying that we were to go with her. We did so; and were led down the great staircase and to a huge room that took up half

the ground floor of the building. And here we met the nobility of the little kingdom—the upper class that governed the immaculate little city.

They were standing along the walls, leaving a lane down the center of the room—tall, finely modelled men and women dressed in the single garments of soft leather. There were people there with gray hair and wisdom wrinkled faces; but all were alike in being erect of body, firm of bearing and in splendid health.

They stopped talking as we entered the big room. Our gaze strayed ahead down the lane toward the further wall.

Here was a raised dais. On it was a gleaming crystal encrusted throne. And occupying it was the most queenly, exquisitely beautiful woman I had ever dreamed about.

Woman? She was just a girl in years in spite of her grave and royal air. Her eyes were deep violet. Her hair was black as ebony and gleaming with sudden

glints of light. Her skin—

But she cannot be described. Only a great painter could give a hint of her glory. Too, I might truthfully be described as prejudiced about her perfections.

The Queen, for patently she was that, bowed graciously at us. It seemed to me—though I told myself that I was an imaginative fool—that her eyes rested longest on me, and had in them an expression not granted to the Professor or Stanley.

She spoke to us a melodious sentence or two, and waved her beautiful hand in which was a short ivory wand, evidently a scepter.

"She's probably giving us the keys to the city," whispered Stanley. He edged nearer the fair one who had conducted us. "I sincerely hope there's room here for us."

The open lane closed in on us. Men and women crowded about us speaking to us and smiling ruefully as they realized we could not understand. I noticed

that, for some curious reason, they seemed fascinated by the color of my hair. Red-haired men were evidently scarce there.

At length the beauty who had so captured Stanley's fancy, and who seemed to have been appointed a sort of mentor for us, suggested in sign language that we might want to return to our quarters.

It was a welcome suggestion. We were done in by the experiences and emotions that had gripped us since leaving the *Rosa* such an incredibly few hours ago.

We went back to the second floor. I to my luxurious big apartment and Stanley and the Professor to their smaller but equally comfortable rooms.

A pleasant period slid by, every waking hour of which was filled with new experiences.

The city's name, we found, was Zyobor. It was a perfect little community. There were artisans and thinkers, artists and laborers—all alike in being physically perfect beyond belief and cultured as no

race on top the ground is cultured.

As we began to learn the language, more exact details of the practical methods of existence were revealed to us.

The surrounding earth furnished them with building materials, metals and unlimited gas. The sea, so near us and yet so securely walled away, gave them food. Which warrants a more detailed description.

We were informed that the manlike, two-armed fishes were the servants of these people—domesticated animals, in a sense, only of an extremely high order of intelligence. They were directed by mental telepathy (Every man, woman and child in Zyobor was skilled at thought projection. They conversed constantly, from end to end of the city, by mental telepathy.)

Protected in their spined shells, which they captured from the schools of porcupine fish that swarmed in Penguin Deep, they gathered sea vegetation from the higher levels and trapped sea creatures. These were brought into the subterranean chamber where our

glass ball now reposed. Then the chamber was emptied of water and the food was borne to the city.

The vast army of mound-fish provided the bulk of the population's food, and also furnished the thick, pliant skin they used for clothing and drapes. They were cultivated as we cultivate cattle—an ominous herd, to be handled with care and approached by the fish-servants with due caution.

Thus, with all reasonable wants satisfied, with talent and brains to design beautiful surroundings, lighted and warmed by inexhaustible natural gas, these fortunate beings lived their sheltered lives in their rosy underground world.

At least I thought their lives were sheltered then. It was only later, when talking to the beautiful young Queen, that I learned of the dread menace that had begun to draw near to them just a short time before we were rescued....

My first impression, when we had entered the throne room that first day, that the Queen had regarded me

more intently than she had Stanley or the Professor, had been right. It pleased her to treat me as an equal, and to give me more of her time than was granted to any other person in the city.

Every day, for a growing number of hours, we were together in her apartment. She personally instructed me in the language, and such was my desire to talk to this radiant being that I made an apt pupil.

Soon I had progressed enough to converse with her—in a stilted, incorrect way—on all but the most abstract of subjects. It was a fine language. I liked it, as I liked everything else about Zyobor. The upper earth seemed far away and well forgotten.

Her name, I found, was Aga. A beautiful name....

"How did your kingdom begin?" I asked her one day, while we were sitting beside one of the small pools in the gardens. We were close together. Now and then my shoulder touched hers, and she did not draw away.

"I know not," she replied. "It is older than any of our

ancient records can say. I am the three hundred and eleventh of the present reigning line."

"And we are the first to enter thy realm from the upper world?"

"Thou art the first."

"There is no other entrance but the sea-way into which we were drawn?"

"There is no other entrance."

I was silent, trying to realize the finality of my residence here.

At the moment I didn't care much if I never got home!

"In the monarchies we know above," I said finally, avoiding her violet eyes, "it is not the custom for the queen—or king—to reign alone. A consort is chosen. Is it not so here? Has thou not, among thy nobles, some one thou hast destined—"

I stopped, feeling that if she dismissed me in anger and never spoke to me again the punishment would be just.

But she wasn't angry. A lovely tide of color stained her cheeks. Her lips parted, and she turned her head. For a long time she said nothing. Then she faced me, with a light in her eyes that sent the blood racing in my veins.

"I have not yet chosen," she murmured. "Mayhap soon I shall tell thee why."

She rose and hurried back toward the palace. But at the door she paused—and smiled at me in a way that had nothing whatever to do with queenship.

As the time sped by the three of us settled into the routine of the city as though we had never known of anything else.

The Professor spent most of his time down by the sea chamber where the food was dragged in by the intelligent servant-fish.

He was in a zoologist's paradise. Not a creature that came in there had ever been catalogued before. He wrote reams of notes on the parchment paper used by the citizens in recording their transactions. Particularly was he interested in the vast, lowly mound-fish.

One time, when I happened to be with him, the receding waters of the chamber disclosed the body of one of the odd herdsmen of these deep sea flocks. Then the Professor's elation knew no bounds. We hurried forward to look at it.

"It is a typical fish," puzzled the Professor when we had cut the body out of its usurped armor. "Cold blooded, adapted to the chill and pressure of the deeps. There are the gills I observed before ... yet it looks very human."

It surely did. There were the jointed arms, and the rudimentary hands. Its forehead was domed; and the brain, when dissected, proved much larger than the brain of a true fish. Also its bones were not those of a mammal, but the cartilagenous bones of a fish. It was

not quite six feet long; just fitted the horny shell.

"But its intelligence!" fretted the Professor, glorying in his inability to classify this marvelous specimen.

"No fish could ever attain such mental development. Evolution working backward from human to reptile and then fish—or a new freak of evolution whereby a fish on a short cut toward becoming human?" He sighed and gave it up. But more reams of notes were written.

"Why do you take them?" I asked. "No one but yourself will ever see them."

He looked at me with professorial absent-mindedness.

"I take them for the fun of it, principally. But perhaps, sometime, we may figure out a way of getting them up. My God! Wouldn't my learned brother scientists be set in an uproar!"

He bent to his observations and dissections again, cursing now and then at the distortion suffered by the specimens when they were released from the deep

sea pressure and swelled and burst in the atmospheric pressure in the cave.

Stanley was engrossed in a different way. Since the moment he laid eyes on her, he had belonged to the stately woman who had first nursed him back to consciousness. Mayis was her name.

From shepherding the three of us around Zyobor and explaining its marvels to us, she had taken to exclusive tutorship of Stanley. And Stanley fairly ate it up.

"You, the notorious woman hater," I taunted him one time, "the wary bachelor—to fall at last. And for a woman of another world—almost of another planet! I'm amazed!"

"I don't know why you should be amazed," said he stiffly.

"You've been telling me ever since I was a kid that women were all useless, all alike—"

"I find I was mistaken," he interrupted. "They aren't all alike. There's only one Mayis. She is—different."

"What do you talk about all the time? You're with her constantly."

"I'm not with her any more than you're with the Queen," he shot back at me. "What do you find to talk about?"

That shut me up. He went to look for Mayis; and I wandered to the royal apartments in search of Aga.

In the first days of our friendship I had several times surprised in Aga's eyes a curious expression, one that seemed compounded of despair, horror and resignation.

I had seen that same expression in the eyes of the nobles of late, and in the faces of all the people I encountered in the streets—who, I mustn't forget to add here, never failed to treat me with a deference that was as intoxicating as it was inexplicable.

It was as though some terrible fate hovered over the populace, some dreadful doom about which nothing could be done. No one put into words any fears that might confirm that impression; but continually I got the idea that everybody there went about in a state of attempting to live normally and happily while life was still left—before some awful, wholesale death descended on them.

At last, from Aga, I learned the fateful reason.

But first—a confession that was hastened by the knowledge of the fate of the city—I learned from her something that changed all of life for me.

We were surrounded by the luxury of her private apartment. We sat on a low divan, side by side. I wanted, more than anything I had ever wanted before, to put my arms around her. But I dared not. One does not make love easily to a queen, the three hundred and eleventh of a proud line.

And then, as maids have done often in all countries, and, perhaps, on all planets, she took the initiative

herself.

"We have a curious custom in Zyobor of which I have not yet told thee," she murmured. "It concerns the kings of Zyobor. The color of their hair."

She glanced up at my own carrot-top, and then averted her gaze.

"For all of our history our kings have had—red hair. On the few occasions when the line has been reduced to a lone queen, as in my case, the red-haired men of the kingdom have striven together in public combat to determine which was most powerful and brave. The winner became the Queen's consort."

"And in this case?" I asked, my heart beginning to pound madly.

"In my case, my lord, there is to be no—no striving. When I was a child our only two red-haired males died, one by accident, one by sickness. Now there are none others but infants, none of eligible age. But—by a miracle—thou—"

She stopped; then gazed up at me from under long, gold flecked lashes.

"I was afraid ... I was doomed to die ... alone...."

It was after I had replied impetuously to this, that she told me of the terror that was about to engulf all life in the beautiful undersea city.

"Thou hast wonder, perhaps, why I should be forward enough to tell thee this instead of waiting for thine own confession first," she faltered. "Know, then—the reason is the shortness of the time we are fated to spend together. We shall belong each to the other only a little while. Then shall we belong to death! And I—when I knew the time was to be so brief—"

And I listened with growing horror to her account of the enemy that was advancing toward us with every passing moment.

About twenty miles away, in the lowest depression of

Penguin Deep, lived a race of monsters which the people of Aga's city called Quabos.

The Quabos were grim beings that were more intelligent than Aga's fish-servants—even, she thought, more intelligent than humans themselves. They had existed in their dark hole, as far as the Zyobites knew, from the beginning of time.

Through the countless centuries they had constructed for themselves a vast series of dens in the rock. There they had hidden away from the deep-sea dangers. They, too, preyed on the mound-fish; but as there was plenty of food for all, the Zyobites had never paid much attention to them.

But—just before we had appeared, there had come about a subterranean quake that changed the entire complexion of matters in Penguin Deep.

The earthquake wiped out the elaborately burrowed sea tunnels of the Quabos, killing half of them at a blow and driving the rest out into the unfriendly openness of the deep.

Now this was fatal to them. They were not used to physical self defense. During the thousands of years of residence in their sheltered burrows they had become utterly unable to exist when exposed to the primeval dangers of the sea. It was as though the civilization-softened citizens of New York should suddenly be set down in a howling wilderness with nothing but their bare hands with which to contrive all the necessities of a living.

Such was the situation at the time Stanley, the Professor and myself arrived in Zyobor.

The Quabos must find an immediate haven or perish. On the ocean bottom they were threatened by the mound-fish. In the higher levels they were in danger from almost everything that swam: few things were so defenceless as themselves after their long inertia.

Their answer was Zyobor. There, in perfect security, only to be reached by the diving chamber that could be sealed at will by the twenty-yard, counterbalanced lock, the Quabos would be even more protected than in their former runways.

So—they were working day and night to invade Aga's city!

"But Aga," I interrupted impulsively at this point. "If these monsters are fishes, how could they live here in air—"

I stopped as my objection answered itself before she could reply.

They would not have to live in air to inhabit Zyobor. They would inundate the city—flood that peaceful, beautiful place with the awful pressure of the lowest depths!

That thought, in turn, suggested to me that every building in Zyobor would be swept flat if subjected suddenly to the rush of the sea. The great low cavern, without the support of the myriad walls, would probably collapse—trapping the invading Quabos and leaving the rest without a home once more.

But Aga answered this before I could voice it.

The Quabos had foreseen that point. They were tunneling slowly but surely toward the city from a point about half a mile from the diving chamber. And as they advanced, they blocked up the passageway behind them at intervals, drilled down to the great underground sea that lay beneath all this section, and drained a little of the water away.

In this manner they lightened, bit by bit, the enormous weight of the ocean depths. When the city was finally reached, not only would it be ensured against sudden destruction but the Quabos themselves would have become accustomed to the difference in pressure. Had they gone immediately from the accustomed press of Penguin Deep into the atmosphere of Zyobor, they would have burst into bits. As it was they would be able to flood the city slowly, without injury to themselves.

"Now thou knowest our fate," concluded Aga with a shudder. "Zyobor will be a part of the great waters. We ourselves shall be food for these monsters...." She faltered and stopped.

"But this cannot be!" I exclaimed, clenching my fists impotently. "There *must* be something we can do; some way—"

"There is nothing to be done. Our wisest men have set themselves sleeplessly to the task of defence. There is no defence possible."

"We can't simply sit here and wait! Your people are wonderful, but this is no time for resignation. Send for my two friends, Aga. We will have a council of war, we four, and see if we can find a way!"

She shrugged despairfully, started to speak, then sent in quest of Stanley and the Professor.

They as well as myself, had had no idea of the menace that crept nearer us with each passing hour. They were dumbfounded, horrified to learn of the peril. We sat awhile in silence, realizing our situation to the full.

Then the Professor spoke:

"If only we could see what these things look like! It might help in planning to defeat them."

"That can be done with ease," said Aga. "Come."

We went with her to the gardens and approached the nearest pool.

"My fish-men are watching the Quabos constantly. They report to me by telepathy whenever I send my thoughts their way. I will let you see, on the pool, the things they are now seeing."

She stared intently at the sheet of water. And gradually, as we watched, a picture appeared—a picture that will never fade from my memory in any smallest detail.

The Quabos had huddled for protection into a large cave at the foot of the cliff outside Zyobor. There were a great many Quabos, and the cave was relatively confining. Now we saw, through the eyes of the spine protected outpost of the Queen, these monstrous refugees crowded together like sheep.

The watery cavern was a creeping mass of viscous tentacles, enormous staring eyes and globular heads. The cave was paved three deep with the horrible things, and they were attached to the its walls and roof in solid blocks.

"My God!" whispered Stanley. "There are thousands of them!"

There were. And that they were in distress was evident.

The layers on the floor were weaving and shifting constantly as the bottom creatures struggled feebly to rise to the top of the mass and be relieved of the weight of their brothers. Also they were famished....

One of the blood red, gigantic worms floated near the cave entrance. Like lightning the nearest Quabos darted after it. In a moment the prey was torn to bits by the ravenous monsters.

The other side of the story was immediately portrayed to us.

With the emerging of the reckless Quabos, a sea-serpent appeared from above and snapped up three of their number. Evidently the huge serpent considered them succulent tidbits, and made it its business to wait near the cave and avail itself of just such rash chance-taking as this.

While we watched the nightmare scene, a Quabo disengaged itself from the parent mass and floated upward into the clear, giving us a chance to see more distinctly what the creatures looked like.

There was a black, shiny head as large as a sugar barrel. In this were eyes the size of dinner plates, and gleaming with a cold, hellish intelligence. Four long, twining tentacles were attached directly to the head. Dotted along these were rudimentary sucker discs, that had evidently become atrophied by the soft living of thousands of the creature's ancestors.

As though emerging from the pool into which we were

gazing, the monster darted viciously at us. At once it disappeared: the fish-servant through whose eyes we were seeing all this had evidently retreated from the approach; although, protected by its spines, it could not have been in actual danger.

"How dost thou know of the tunneling?" I asked Aga. "Thy fish-men cannot be present there, in the rear of the tunnel, to report."

"My artisans have knowledge of each forward move," she answered. "I will show thee."

We walked back to the palace and descended to a smooth-lined vault. There we saw a great stone shaft sunk down into the rock of the floor. On this was a delicate vibration recording instrument of some sort, with a needle that quivered rhythmically over several degrees of an arc.

"This tells of each move of the Quabos," said Aga. "It also tells us where they will break through the city wall. How near to us are they, Kilor?" she asked an attendant who was studying the dial, and who had

bowed respectfully to Aga and myself as we approached.

"They will break into the city in four rixas at the present rate of advance, Your Majesty."

Four rixas! In a little over sixteen days, as we count time, the city of Zyobor would be delivered into the hands—or, rather, tentacles—of the slimy, starving demons that huddled in the cavern outside!

Somberly we followed Aga back to her apartment.

"As thou seest," she murmured, "there is nothing to be done. We can only resign ourselves to the fate that nears us, and enjoy as much as may be the few remaining rixas...."

She glanced at me.

The Professor's dry, cool voice cut across our wordless, engrossed communion.

"I don't think we'll give up quite as easily as all that.

We can at least try to outwit our enemies. If it does nothing else for us, the effort can serve to distract our minds."

He drew from his pocket a sheet of parchment and the stub of his last remaining pencil. His fingers busied themselves apparently idly in the tracing of geometric lines.

"Looking ahead to the exact details of our destruction," he mused coolly, "we see that our most direct and ominous enemy is the sea itself. When the city is flooded, we drown—and later the Quabos can enter at will."

He drew a few more lines, and marked a cross at a point in the outer rim of the diagram.

"What will happen? The Quabos force through the last shell of the city wall. The water from their tunnel floods into Zyobor. But—and mark me well—*only* the water from the tunnel! The outer end, remember, is blocked off in their pressure-reducing process. The vast body of the sea itself cannot immediately be let

in here because the Quabos must take as long a time to re-accustom themselves to its pressure as they did to work out of it."

He spread the parchment sheet before us.

"Is this a roughly accurate plan of the city?" he asked Aga.

She inclined her lovely head.

"And this," indicating the cross, "is the spot where the Quabos will break in?"

Again she nodded, shuddering.

"Then tell me what you think of this," said the Professor.

And he proceeded to sketch out a plan so simple, and yet so seemingly efficient, that the rest of us gazed at him with wordless admiration.

"My friend, my friend," whispered Aga at last, "thou

hast saved us. Thou art the guardian hero of Zyobor
—"

"Not too fast, Your Highness," interrupted the Professor with his frosty smile. "I shall be much surprised if this little scheme actually saves the city. We may find the rock so thick there that our task is hopeless—though I imagine the Quabos picked a thin section for help in their own plans."

A vague look came into his eyes.

"I must certainly get my hands on one of these monsters ... superhumanly intelligent fish ... marvelous—akin to the octopus, perhaps?"

He wandered off, changed from the resourceful schemer to the dreamy man of scientific abstractions.

The Queen gazed after him with wonder in her eyes.

"A great man," she murmured, "but is he—a little mad?"

"No, only a little absent-minded," I replied. Then, "Come on, Stanley. We'll round up every able bodied citizen in Zyobor and get to work. I suppose they have some kind of rock drilling machinery here?"

They had. And they strangely resembled our own rock drills: revolving metal shafts, driven by gas turbines, tipped with fragments of the same crystal that glittered so profusely in the palace walls. Another proof that practically every basic, badly needed tool had been invented again and again, in all lands and times, as the necessity for it arose.

With hundreds of the powerful men of Zyobor working as closely together as they could without cramping each others movements, and with the whole city resounding to the roar of the machinery, we labored at the defence that might possibly check the advance of the hideous Quabos.

And with every breath we drew, waking or sleeping, we realized that the cold blooded, inhuman invaders had crept a fraction of an inch closer in their tunneling.

The Quabos against the Zyobites! Fish against man! Two diametrically opposed species of life in a struggle to the death! Which of us would survive?

The hour of the struggle approached. Every soul in Zyobor moved in a daze, with strained face and fear haunted eyes. Their proficiency in mental telepathy was a curse to them now: every one carried constantly, transmitted from the brains of the servant-fish outposts, a thought picture of that outer cavern in the murky depths of which writhed the thousands of crowding Quabos. Each mind in Zyobor was in continual torment.

Spared that trouble, at least, Stanley and the Professor and I walked down to the fortification we had so hastily contrived. It was finished. And none too soon: the vibration indicator in the palace vault told us that only two feet of rock separated us from the burrowing monsters!

The Professor's scheme had been to cut a long slot down through the rock floor of the city to the roof of the vast, mysterious body of water below.

This slot was placed directly in front of the spot in the city wall where the Quabos were about to emerge. As they forced through the last shell of rock, the deluge of water, instead of drowning the city, was supposed to drain down the oblong vent. Any Quabos that were too near the tunnel entrance would be swept down too.

In silence we approached the edge of the great trough and stared down.

There was a stratum of black granite, fortunately only about thirty feet thick at this point, and then—the depths! A low roar reached our ears from far, far beneath us. A steady blast of ice cold air fanned up against us.

The Professor threw down a large fragment of rock. Seconds elapsed and we heard no splash. The unseen surface was too far below for the noise of the rock's fall to carry on up to us.

"The mystery of this ball of earth on which we live!" murmured the Professor. "Here is this enormous

underground body of water. We are far below sea level. Where, then, is it flowing? What does it empty into? Can it be that our planet is honeycombed with such hollows as this we are in? And is each inhabited by some form of life?"

He sighed and shook his head.

"The thought is too big! For, if that were true, wouldn't the seas be drained from the surface of the earth should an accidental passage be formed from the ocean bed down to such a giant river as this beneath us? How little we know!"

The wild clamor of an alarm bell interrupted his musing. From all the city houses poured masses of people, to form in solid lines behind the large well.

In addition to men, there were many women in those lines, tall and strong, ready to stand by their mates as long as life was left them. There were children, too, scarcely in their teens, prepared to fight for the existence of the race. Every able-bodied Zyobite was mustered against the cold-blooded Things that

pressed so near.

The arms of these desperate fighters were pitiful compared to our own war weapons. With no need in the city for fighting engines, none had ever been developed. Now the best that could be had was a sort of ax, used for dissecting the mound-fish, and various knives fashioned for peaceful purposes.

Again the bell clamored forth a warning, this time twice repeated. Every hand grasped its weapon. Every eye went hopefully to the hole in the floor on which our immediate fate depended, then valiantly to the section of wall above it.

This quivered perceptibly. A heavy, pointed instrument broke through; was withdrawn; and a hissing stream of water spurted out.

The Quabos were about to break in upon us!

With a crash that made the solid rock tremble, a section of the wall collapsed. It was the top half of the end of the Quabos' tunnel. They had so wrought that

the lower half stayed in place—a thing we did not have time to recognize as significant until later.

A solid wall of water, in which writhed dozens of tentacled monsters, was upon us, and we had time for nothing but action.

The ditch had of necessity been placed directly under the Quabos' entrance. The first rush of water carried half over it. With it were borne scores of the cold-blooded invaders.

In an instant we were standing knee deep in a torrent that tore at our footing, while we hacked frantically with knives and axes at the slimy tentacles that reached up to drag us under.

A soft, horrible mass swept against my legs. I was overthrown. A tentacle slithered around my neck and constricted viciously like a length of rotten cable. I sawed at it with the long, notched blade I carried. Choking for air, I felt the pressure relax and scrambled to my knees.

Two more tentacles went around me, one winding about my legs and the other crushing my waist. Two huge eyes glared fiendishly at me.

I plunged the knife again and again into the barrel-shaped head. It did not bleed: a few drops of thin, yellowish liquid oozed from the wounds but aside from this my slashing seemed to make no impression.

In a frenzy I defended myself against the nightmare head that was winding surely toward me. Meanwhile I devoted every energy to keeping on my feet. If I ever went under again—

It seemed to me that the creature was weakening. With redoubled fury I hacked at the spidery shape. And gradually, when it seemed as though I could not withstand its weight and crushing tentacles another second, it slipped away and floated off on the shallow, roaring rapids.

For a moment I stood there, catching my breath and regaining my strength. Shifting, terrible scenes flashed before my eyes.

A tall Zyobite and an almost equally stalwart woman were both caught by one gigantic Quabo which had a tentacle around the throat of each. The man and woman were chopping at the viscous, gruesome head. One of the Thing's eyes was gashed across, giving it a fearsome, blind appearance. It heaved convulsively, and the three struggling figures toppled into the water and were swirled away.

The Professor was almost buried by a Quabo that had all four of its tentacles wound about him. As methodically as though he were in a laboratory dissecting room, he was cutting the slippery lengths away, one by one, till the fourth parted and left him free.

A giant Zyobite was struggling with two of the monsters. He had an ax in each hand, and was whirling them with such strength and rapidity that they formed flashing circles of light over his head. But he was torn down at last and borne off by the almost undiminished flood that gushed from the tunnel.

And now, without warning, a heavy soft body flung

against my back, and the accident most to be dreaded in that mêlée occurred.

I was knocked off my feet! My head was pressed under the water. On my chest was a mass that was yielding but immovable, soft but terribly strong. Animated, firm jelly! I had no chance to use my knife. My arms were held powerless against my sides.

Water filled my nose and mouth. I strangled for breath, heaving at the implacable weight that pinned me helpless. Bright spots swirled before my eyes. There was a roaring in my ears. My lungs felt as though filled with molten lead. I was drowning....

Vaguely I felt the pressure loosen at last. An arm—with good, solid flesh and bone in it—slipped under my shoulders and dragged me up into the air.

"Don't you know—can't drown a fish—holding it under water?" panted a voice.

I opened my eyes and saw Stanley, his face pale with the thrill of battle, his chin jutting forward in a

berserk line, his eyes snapping with eager, wary fires.

I grinned up at him and he slapped me on the back—almost completing the choking process started by the salt water I'd inhaled.

"That's better. Now—at it again!"

I don't remember the rest of the tumult. The air seemed filled with loathsome tentacles and bright metal blades. It was a confused eternity until the decreased volume of water in the tunnel gave us a respite....

As the tunnel slowly emptied the pressure dropped, and the incoming flood poured squarely into the trough instead of half over it. From that moment there was very little more for us to do.

Our little army—with about a fourth of its number gone—had only to guard the ditch and see that none of the Quabos caught the edges as they hurtled out of their passage.

For perhaps ten minutes longer the water poured from the break in the wall, with now and then a doomed Quabo that goggled horribly at us as it was dashed down the hole in the floor to whatever awesome depths were beneath.

Then the flow ceased. The last oleaginous corpse was pushed over the edge. And the city, save for an ankle-deep sheet of water that was rapidly draining out the vents in the streets, presented its former appearance.

The Zyobites leaned wearily against convenient walls and began telling themselves how fortunate they were to have been spared what seemed certain destruction.

The Professor didn't share in the general feeling of triumph.

"Don't be so childishly optimistic!" he snapped as I began to congratulate him on the victory his ditch had given us. "Our troubles aren't over yet!"

"But we've proved that we can stand up to them in a hand-to-tentacle fight—"

His thin, frosty smile appeared.

"One of those devils, normally, is stronger than any three men. The only reason all of us weren't destroyed at once is that they were slowly suffocating as they fought. The foot and a half of water we were in wasn't enough to let their gills function properly. Now if they were able to stand right up to us and not be handicapped by lack of water to breathe ... I wonder.... Is that part of their plan? Is there any way they could manage ...?"

"But, Professor," I argued, "it's all over, isn't it? The tunnel is emptied, and all the Quabos are—"

"The tunnel isn't emptied. It's only *half* emptied! I'll show you."

He called Stanley; and the three of us went to the break.

"See," the Professor pointed out to us as we approached the jagged hole, "the Quabos only drilled through the top half of their tunnel ending. That

means that the tunnel still has about four feet of water in it—enough to accommodate a great many of the monsters. There may be four or five hundred of them left in there; possibly more. We can expect renewed hostilities at any time!"

"But won't it be just a repetition of the first battle?" remonstrated Stanley. "In the end they'll be killed or will drown for lack of water as these first ones did."

The Professor shook his head.

"They're too clever to do that twice. The very fact that they kept half their number in reserve shows that they have some new trick to try. Otherwise they'd all have come at once in one supreme effort."

He paced back and forth.

"They're ingenious, intelligent. They're fighting for their very existence. They must have figured out some way of breathing in air, some way of attacking us on a more even basis in case that first rush went wrong. What can it be?"

"I think you're borrowing trouble before it is necessary—" I began, smiling at his elaborate, scientific pessimism. But I was interrupted by a startled shout from Stanley.

"Professor Martin," he cried, pointing to the tunnel mouth. "Look!"

Like twin snakes crawling up to sun themselves, two tentacles had appeared over the rock rim. They hooked over the edge; and leisurely, with grim surety of invulnerability, the barrel-like head of a Quabo balanced itself on the ledge and glared at us.

For a moment we stared, paralyzed, at the Thing. And, during that moment it squatted there, as undistressed as though the air were its natural element, its gills flapping slowly up and down supplying it with oxygen.

The thing that held us rooted to the spot with fearful amazement was the fantastic device that permitted it

to be almost as much at home in air as in water.

Over the great, globular head was set an oval glass shell. This was filled with water. A flexible metal tube hung down from the rear. Evidently it carried a constant stream of fresh water. As we gazed we saw intermittent trickles emerging from the bottom of the crystalline case.

Point for point the creature's equipment was the same as diving equipment used by men, only it was exactly opposite in function. A helmet that enabled a fish to breathe in air, instead of a helmet to allow a man to breathe in water!

Stanley was the first of us to recover from the shock of this spectacle. He faced about and raised his voice in shouts of warning to the resting Zyobites. For other glass encased monsters had appeared beside the first, now.

One by one, in single file like a line of enormous marching insects, they crawled down the wall and humped along on their tentacles—around the ditch

and toward us!

The deadly infallibility of that second attack!

The Quabos advanced on us like armored tanks bearing down on defenceless savages. Their glass helmets, in addition to containing water for their breathing, protected them from our knives and axes. We were utterly helpless against them.

They marched in ranks about twenty yards apart, each rank helping the one in front to carry the cumbersome water-hoses which trailed back to the central water supply in the tunnel.

Their movements were slow, weighted down as they were by the great glass helmets, but they were appallingly sure.

We could not even retard their advance, let alone stop it. Here were no suffocating, faltering creatures. Here were beings possessed of their full vigor, each one equal to three of us even as the Professor had conjectured. Their only weak points were their

tentacles which trailed outside the glass cases. But these they kept coiled close, so that to reach them and hack at them we had to step within range of their terrific clutches.

The Zyobites fought with the valor of despair added to their inherent noble bravery. Man after man closed with the monstrous, armored Things—only to be seized and crushed by the weaving tentacles.

Occasionally a terrific blow with an ax would crack one of the glass helmets. Then the denuded Quabo would flounder convulsively in the air till it drowned. But there were all too few of these individual victories. The main body of the Quabos, rank on rank, dragging their water-hose behind them, came on with the steadiness of a machine.

Slowly we were driven back down the broad street and toward the palace. As we retreated, old people and children came from the houses and went with us, leaving their dwellings to the mercy of the monsters.

A block from the palace we bunched together and, by

sheer mass and ferocity, actually stopped the machinelike advance for a few moments.

Miscellaneous weapons had been brought from the houses—sledges, stone benches, anything that might break the Quabos' helmets—and handed to us in silence by the noncombatants.

Somebody tugged at my sleeve. Looking down I saw a little girl. She had dragged a heavy metal bar out to the fray and was trying to get some fighter's attention and give it to him.

I seized the formidable weapon and jumped at the nearest Quabo, a ten-foot giant whose eyes were glinting gigantically at me through the distorting curve of the glass.

Disregarding the clutching tentacles entirely, I swung the bar against the helmet. It cracked. I swung again and it fell in fragments, spilling the gallons of water it had contained.

The tentacles wound vengefully around me, but in a few seconds they relaxed as the thing gasped out its

life in the air.

I turned to repeat the process on another if I could, and found myself facing the Queen. Her head was held bravely high, though the violet of her eyes had gone almost black with fear and repulsion of the terrible things we fought.

"Aga!" I cried. "Why art thou here! Go back to the palace at once!"

"I came to fight beside thee," she answered composedly, though her delicate lips quivered. "All is lost, it seems. So shall I die beside thee."

I started to reply, to urge her again to seek the safety of the palace. But by now the deadly advance of the tentacled demons had begun once more.

Fighting vainly, the population of Zyobor was swept into the palace grounds, then into the building itself.

Men, women and children huddled shoulder to shoulder in the cramping quarters. An ironic picture

came to me of the crowding masses of Quabos stuffed into the protection of the outer cave, waiting the outcome of the fight being waged by their warriors. Here were we in a similar circumstance, waiting for the battle to be decided. Though there was little doubt in the minds of any of us as to what the outcome would be.

Guards, the strongest men of the city, were stationed with sledges at the doors and windows. The Quabos, able only to enter one at a time, halted a moment and there was a badly needed breathing spell.

"We've got to find some drastic means of defence," said the Professor, "or we won't last another three hours."

"If you asked me, I'd say we couldn't last another three hours anyway," replied Stanley with a shrug. "These fish have out-thought us!"

"Nonsense! There may still be a way—"

"A brace of machine-guns...." I murmured hopefully.

"You might as well wish for a dozen light cannon!" snapped the Professor. "Please try to concentrate, and see if any effective weapon suggests itself to you—something more available at the moment than machine-guns."

In silence the three of us racked our brains for a means of defence. Aga, leaving for a time the task of soothing her more hysterical subjects, came quietly over to us and sat on the bench beside me.

Frankly I could think of nothing. To my mind we were surely doomed. What arms could possibly be contrived at such short notice? What weapon could be called forth to be effective against the thick glass helmets?

But as I glanced at Stanley I saw his face set in a new expression as his thoughts took a turn that suggested possible salvation.

"Glass," he muttered. "Glass. What destroys it? Sharp blows ... certain acids ... variation in temperature ... heat and cold.... That's it! *That's it!*"

He turned excitedly to the Queen.

"I think we have it! At least it's worth trying. If there is any tubing around...." He stopped as he realized he was talking in English, and resumed stiltedly in Aga's own language.

"Hast thou, in the palace, any lengths of pipe like to that which the Quabos drag behind them?"

"No ..." Aga began, her eyes round and wondering. Then she interrupted herself. "Ah, yes! There is! In a vault near that of Kilor's there is a great spool of it. He had it fashioned to carry air for one of his experiments—"

"Come along!" cried Stanley. "I'll explain what I have in mind while we dig up this coil of hose."

A score of Zyobite workmen were gathered at once. The length of hose—made of some linen-like fabric of tough, shredded sea-weed and covered with a flexible metal sheath—was cut into three pieces each about fifty yards long. These were connected to three of the

largest gas vents of the palace.

Stanley, the Professor and I each took an end. And we prepared to fight, with fire, the creatures of water.

"It ought to work," Stanley, repeated several times as though trying to reassure himself as well as us. "It's simple enough: the water in those helmets is ice cold: if fire is suddenly squirted against them they'll crack with the uneven expansion."

"Unless," retorted the Professor, "their glass has some special heat and cold resisting quality."

Stanley shrugged.

"It may well have some such properties. How such creatures can make glass at all is beyond me!"

Dragging our hose to the big front entrance of the palace, and warning the crowded people to keep their feet clear of it, we prepared to test out the efficiency of this, our last resource against the enemy.

For an instant we paused just inside the doorway, looking out at the ugly, glassed-in Things that were massing to attack us again.

The ranks of Quabos had closed in now, till they extended down the street for several hundred yards in close formation—a forest of great pulpy heads with huge eyes that glared unblinkingly at the glittering, pink building that was their objective.

"Light up!" ordered Stanley, setting an example by touching his hose nozzle to the nearest wall jet. A spurt of fire belched from his hose, streaming out for four or five feet in a solid red cone. The Professor and I touched off our torches; and we moved slowly out the door toward the ranks of Quabos.

"Don't try to save yourselves from their tentacles," advised Stanley. "Walk right up to them, direct the fire against their helmets, and damn the consequences. If they grip too hard you can always play the torch on their tentacles till they think better of it."

The Quabos' front line humped grimly toward us,

unblinking eyes glaring, tentacles writhing warily, little spurts of used water trickling from their helmets.

"Keep together," warned Stanley, "so that if any one of us loses his light he can get it from the hose of one of the other two. And—*Here they come!*"

There was no more time for commands. The Quabos in front, supplied with slack in their hoses by those behind, leaped at us with incredible agility. We fell back a step so that none should get at our backs.

The last stand was begun.

It was not a battle so much as a series of fierce duels. The Quabos realized their new danger instantly, and devoted all their efforts to extinguishing our torches. We parried and thrust with the flaming hoses in an equally desperate effort to prevent it.

One of them scuttled toward me like a great crab. A tentacle darted toward my right arm. Another was pressed against the nozzle. There was a sickening

smell—and the tentacle was jerked spasmodically away.

I caught the hose in my left hand and turned the fiery jet against the water-filled helmet.

A shout of savage exultation broke from my lips. Hardly, had the flame touched the glass before it cracked! There was a report like a pistol shot—and a miniature Niagara of water and splintered glass poured at my feet!

The tentacle around my arm tightened, then relaxed. The monster shuddered in a convulsive heap on the ground.

I went toward the next one, swinging the flaring hose in a slow arc as I advanced. The creature lunged at me and threshed at the burning jet with all four of its feelers. But it had been exposed to the air for a long time now. The ghastly tentacles were dry; withered and soft. A touch of the fire seared them unmercifully.

Nevertheless with a swift move it slapped a tentacle

squarely down over the hose nozzle. The flame was extinguished as the flame of a candle is pinched out between thumb and forefinger. I retreated.

"Catch!" came a voice behind me.

The Professor swung his four-foot jet my way. I held my hose to it, and the flame burst out again. A touch at my grisly antagonist's helmet—a sharp crack—the welcome rush of water over the cream-colored grass—and another monster was writhing in the death throes!

Keeping close together, the three of us faced the massed Quabos in the palace grounds. Again and again the fiery weapon of one or the other of us was dashed out—to be re-lighted from the nearest hose. Again and again loud detonations heralded the collapse of more of the invaders.

But it seemed as though their flailing tentacles were as myriad as the stars they had never seen. It seemed

as though their numbers would never appreciably diminish. We thrust and parried till our arms grew numb. And still there appeared to be hundreds of the Quabos left.

By order of the Queen three stout Zyobites stepped up to us and relieved us of our exhausting labor. Gladly we handed the hoses to them and went to the palace for a much needed rest.

Two more shifts of fighters took the flaming jets before the monsters began the retreat slowly back toward their tunnel. And here the Professor took command again.

"We mustn't let them get away to try some new scheme!" he snapped. "Martin, take fifty men and beat them back to the break in the wall. Go around a side street. They move so slowly that you can easily cut off their retreat."

"There isn't any more hose—" began Stanley.

"There's plenty of it. The Quabos brought it with them." The Professor turned to me again. "Take metal-saws with you. Cut sections of the Quabos water-hose and connect them to the nearest wall jets. Run!"

I ran, with fifty of the men of Zyobor close behind me. We dodged out the side of the palace grounds least guarded by the Quabos, ducking between their ranks like infantry men threading through an opposition of powerful but slow-moving tanks. Four of our number were caught, but the rest got through unscathed.

Down a side street we raced, and along a parallel avenue toward the tunnel. As we went I prayed that all the Quabos had centered their attention on the palace and left their vulnerable water-hoses unguarded.

They had! When we stole up the last block toward the break we found the nearest Quabo was a hundred yards down the street—and working further away with every move.

At once we set to work on the scores of hoses that quivered over the floor with each move of the distant monsters.

A Zyobite with the muscles of a Hercules swung his ax mightily down on a hose. The metal was soft enough to be sheered through by the stroke. The cut ends were smashed so that they could not be crammed down over the tapering jets; but we could use our metal-saws for cleaner severances at the other ends.

The giant with the ax stepped from hose to hose. Lengths were completed with the saws. A man was placed at each jet to hold the connections in position. Before the Quabos had reached us we had rigged six fire-hoses and had cut through forty or fifty more water-lines.

The end was certain and not long in coming.

We sprayed the monsters with fire as workmen spray fruit trees with insect poison. Stanley, the Professor and a Zyobite came up in the rear with their three

hoses.

Caught between the two forces, the beaten fish milled in hopeless confusion and indecision.

In half an hour they were all reduced to huddles of slimy wet flesh that dotted the pavement from the break back to the palace grounds. The invaders were completely annihilated—and the city of Zyobor was saved!

"Now," said the Professor triumphantly, "we have only to knock out the bottom half of the tunnel wall, empty the tunnel and make sure there are no more Quabos lurking there. After that we can fill it in with solid cement. The Queen can order her fish-servants to guard the outer cave and see that no food gets in to the starving monsters there. The war is over, gentlemen. The Quabos are as good as exterminated at this moment. And I can get back to my zoological work...."

Stanley and I looked at each other. We knew each others thoughts well enough.

He could resume his companionship with the beautiful Mayis. And I—I had Aga....

With the menace of the Quabos banished forever, the city of Zyobor resumed its normal way.

The citizens lowered their dead into the great well we had cut, with appropriate rites performed by the Queen. The daily tasks and pleasures were picked up where they had been dropped. The haunting fear died from the eyes of the people.

Shortly afterward, with great ceremony and celebration, I was made King of Zyobor, to rule by Aga's side. Stanley took Mayis for his wife. He is second to me in power. The Professor is the official wise man of the city.

Life flows smoothly for us in this pink lighted community. We are more than content with our lot here. Our only concern has been the grief that must have been occasioned our relatives and friends when the *Rosa* sailed home without us.

Now we have thought of a way in which, with luck, we may communicate with the upper world. By relays of my Queen's fish-servants we believe we can send up the Professor's invaluable notes* and this informal account of what has happened since we left San Francisco that....

(Editor's note: There was no trace of any "notes." The yacht, *Rosa*, was reported lost with all hands in a hurricane off New Zealand. Aboard her were a Professor George Berry and the owner, Stanley Browne. There is no record, however, of any passenger by the name of Martin Grey. To date no one has taken this document seriously enough to consider financing an expedition of investigation to Penguin Deep.)

#50 The Murder Machine, By Hugh Barnett Cave:

Four lives lay helpless before the murder machine, the uncanny device by which hypnotic thought waves are filtered through men's minds to mold them into murdering tools.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

I shall probably kill you



- - -

It was dusk, on the evening of December 7, 1906, when I first encountered Sir John Harmon. At the moment of his entrance I was standing over the table in my study, a lighted match in my cupped hands and a pipe between my teeth. The pipe was never lit.

I heard the lower door slam shut with a violent clatter. The stairs resounded to a series of unsteady footbeats, and the door of my study was flung back. In the opening, staring at me with quiet dignity, stood a young, careless fellow, about five feet ten in height and decidedly dark of complexion. The swagger of his entrance branded him as an adventurer. The ghastly pallor of his face, which was almost colorless, branded him as a man who has found something more than mere adventure.

"Doctor Dale?" he demanded.

"I am Doctor Dale."

He closed the door of the room deliberately, advancing toward me with slow steps.

"My name is John Harmon—Sir John Harmon. It is unusual, I suppose," he said quietly, with a slight shrug, "coming at this late hour. I won't keep you long."

He faced me silently. A single glance at those strained features convinced me of the reason for his coming. Only one thing can bring such a furtive, restless stare to a man's eyes. Only one thing—fear.

"I've come to you. Dale, because—" Sir John's fingers closed heavily over the edge of the table—"because I am on the verge of going mad."

"From fear?"

"From fear, yes. I suppose it is easy to discover. A single look at me...."

"A single look at you," I said simply, "would convince any man that you are deadly afraid of something. Do you mind telling me just what it is?"

He shook his head slowly. The swagger of the poise

was gone; he stood upright now with a positive effort, as if the realization of his position had suddenly surged over him.

"I do not know," he said quietly. "It is a childish fear—fear of the dark, you may call it. The cause does not matter; but if something does not take this unholy terror away, the effect will be madness."

I watched him in silence for a moment, studying the shrunken outline of his face and the unsteady gleam of his narrowed eyes. I had seen this man before. All London had seen him. His face was constantly appearing in the sporting pages, a swaggering member of the upper set—a man who had been engaged to nearly every beautiful woman in the country—who sought adventure in sport and in night life, merely for the sake of living at top speed. And here he stood before me, whitened by fear, the very thing he had so deliberately laughed at!

"Dale," he said slowly, "for the past week I have been thinking things that I do not want to think and doing things completely against my will. Some outside

power—God knows what it is—is controlling my very existence."

He stared at me, and leaned closer across the table.

"Last night, some time before midnight," he told me, "I was sitting alone in my den. Alone, mind you—not a soul was in the house with me. I was reading a novel; and suddenly, as if a living presence had stood in the room and commanded me, I was forced to put the book down. I fought against it, fought to remain in that room and go on reading. And I failed."

"Failed?" My reply was a single word of wonder.

"I left my home: because I could not help myself. Have you ever been under hypnotism, Dale? Yes? Well, the thing that gripped me was something similar—except that no living person came near me in order to work his hypnotic spell. I went alone, the whole way. Through back streets, alleys, filthy dooryards—never once striking a main thoroughfare—until I had crossed the entire city and reached the west side of the square. And there, before a big gray town-house, I

was allowed to stop my mad wandering. The power, whatever it was, broke. I—well, I went home."

Sir John got to his feet with an effort, and stood over me.

"Dale," he whispered hoarsely, "what was it?"

"You were conscious of every detail?" I asked.

"Conscious of the time, of the locality you went to? You are sure it was not some fantastic dream?"

"Dream! Is it a dream to have some damnable force move me about like a mechanical robot?"

"But.... You can think of no explanation?" I was a bit skeptical of his story.

He turned on me savagely.

"I have no explanation. Doctor," he said curtly. "I came to you for the explanation. And while you are thinking over my case during the next few hours, perhaps you can explain this: when I stood before that

gray mansion on After Street, alone in the dark, there was murder in my heart. I should have killed the man who lived in that house, had I not been suddenly released from the force that was driving me forward!"

Sir John turned from me in bitterness. Without offering any word of departure, he pulled open the door and stepped across the sill. The door closed, and I was alone.

That was my introduction to Sir John Harmon. I offer it in detail because it was the first of a startling series of events that led to the most terrible case of my career. In my records I have labeled the entire case "The Affair of the Death Machine."

Twelve hours after Sir John's departure—which will bring the time, to the morning of December 8—the headlines of the Daily Mail stared up at me from the table. They were black and heavy: those headlines, and horribly significant. They were:

FRANKLIN WHITE Jr. FOUND
MURDERED

Midnight Marauder Strangles Young Society Man in West-End Mansion

I turned the paper hurriedly, and read:

Between the hours of one and two o'clock this morning, an unknown murderer entered the home of Franklin White, Jr., well known West-End sportsman, and escaped, leaving behind his strangled victim.

Young White, who is a favorite in London upper circles, was discovered in his bed this morning, where he had evidently lain dead for many hours. Police are seeking a motive for the crime, which may have its origin in the fact that White only recently announced his engagement to Margot Vernee, young and exceedingly pretty French débutante.

Police say that the murderer was evidently an amateur, and that he made no attempt to cover his crime. Inspector Thomas Drake of Scotland Yard has the case.

There was more, much more. Young White had evidently been a decided favorite, and the murder had been so unexpected, so deliberate, that the Mail reporter had made the most of his opportunity for a story. But aside from what I have reprinted, there was only a single short paragraph which claimed my attention. It was this:

The White home is not a difficult one to enter. It is a huge gray town-house, situated just off the square, in After Street. The murderer entered by a low French window, leaving it open.

I have copied the words exactly as they were printed. The item does not call for any comment.

But I had hardly dropped the paper before she stood before me. I say "she"—it was Margot Vernee, of course—because for some peculiar reason I had expected her. She stood quietly before me, her cameo face, set in the black of mourning, staring straight into mine.

"You know why I have come?" she said quickly.

I glanced at the paper on the table before me, and nodded. Her eyes followed my glance.

"That is only part of it, Doctor," she said. "I was in love with Franklin—very much—but I have come to you for something more. Because you are a famous psychologist, and can help me."

She sat down quietly, leaning forward so that her arms rested on the table. Her face was white, almost as white as the face of that young adventurer who had come to me on the previous evening. And when she spoke, her voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"Doctor, for many days now I have been under some strange power. Something frightful, that compels me to think and act against my will."

She glanced at me suddenly, as if to note the effect of her words. Then:

"I was engaged to Franklin for more than a month, Doctor: yet for a week now I have been commanded—commanded—by some awful force, to return to—to a

man who knew me more than two years ago. I can't explain it. I did not love this man; I hated him bitterly. Now comes this mad desire, this hungering, to go to him. And last night—"

Margot Vernee hesitated suddenly. She stared at me searchingly. Then, with renewed courage, she continued.

"Last night, Doctor, I was alone. I had retired for the night, and it was late, nearly three o'clock. And then I was strangely commanded, by this awful power that has suddenly taken possession, of my soul, to go out. I tried to restrain myself, and in the end I found myself walking through the square. I went straight to Franklin White's home. When I reached there, it was half past three—I could hear Big Ben. I went in—through the wide French window at the side of the house. I went straight to Franklin's room—*because I could not prevent myself from going.*"

A sob came from Margot's lips. She had half risen from her chair, and was holding herself together with a brave effort. I went to her side and stood over her.

And she, with a half crazed laugh, stared up at me.

"He was dead when I saw him!" she cried. "Dead! Murdered! That infernal force, what ever it was, had made me go straight to my lover's side, to see him lying there, with those cruel finger marks on his throat—dead, I tell you, I—oh, it is horrible!"

She turned suddenly.

"When I saw him," she said bitterly, "the sight of him—and the sight of those marks—broke the spell that held me. I crept from the house as if I had killed him. They—they will probably find out that I was there, and they will accuse me of the murder. It does not matter. But this power—this awful thing that has been controlling me—is there no way to fight it?"

I nodded heavily. The memory, of that unfortunate fellow who had come to me with the same complaint was still holding me. I was prepared to wash my hands of the whole horrible affair. It was clearly not a medical case, clearly out of my realm.

"There is a way to fight it," I said quietly. "I am a doctor, not a master of hypnotism, or a man who can discover the reasons behind that hypnotism. But London has its Scotland Yard, and Scotland Yard has a man who is one of my greatest comrades...."

She nodded her surrender. As I stepped to the telephone, I heard her murmur, in a weary, troubled voice:

"Hypnotism? It is not that. God knows what it is. But it has always happened when I have been alone. One cannot hypnotise through distance...."

And so, with Margot Vernee's consent, I sought the aid of Inspector Thomas Drake, of Scotland Yard. In half an hour Drake stood beside me, in the quiet of my study. When he had heard Margot's story, he asked a single significant question. It was this:

"You say you have a desire to go back to a man who was once intimate with you. Who is he?"

Margot looked at him dully.

"It is Michael Strange," she said slowly. "Michael Strange, of Paris. A student of science."

Drake nodded. Without further questioning he dismissed my patient; and when she had gone, he turned to me.

"She did not murder her sweetheart, Dale" he said. "That is evident. Have you any idea who did?"

And so I told him of that other young man. Sir John Harmon, who had come to me the night before. When I had finished. Drake stared at me—stared through me—and suddenly turned on his heel.

"I shall be back, Dale," he said curtly. "Wait for me!"

Wait for him! Well, that was Drake's peculiar way of going about things. Impetuous, sudden—until he faced some crisis. Then, in the face of danger, he became a cold, indifferent officer of Scotland Yard.

And so I waited. During the twenty-four hours that elapsed before Drake returned to my study, I did my

best to diagnose the case before me. First, Sir John Harmon—his visit to the home of Franklin White. Then—the deliberate murder. And, finally, young Margot Vernee, and her confession. It was like the revolving whirl of a pinwheel, this series of events: continuous and mystifying, but without beginning or end. Surely, somewhere in the procession of horrors, there would be a loose end to cling to. Some loose end that would eventually unravel the pinwheel!

It was plainly not a medical affair, or at least only remotely so. The thing was in proper hands, then, with Drake following it through. And I had only to wait for his return.

He came at last, and closed the door of the room behind him. He stood over me with something of a swagger.

"Dale, I have been looking into the records of this Michael Strange," he said quietly. "They are interesting, those records. They go back some ten years, when this fellow Strange was beginning his study of science. And now Michael Strange is one of

the greatest authorities in Paris on the subject of mental telegraphy. He has gone into the study of human thought with the same thoroughness that other scientists go into the subject of radio telegraphy. He has written several books on the subject."

Drake pulled a tiny black volume from the pocket of his coat and dropped it on the table before me. With one hand he opened it to a place which he had previously marked in pencil.

"Read it," he said significantly.

I looked at him in wonder, and then did as he ordered. What I read was this:

"Mental telegraphy is a science, not a myth. It is a very real fact, a very real power which can be developed only by careful research. To most people it is merely a curiosity. They sit, for instance, in a crowded room at some uninteresting lecture, and stare continually at the back of some unsuspecting companion until that companion, by the power of

suggestion, turns suddenly around. Or they think heavily of a certain person nearby, perhaps commanding him mentally to hum a certain popular tune, until the victim, by the power of their will, suddenly fulfills the order. To such persons, the science of mental telegraphy is merely an amusement.

"And so it will be, until science has brought it to such a perfection that these waves of thought can be broadcast—that they can be transmitted through the ether precisely as radio waves are transmitted. In other words, mental telegraphy is at present merely a mild form of hypnotism. Until it has been developed so that those hypnotic powers can be directed through space, and directed accurately to those individuals to whom they are intended, this science will have no significance. It remains for scientists of to-day to bring about that development."

I closed the book. When I looked up, Drake was watching me intently, as if expecting me to say something.

"Drake," I said slowly, more to myself than to him, "the pinwheel is beginning to unravel. We have found the beginning thread. Perhaps, if we follow that thread...."

Drake smiled.

"If you'll pick up your hat and coat, Dale," he interrupted, "I think we have an appointment. This Michael Strange, whose book you have just enjoyed so immensely, is now residing on a certain quiet little side street about three miles from the square, in London!"

I followed Drake in silence, until we had left Cheney Lane in the gloom behind us. At the entrance to the square my companion called a cab; and from there on we rode slowly, through a heavy darkness which was blanketed by a wet, penetrating fog. The cabby, evidently one who knew my companion by sight (and what London cabby does not know his Scotland Yard men!) chose a route that twisted through gloomy, uninhabited side streets, seldom winding into the main route of traffic.

As for Drake, he sank back in the uncomfortable seat and made no attempt at conversation. For the entire first part of our journey he said nothing. Not until we had reached a black, unlighted section of the city did he turn to me.

"Dale," he said at length, "have you ever hunted tiger?"

I looked at him and laughed.

"Why?" I replied. "Do you expect this hunt of ours will be something of a blind chase?"

"It will be a blind chase, no doubt of it," he said. "And when we have followed the trail to its end, I imagine we shall find something very like a tiger to deal with. I have looked rather deeply into Michael Strange's life, and unearthed a bit of the man's character. He has twice been accused of murder—murder by hypnotism—and has twice cleared himself by throwing scientific explanations at the police. That is the nature of his entire history for the past ten years."

I nodded, without replying. As Drake turned away from me again, our cab poked its laboring nose into a narrowing, gloomy street. I had a glimpse of a single unsteady street lamp on the corner, and a dim sign, "Mate Lane." And then we were dragging along the curb. The cab stopped with a groan.

I had stepped down and was standing by the cab door when suddenly, from the darkness in front of me, a strange figure advanced to my side. He glanced at me intently; then, seeing that I was evidently not the man he sought, he turned to Drake. I heard a whispered greeting and an undertone of conversation. Then, quietly, Drake stepped toward me.

"Dale," he said. "I thought it best that I should not show myself here to-night. No, there is no time for explanation now; you will understand later.

Perhaps"—significantly—"sooner than you anticipate. Inspector Hartnett will go through the rest of this pantomime with you."

I shook hands with Drake's man, still rather bewildered at the sudden substitution. Then, before I

was aware of it, Drake had vanished and the cab was gone. We were alone, Hartnett and I, in Mate Lane.

The home of Michael Strange—number seven—was hardly inviting. No light was in evidence. The big house stood like a huge, unadorned vault set back from the street, some distance from its adjoining buildings. The heavy steps echoed to our footbeats as we mounted them in the darkness; and the sound of the bell, as Hartnett pressed it came sharply to us from the silence of the interior.

We stood there, waiting. In the short interval before the door opened, Hartnett glanced at his watch (it was nearly ten o'clock), and said to me:

"I imagine, Doctor, we shall meet a blank wall. Let me do the talking, please."

That was all. In another moment the big door was pulled slowly open from the inside, and in the entrance, glaring out at us, stood the man we had come to see. It is not hard to remember that first impression of Michael Strange. He was a huge man,

gaunt and haggard, moulded with the hunched shoulders and heavy arms of a gorilla. His face seemed to be unconsciously twisted into a snarl. His greeting, which came only after he had stared at us intently, for nearly a minute, was curt and rasping.

"Well, gentlemen? What is it?"

"I should like a word with Dr. Michael Strange," said my companion quietly.

"I am Michael Strange."

"And I," replied Hartnett, with a suggestion of a smile, "am Raoul Hartnett, from Scotland Yard."

I did not see any sign of emotion on Strange's face. He stepped back in silence to allow us to enter. Then closing the big door after us, he led the way along a carpeted hall to a small, ill-lighted room just beyond. Here he motioned us to be seated, he himself standing upright beside the table, facing us.

"From Scotland Yard," he said, and the tone was

heavy with dull sarcasm. "I am at your service, Mr. Hartnett."

And now, for the first time, I wondered just why Drake had insisted on my coming here to this gloomy house in Mate Lane. Why he had so deliberately arranged a substitute so that Michael Strange should not come face to face with him directly. Evidently Hartnett had been carefully instructed as to his course of action—but why this seemingly unnecessary caution on Drake's part? And now, after we had gained admission, what excuse would Hartnett offer for the intrusion? Surely he would not follow the bull-headed rôle of a common policeman!

There was no anger, no attempt at dramatics, in Hartnett's voice. He looked quietly up at our host.

"Dr. Strange," he said at length, "I have come to you for your assistance. Last night, some time after midnight, Franklin White was strangled to death. He was murdered, according to substantial evidence, by the girl he was going to marry—Margot Vernee. I come to you because you know this girl rather well,

and can perhaps help Scotland Yard in finding her motive for killing White."

Michael Strange said nothing. He stood there, scowling down at my companion in silence. And I, too, I must admit, turned upon Hartnett with a stare of bewilderment. His accusation of Margot had brought a sense of horror to me. I had expected almost anything from him, even to a mad accusation of Strange himself. But I had hardly foreseen this cold blooded declaration.

"You understand, Doctor," Hartnett went on, in that same ironical drawl, "that we do not believe Margot Vernee did this thing herself. She had a companion, undoubtedly, one who accompanied her to the house on After Street, and assisted her in the crime. Who that companion was, we are not sure; but there is decidedly a case of suspicion against a certain young London sportsman. This fellow is known to have prowled about the White mansion both on the night of the murder and the night before."

Hartnett glanced up casually. Strange's face was a

total mask. When he nodded, the nod was the most even and mechanical thing I have ever seen. Certainly this man could control his emotions!

"Naturally, Doctor," Hartnett said, "we have gone rather deeply into the past life of the lady in question. Your name appears, of course, in a rather unimportant interval when Margot Vernee resided in Paris. And so we come to you in the hope that you can perhaps give us some slight bit of information—something that seems insignificant, perhaps, to you, but which may put us on the right track."

It was a careful speech. Even as Hartnett spoke it, I could have sworn that the words were Drake's, and had been memorized. But Michael Strange merely stepped back to the table and faced us without a word. He was probably, during that brief interlude, attempting to realize his position, and to discover just how much Raoul Hartnett actually knew.

And then, after his interim of silence, he came forward sullenly and stood over my comrade.

"I will tell you this much, Mr. Hartnett of Scotland Yard," he said bitterly: "My relations with Margot Vernee are not an open book to be passed through the clumsy fingers of ignorant police officers. As to this murder, I know nothing. At the time of it, I was seated in this room in company with a distinguished group of scientific friends. I will tell you, on authority, that Margot *did not murder her lover*. Why? Because she loved him!"

The last words were heavy with bitterness. Before they had died into silence, Michael Strange had opened the door of his study.

"If you please, gentlemen," he said quietly.

Hartnett got to his feet. For an instant he stood facing the gorilla-like form of our host; then he stepped over the sill, without a word. We passed down the unlighted corridor in silence, while Strange stood in the door of his study, watching us. I could not help but feel, as we left that gloomy house, that Strange had suddenly focused his entire attention upon me, and had ignored my companion. I could feel those eyes

upon me, and feel the force of the will behind them. A decided feeling of uneasiness crept over me, and I shuddered.

A moment later the big outer door had closed shut after us, and we were alone in Mate Lane. Alone, that is, until a third figure joined us in the shadows, and Drake's hand closed over my arm.

"Capital, Dale," he said triumphantly. "For half an hour you entertained him, you and Hartnett. And for half an hour I've had the unlimited freedom of his inner rooms, with the aid of an unlocked window on the lower floor. Those inner rooms, gentlemen, are significant—very!"

As we walked the length of Mate Lane, the gaunt, sinister home of Michael Strange became an indistinct outline in the pitch behind us. Drake said nothing more on the return trip, until we had nearly reached my rooms. Then he turned to me with a smile.

"We are one up on our friend, Dale," he said. "He does

not know, just now, which is the bigger fool—you or Hartnett here. However, I imagine Hartnett will be the victim of some very unusual events before many hours have passed!"

That was all. At least, all of significance. I left the two Scotland Yard men at the opening of Cheney Lane, and continued alone to my rooms. I opened the door and let myself in quietly. And there some few hours later, began the last and most horrible phase of the case of the murder machine.

It began—or to be more accurate, I began to react to it—at three o'clock in the morning. I was alone, and the rooms were dark. For hours I had sat quietly by the table, considering the significant events of the past few days. Sleep was impossible with so many unanswered questions staring into me, and so I sat there wondering.

Did Drake actually believe that Margot Vernee's simple story had been a ruse—that she had in truth killed her lover on that midnight intrusion of his home? Did he believe that Michael Strange knew of

that intrusion—that he had possibly planned it himself, and aided her, in order that Margot might be free to return to him? Did Strange know of that other intrusion, and of the uncanny power which had driven Sir John Harmon, and supposedly driven Margot to that house on After Street?

Those were the questions that still remained without answers: and it was over those questions that I pondered, while my surroundings became darker and more silent as the hour became more advanced. I heard the clock strike three, and heard the answering drone of Big Ben from the square.

And then it began. At first it was little more than a sense of nervousness. Before I had been content to sit in my chair and doze. Now, in spite of myself, I found myself pacing the floor, back and forth like a caged animal. I could have sworn, at the time, that some sinister presence had found entrance to my room. Yet the room was empty. And I could have sworn, too, that some silent power of will was commanding me, with undeniable force, to go out—out into the darkness of Cheney Lane.

I fought it bitterly. I laughed at it, yet even through my laugh came the memory of Sir John Harmon and Margot, and what they had told me. And then, unable to resist that unspoken demand, I seized my hat and coat and went out.

Cheney Lane was deserted, utterly still. At the end of it, the street lamp glowed dully, throwing a patch of ghastly light over the side of the adjoining building. I hurried through the shadows, and as I walked, a single idea had possession of me. I must hurry, I thought, with all possible speed, to that grim house in Mate Lane—number seven.

Where that deliberate desire came from I did not know. I did not stop to reason. Something had commanded me to go at once to Michael Strange's home. And though I stopped more than once, deliberately turning in my tracks, inevitably I was forced to retrace my steps and continue.

I remember passing through the square, and prowling through the unlightened side streets that lay beyond. Three miles separated Cheney Lane from Mate Lane,

and I had been over the route only once before, in a cab. Yet I followed that route without a single false turn, followed it instinctively. At every intersecting street I was dragged in a certain direction and not once was I allowed to hesitate. It was as though some unseen demon perched on my shoulders, as the demon of the sea rode Sinbad, and pointed out the way.

Only one disturbing thing occurred on that night journey through London. I had turned into a narrow street hardly more than a quarter mile from my destination; and before me, in the shadows, I made out the form of a shuffling old man. And here, as I watched him, I was conscious of a new, mad desire. I crept upon him stealthily, without a sound. My hands were outstretched, clutching, for his throat. At that moment I should have killed him!

I cannot explain it. During that brief interval I was a murderer at heart. I wanted to kill. And now that I remember it, the desire had been pregnant in me ever since the lights of Cheney Lane had died behind me. All the time that I prowled through those black

streets, murder lurked in my heart. I should have killed the first man who crossed my path.

But I did not kill him. Thank God, as my fingers twisted toward the back of his throat, that mad desire suddenly left me. I stood still, while the old fellow, still unsuspecting, shuffled, away into the darkness. Then, dropping my hands with a sob of helplessness, I went forward again.

And so I reached Mate Lane, and the huge gray house that awaited me. This time, as I mounted the stone steps, the old house seemed even more repulsive and horrible. I dreaded to see that door open, but I could not retreat.

I dropped the knocker heavily. A moment passed: and then, precisely as before, the huge door swung inward. Michael Strange stood before me.

He did not speak. Perhaps, if he had spoken, that fiendish spell would have been broken, and I should have returned, even then, to my own peaceful little rooms in Cheney Lane. No—he merely held the door

for me to enter, and as I passed him he stood there, watching me with a significant smile.

Straight to that familiar room at the end of the hall I went, with Strange behind me. When we had entered, he closed the door cautiously. For a moment he faced me without speaking.

"You came very close to committing a murder on your way here, did you not, Dale?"

I stared at him. How, in God's name, could this man read my thoughts so completely?

"You would have completed the murder," he said softly, "had I wished it. I did not wish it!"

I did not answer. There was no reply to such a mad declaration. As for my companion, he watched me for an instant and then laughed. He was not mad. I am doctor enough to know that.

But the laugh was not long in duration. He stepped forward suddenly and took my arm in a steel grip,

dragging me toward the half hidden door at the farther end of the room.

"I shall not keep you long, Dale," he said harshly. "I could have killed you—could have made you kill yourself, and in fact, I intended to do so—but after all, you are merely a poor stumbling fool who has meddled in things too deep for you."

He pulled open the door and pushed me forward. The room was dark, and not until he had closed the door again and switched on a dim light, could I see its contents.

Even then I saw nothing. At least, nothing of importance to an unscientific mind. There was a low table against the wall, with a profusion of tiny wires emanating from it. I was aware that a cup shaped microphone—or something very similar—hung over the table, about on a level with my eyes, had I been sitting in the chair. Beyond that I saw nothing, until Strange had moved forward and drawn aside a curtain that hung beside the table.

"I made you come here to-night, Dale," he murmured, "because I was a bit afraid of you. Your comrade, Hartnett, was an ignorant police officer. He has not the intellect to connect the series of events of the past day or two, and so I did not trouble myself with him. But you are an educated man. You have made no demonstrations of your ability in the field of science, but—"

He stopped speaking abruptly. From the room behind us came the sound of a warning bell. Strange turned quickly and went to the door.

"You will wait here, Doctor," he said. "I have another caller to-night. Another one who came the same way as you!"

He vanished. For a short interlude I was alone, with that peculiar radio-like apparatus before me. It was, for all the world, like a miniature control room in some small broadcasting station. Except for the odd shape of the microphone, if it was such I could detect no radical difference in equipment.

However, I had little time for conjecture. A patter of footsteps interrupted me from the next room, and a frightened, feminine voice broke the stillness of the outer study. Even before the owner of that voice stepped in to my presence, I knew her.

And when she came, with white, fearful face and trembling body, I could not withhold a shudder of apprehension. It was the young woman who had come to my office—Margot Vernee. Evidently, at last, she had yielded to the horrible impulse that had drawn her back to Michael Strange, an impulse which, I now understood, had originated from the man himself.

He pressed her forward. There was nothing tender in his touch: it was cruel and triumphant.

"So you have succeeded—at last," I said bitterly.

He turned to me with a sneer.

"I have brought her here, yes," he replied. "And now that she has come, she shall hear what I have to tell you. It will perhaps give her a respect for me, and this

time she will not have the power to turn me away."

He pointed to the table, to the apparatus that lay there.

"I'm telling you this, Dale," he said, "because it gives me pleasure to do so. You are enough of a scientist to appreciate and understand it. And if, when I have finished, I have told you too much, there is a very easy way to keep your tongue silent. You have heard of hypnotism, Dale? You have heard also of radio? Have you ever thought of combining the two?"

He faced me directly. I made no effort to reply.

"Radio," he said quietly, "is broadcast by means of sound waves. That much you know. But hypnotism too, can be transmitted through distance, if an instrument delicate enough to transmit *thought waves* can be invented. For twenty years I have worked on that instrument, and for twenty years I have studied hypnotism. You understand, of course, that this instrument is worthless unless it is operated by a master mind. Thought waves are useless; they will not

control the actions of even a cat. But hypnotic waves or concentrated thought waves—will control the world."

There was no denying him. He faced me with the savage triumph of a wild beast. He was glorying in his power, and in my amazement.

"I wanted Franklin White to die!" he cried. "It was I who murdered him. Why? Because he was about to take the girl I desired. Is that not reason enough for murder? And so I killed him. It was not Margot Vernee who strangled her lover: it was a complete stranger, a London sportsman, who had no reason for committing the murder, *except that I wished him to!*

"He died on the night of December seventh, murdered by Sir John Harmon, the sportsman. Why? Because, of all London, Sir John would be the last man to be suspected. I have a keen appreciation for the irony of fate! White would have died the night before, Dale, except that I lacked the courage to kill him. His murderer was standing, under my power, outside his very house—and then I suddenly thought it best that I

should have an alibi. Your Scotland Yard is clever, and it was best that I have protection. And so, on the following night, I sent Sir John to the house once again. This time, while I sat here and controlled the actions of my puppet, a group of men sat here with me. They believed that I was experimenting with a new type of radio receiver!"

Michael Strange laughed, laughed harshly, in utter triumph, as a cat laughs at the antics of his mouse victims.

"When that murder was done," he said, "I sent Margot to the scene, so that she might see her lover strangled, dead. I repeat, Dale, that I enjoy the irony of fate, especially when I can control it. And as for you—I brought you here to-night merely so that you would realize the intensity of the powers that control you. When you leave here, you will be unharmed—but after the exhibition I shall give you, I am sure that you will make no further attempt to interfere with things out of your realm of understanding."

I heard a sob from Margot. She had retreated to the

door, and clung there. For myself, I did not move. Strange's recital had revealed to me the horrible lust that gripped him, and now I watched him in fascination. He would not harm the girl; that much I was sure of. In his distorted fashion he loved her. In his crazed, murderous way he would attempt to win her love, even though she had once scorned him.

I saw him step toward the table. Saw him drop heavily into the chair, and stare directly into that microphonic thing that hung before his eyes. As he stared, he spoke to me.

"Science, in its intricate forms, is probably above the mind of a common medical man, Dale," he said. "It would be useless to explain to you how my thoughts—and my will—can be transmitted through space. Perhaps you have sat in a theater and stared at a certain person until that person turned to face you. You have? Then you will perhaps understand how I can control the minds of any human creature within the radius of my power. You see, Dale, this intricate little machine gives me the power to transform London into a city of stark murder. I could bring

about such a horrible wave of crime that Scotland Yard would be scorned from one end of the world to the other. I could make every man murder his neighbor, until the streets of the city were running with blood!"

Strange turned quietly to look at me. He spoke deliberately.

"And now for the little exhibition of which I spoke, Dale," he murmured. "Your detective friend, Hartnett, has been under my power for the past three hours. You see, it was safer to control his movements, and be sure of him. And now, to be doubly sure of him, perhaps you would like to see him kill himself!"

I stepped forward with a sudden cry. Strange said nothing: his eyes merely burned into mine. Once again I felt that strange, all-powerful control forcing me back. I retreated, step by step, until the wall stopped me. Yet even as I retreated, a childish hope filled me. How could Strange, working his terrible murder machine, concentrate his power on any individual, when the whole of London lay before him?

He answered my question. He must have read it as it came over me.

"Have you ever been in a crowd, Dale, and watched a certain individual intently, until that particular individual turned to look at you? The rest of the crowd pays no attention, of course, but that one man. And now we shall make that one man murder himself!"

Strange turned slowly. I saw his fingers creep along the rim of the table, touching certain wires that came together there. I heard a dull, droning hum fill the room, and, over it, Strange's penetrating voice.

"When I am finished, Dale, I shall probably kill you. I brought you here merely to frighten you, but I believe I have told you too much."

With that new horror upon me, I saw my captor's lips move slowly....

And then, from the shadows at the other end of the small room, came a low, unemotional voice.

"Before you begin, Strange—"

Michael Strange whipped about in his chair like a tiger. His hand dropped to his pocket, so swiftly that my eyes did not follow it. And as it dropped, a single staccato shot split the darkness of the room. The scientist slumped forward in his chair.

The dull, whirring sound of that hellish machine had stopped abruptly, cut short by the sudden weight of Strange's lunging body as he fell upon it. I saw the livid, fiery snake of white light twist suddenly upward through that coil of wires: and in another moment the entire apparatus shattered by a blinding crash of flame.

After that I turned away. Whether the bullet killed Strange or not, I do not know: but the sight of his charred face, hanging over that table of destruction, told its own story.

It was Inspector Drake who came across the room toward me, and took my arm. The smoking revolver still lay in his hand, and as he led me into the

adjoining room, I saw that Margot had already found refuge there.

"You see now, Dale," Drake said quietly, "why I let Hartnett go with you before? If Strange had suspected me, I should have been merely another victim. As for Hartnett, he has been under constant guard down at headquarters. He's safe. They've kept him there, at my instructions, in spite of all his terrific efforts to leave them."

I was listening to my companion in admiration. Even then I did not quite understand.

"I was wrong in just one thing, Dale. I left you alone, without protection. I believed Strange would ignore you, because, after all, you are not a Scotland Yard man. Thank God I had the sense to follow Margot—to trail her here—and get here soon enough."

And so ended the horrible series of events that began with Sir John Harmon's chance visit to my study. As for Harmon, he was later cleared of all guilt, upon the charred evidence in Michael Strange's house in Mate

Lane. The girl, I believe, has left London, where she can be as far as possible from memories that are all too terrible.

As for me, I am back once again in my quiet rooms in Cheney Lane, where the routine of common medical practice has wiped out many of those vivid horrors. In time, I believe, I shall forget, unless Inspector Drake, of Scotland Yard, insists upon bringing the affair up again!

October 1930

#51 Stolen Brains, By Sterner St. Paul Meek:

Dr. Bird, Scientific sleuth extraordinary, goes after a sinister stealer of brains.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

and grasped the motionlessness



Dr. Bird, scientific sleuth extraordinary, goes after a sinister stealer of brains.

"I hope, Carnes," said Dr. Bird, "that we get good fishing."

"Good fishing? Will you please tell me what you are talking about?"

"I am talking about fishing, old dear. Have you seen the evening paper?"

"No. What's that got to do with it?"

Dr. Bird tossed across the table a copy of the *Washington Post* folded so as to bring uppermost an item on page three. Carnes saw his picture staring at him from the center of the page.

"What the dickens?" he exclaimed as he bent over the sheet. With growing astonishment he read that Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service had collapsed at his desk that afternoon and had been rushed to Walter Reed Hospital where the trouble had

been diagnosed as a nervous breakdown caused by overwork. There followed a guarded statement from Admiral Clay, the President's personal physician, who had been called into conference by the army authorities.

The Admiral stated that the Chief of the Washington District was in no immediate danger but that a prolonged rest was necessary. The paper gave a glowing tribute to the detective's life and work and stated that he had been given sick leave for an indefinite period and that he was leaving at once for the fishing lodge of his friend, Dr. Bird of the Bureau of Standards, at Squapan Lake, Maine. Dr. Bird, the article concluded, would accompany and care for his stricken friend. Carnes laid aside the paper with a gasp.

"Do you know what all this means?" Carnes demanded.

"It means, Carnsey, old dear, that the fishing at Squapan Lake should be good right now and that I feel the need of accurate information on the subject. I

didn't want to go alone, so I engineered this outrage on the government and am taking you along for company. For the love of Mike, look sick from now on until we are clear of Washington. We leave to-night. I already have our tickets and reservations and all you have to do is to collect your tackle and pack your bags for a month or two in the woods and meet me at the Pennsy station at six to-night."

"And yet there are some people who say there is no Santa Claus," mused Carnes. "If I had really broken down from overwork, I would probably have had my pay docked for the time I was absent, but a man with official pull in this man's government wants to go fishing and presto! the wheels move and the way is clear. Doctor, I'll meet you as directed."

"Good enough," said Dr. Bird. "By the way, Carnes," he went on as the operative opened the door, "bring your pistol."

Carnes whirled about at the words.

"Are we going on a case?" he asked.

"That remains to be seen," replied the Doctor enigmatically. "At all events, bring your pistol. In answer to any questions, we are going fishing. In point of fact, we are—with ourselves as bait. If you have a little time to spare this afternoon you might drop around to the office of the *Post* and get them to show you all the amnesia cases they have had stories on during the past three months. They will be interesting reading. No more questions now, old dear, we'll have lots of time to talk things over while we are in the Maine woods."

Late the next evening they left the Bangor and Aroostook train at Mesardis and found a Ford truck waiting for them. Over a rough trail they were driven for fifteen miles, winding up at a log cabin which the Doctor announced was his. The truck deposited their belongings and jounced away and Dr. Bird led the way to the cabin, which proved to be unlocked. He pushed open the door and entered, followed by Carnes. The operative glanced at the occupants of the cabin and started back in surprise.

Seated at a table were two figures. The smaller of the

two had his back to the entrance but the larger one was facing them. He rose as they entered and Carnes rubbed his eyes and reeled weakly against the wall. Before him stood a replica of Dr. Bird. There was the same six feet two of bone and muscle, the same beetling brows and the same craggy chin and high forehead surmounted by a shock of unruly black hair. In face and figure the stranger was a replica of the famous scientist until he glanced at their hands. Dr. Bird's hands were long and slim with tapering fingers, the hands of a thinker and an artist despite the acid stains which disfigured them but could not hide their beauty. The hands of his double were stained as were Dr. Bird's, but they were short and thick and bespoke more the man of action than the man of thought.

The second figure arose and faced them and again Carnes received a shock. While the likeness was not so, striking, there was no doubt that the second man would have readily passed for Carnes himself in a dim light or at a little distance. Dr. Bird burst into laughter at the detective's puzzled face.

"Carnes," he said, "shake yourself together and then

shake hands with Major Trowbridge of the Coast Artillery Corps. It has been said by some people that we favor one another."

"I'm glad to meet you, Major," said Carnes. "The resemblance is positively uncanny. But for your hands, I would have trouble telling you two apart."

The Major glanced down at his stubby fingers.

"It is unfortunate but it can't be helped," he said. "Dr. Bird, this is Corporal Askins of my command. He is not as good a second to Mr. Carnes as I am to you but you said it was less important."

"The likeness is plenty good enough," replied the Doctor. "He will probably not be subjected to as close a scrutiny as you will. Did you have any trouble in getting here unobserved?"

"None at all, Doctor. Lieutenant Maynard found a good landing field within a half mile of here, as you said he would, and he has his Douglass camouflaged and is standing by. When do you expect trouble?"

"I have no idea. It may come to-night or it may come later. Personally I hope that it comes later so that we can get in a few days of fishing before anything happens."

"What do you expect to happen, Doctor?" demanded Carnes. "Every time I have asked you anything you told me to wait until we were in the Maine woods and we are there now. I read up everything that I could find on amnesia victims during the past three months but it didn't throw much light on the matter to me."

"How many cases did you find, Carnes?"

"Sixteen. There may have been lots more but I couldn't find any others in the *Post* records. Of course, unless the victim were a local man, or of some prominence, it wouldn't appear."

"You got most of them at that. Did any points of similarity strike you as you read them?"

"None except that all were prominent men and all of them mental workers of high caliber. That didn't

appear peculiar because it is the man of high mentality who is most apt to crack."

"Undoubtedly. There were some points of similarity which you missed. Where did the attacks take place?"

"Why, one was at—Thunder, Doctor! I did miss something. Every case, as nearly as I can recall, happened at some summer camp or other resort where they were on vacation."

"Correct. One other point. At what time of day did they occur?"

"In the morning, as well as I can remember. That point didn't register."

"They were all discovered in the morning, Carnes, which means that the actual loss of memory occurred during the night. Further, every case has happened within a circle with a diameter of three hundred miles. We are near the northern edge of that circle."

Carnes checked up on his memory rapidly.

"You're right, Doctor," he cried. "Do you think—?"

"Once in a while," replied Dr. Bird dryly, "I think enough to know the futility of guesses hazarded without complete data. We are now located within the limits of the amnesia belt and we are here to find out what did happen, if anything, and not to make wild guesses about it. You have the tent set up for us, Major?"

"Yes, Doctor, about thirty yards from the cabin and hidden so well that you could pass it a dozen times a day without suspecting its existence. The gas masks and other equipment which you sent to Fort Banks are in it."

"In that case we had better dispense with your company as soon as we have eaten a bite, and retire to it. On second thought, we will eat in it. Carnes, we will go to our downy couches at once and leave our substitutes in possession of the cabin. I trust, gentlemen, that things come out all right and that you are in no danger."

Major Trowbridge shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"It is as the gods will," he said sententiously. "It is merely a matter of duty to me, you know, and thank God, I have no family to mourn if anything does go wrong. Neither has Corporal Askins."

"Well, good luck at any rate. Will you guide Carnes to the tent and then return here and I'll join him?"

Huddled in the tiny concealed tent, Dr. Bird handed Carnes a haversack on a web strap.

"This is a gas mask," he said. "Put it on your neck and keep it ready for instant use. I have one on and one of us must wear a mask continually while we are here. We'll change off every hour. If the gas used is lethane, as I suspect, we should be able to detect it before its gets too concentrated, but some other gas might be used and we must take no chances. Now look here."

With the aid of a flash-light he showed Carnes a piece of apparatus which had been set up in the tent. It consisted of two telescopic barrels, one fitted with an

eye-piece and the other, which was at a wide angle to the first, with an objective glass. Between the two was a covered round disc from which projected a short tube fitted with a protecting lens. This tube was parallel to the telescopic barrel containing the objective lens.

"This is a new thing which I have developed and it is getting its first practical test to-night," he said. "It is a gas detector. It works on the principle of the spectroscope with modifications. From this projector goes out a beam of invisible light and the reflections are gathered and thrown through a prism of the eye-piece. While a spectroscope requires that the substance which it examines be incandescent and throw out visible light rays in order to show the typical spectral lines, this device catches the invisible ultra-violet on a fluorescent screen and analyzes it spectroscopically. Whoever has the mask on must continually search the sky with it and look for the three bright lines which characterize lethane, one at 230, one at 240 and the third at 670 on the illuminated scale. If you see any bright lines in those

regions or any other lines that are not continually present, call my attention to it at once. I'll watch for the first hour."

At the end of an hour Dr. Bird removed his mask with a sigh of relief and Carnes took his place at the spectroscope. For half an hour he moved the glass about and then spoke in a guarded tone.

"I don't see any of the lines you told me to look for," he said, "but in the southwest I get wide band at 310 and two lines at about 520."

Dr. Bird advanced toward the instrument but before he reached it, Carnes gave an exclamation.

"There they are, Doctor!" he cried.

Dr. Bird sniffed the air. A faint sweetish odor became apparent and he reached for his gas mask. Slowly his hands drooped and Carnes grasped him and drew the mask over his face. Dr. Bird rallied slightly and feebly drew a bottle from his pocket and sniffed it. In another instant he was shouldering Carnes aside and

staring through the spectroscope. Carnes watched him for an instant and then a low whirring noise attracted his attention and he looked up. Silently he caught the Doctor's arm in a viselike grip and pointed.

Hovering above the cabin was a silvery globe, faintly luminous in the moonlight. From its top rose a faint cloud of vapor which circled around the globe and descended toward the earth. The globe hovered like a giant humming bird above the cabin and Carnes barely stifled an exclamation. The door of the cabin opened and Major Trowbridge, walking stiffly and like a man in a dream, appeared. Slowly he advanced for ten yards and stood motionless. The globe moved over him and the bottom unfolded like a lily. Two long arms shot silently down and grasped the motionless figure and drew him up into the heart of the globe. The petals refolded, and silently as a dream the globe shot upward and disappeared.

"Gad! They lost no time!" commented Dr. Bird. "Come on, Carnes, run for your life, or rather, for Trowbridge's life. No, you idiot, leave your gas mask

on. I'll take the spectroscope; it'll be all we need."

Followed by the panting Carnes, Dr. Bird sped through the night along an almost invisible path. For half a mile he kept up a headlong pace until Carnes could feel his heart pounding as though it would burst his ribs. The pair debouched from the trees into a glade a few acres in extent and Dr. Bird paused and whistled softly. An answering whistle came from a few yards away and a figure rose in the darkness as they approached.

"Maynard?" called Dr. Bird. "Good enough! I was afraid that you might not have kept your gas mask on."

"My orders were to keep it on, sir," replied the lieutenant in muffled tones through his mask, "but my mechanician did not obey orders. He passed out cold without any warning about fifteen minutes ago."

"Where's your ship?"

"Right over here, sir."

"We'll take off at once. Your craft is equipped with a Bird silencer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come on, Carnes, we're going to follow that globe. Take the front cockpit alone, Maynard; Carnes and I will get in the rear pit with the spec and guide you. You can take off your gas mask at an elevation of a thousand feet. You have pack 'chutes, haven't you?"

"In the rear pit, Doctor."

"Put one on, Carnes, and climb in. I've got to get this spec set up before he gets too high."

The Douglass equipped with the Bird silencer, took the air noiselessly and rapidly gained elevation under the urging of the pilot. Dr. Bird clamped the gas-detecting spectroscope on the front of his cockpit and peered through it.

"Southwest, at about a thousand more elevation," he directed.

"Right!" replied the pilot as he turned the nose of his plane in the indicated direction and began to climb. For an hour and a half the plane flew noiselessly through the night.

"Bald Mountain," said the pilot, pointing. "The Canadian Border is only a few miles away."

"If they've crossed the Border, we're sunk," replied the doctor. "The trail leads straight ahead."

For a few minutes they continued their flight toward the Canadian Border and then Dr. Bird spoke.

"Swing south," he directed, "and drop a thousand feet and come back."

The pilot executed the maneuver and Dr. Bird peered over the edge of the plane and directed the spectroscope toward the ground.

"Half a mile east," he said, "and drop another thousand. Carnes, get ready to jump when I give the word."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Carnes as he fumbled for the rip cord of his parachute, "suppose this thing doesn't open?"

"They'll slide you between two barn doors for a coffin and bury you that way," said Dr. Bird grimly. "You know your orders, Maynard?"

"Yes, sir. When you drop, I am to land at the nearest town—it will be Lowell—and get in touch with the Commandant of the Portsmouth Navy Yard if possible. If I get him, I am to tell him my location and wait for the arrival of reinforcements. If I fail to get him on the telephone, I am to deliver a sealed packet which I carry to the nearest United States Marshal. When reinforcements arrive, either from the Navy Yard or from the Marshal, I am to guide them toward the spot where I dropped you and remain, as nearly as I can judge, two miles away until I get a further signal or orders from you."

"That is right. We'll be over the edge in another minute. Are you ready, Carnes?"

"Oh, yes, I'm ready, Doctor, if I have to risk my precious life in this contraption."

"Then jump!"

Side by side, Carnes and the doctor dropped toward the ground. The Douglass flew silently away into the night. Carnes found that the sensation of falling was not an unpleasant one as soon as he got accustomed to it. There was little sensation of motion, and it was not until a sharp whisper from Dr. Bird called it to his attention that he realized that he was almost to the ground. He bent his legs as he had been instructed and landed without any great jar. As he rose he saw that Dr. Bird was already on his feet and was eagerly searching the ground with the spectroscope which he had brought with him in the jump.

"Fold your parachute, Carnes, and we'll stow them away under a rock where they can't be seen. We won't use them again."

Carnes did so and deposited the silk bundle beside the doctor's, and they covered them with rocks until

they would be invisible from the air.

"Follow me," said the doctor as he strode carefully forward, stopping now and then to take a sight with the spectroscope. Carnes followed him as he made his way up a small hill which blocked the way. A hiss from Dr. Bird stopped him.

Dr. Bird had dropped flat on the ground, and Carnes, on all fours, crawled forward to join him. He smothered an exclamation as he looked over the crest of the hill. Before him, sitting in a hollow in the ground, was the huge globe which had spirited away Major Trowbridge.

"This is evidently their landing place," whispered Dr. Bird. "The next thing to find is their hiding place."

He rose and started forward but sank at once to the ground and dragged Carnes down with him. On the hill which formed the opposite side of the hollow a line of light showed for an instant as though a door had been opened. The light disappeared and then reappeared, and as they watched it widened and

against an illuminated background four men appeared, carrying a fifth. The door shut behind them and they made their way slowly toward the waiting globe. They laid down their burden and one of them turned a flash-light on the globe and opened a door in its side through which they hoisted their burden. They all entered the globe, the door closed and with a slight whirring sound it rose in the air and moved rapidly toward the northeast.

"That's the place we're looking for," muttered Dr. Bird. "We'll go around this hollow and look for it. Be careful where you step; they must have ventilation somewhere if their laboratory is underground."

Followed by the secret service operative, the doctor made his way along the edge of the hollow. They did not dare to show a light and it was slow work feeling their way forward, inch by inch. When they had reached a point above where the doctor thought the light had been he paused.

"There must be a ventilation shaft somewhere around here," he whispered, his mouth not an inch from

Carnes' ear, "and we've got to find it. It would never do to try the door; if any of them are still here it is sure to be guarded. You go up the hill for five yards and I'll go down. Quarter back and forth on a two hundred yard front and work carefully. Don't fall in, whatever you do. We'll return to this point every time we pass it and report."

The operative nodded and walked a few yards up the hill and made his way slowly forward. He went a hundred yards as nearly as he could judge and then stepped five yards further up the hill and made his way back. As he passed the starting point he approached and Dr. Bird's figure rose up.

"Any luck?" he whispered.

Dr. Bird shook his head.

"Well try further," he said. "I think it is probably beyond us, so suppose you go fifteen yards up and quarter the same as before."

Carnes nodded and stole silently away. Fifteen yards

up the hill he went and then paused. He stood on the crest of the hill and before him was a steep, almost precipitous slope. He made his way along the edge for a few yards and then paused. Faintly he could detect a murmur of voices. Inch by inch he crept forward, going over the ground under foot. He paused and listened intently and decided that the sound must come from the slope beneath him. A glance at his watch told him that he had spent ten minutes on this trip and he made his way back to the meeting place.

Dr. Bird was waiting for him, and in a low whisper Carnes reported his discovery. The doctor went back with him and together they renewed the search. The slope of the hill was almost sheer and Carnes looked dubiously over the edge.

"I wish we had brought the parachutes," he whispered to the doctor. "We could have taken the ropes off them and you could have lowered me over the edge."

Dr. Bird chuckled softly and tugged at his middle. Carnes watched him with astonishment in the dim

light, but he understood when Dr. Bird thrust the end of a strong but light silk cord into his hands. He looped it under his arms and the doctor with whispered instructions, lowered him over the cliff. The doctor lowered him for a few feet and then stopped in response to a jerk on the free end. A moment later Carnes signaled to be drawn up and soon stood beside the doctor.

"That's the place all right," he whispered. "The whole cliff is covered with creepers and there is a tree growing right close to it. If we can anchor the cord here, I think that we can slide down to a safe hold on the tree."

A tree stood near and the silk cord was soon fastened. Carnes disappeared over the cliff and in a few moments Dr. Bird slid down the cord to join him. He found the detective seated in the crotch of a tree only a few feet from the face of the cliff. From the cliff came a pronounced murmur of voices. Dr. Bird drew in his breath in excitement and moved forward along the branch. He touched the stone and after a moment of searching he cautiously raised one corner of a

painted canvas flap and peered into the cliff. He watched for a few seconds and then slid back and silently pulled Carnes toward him.

Together the two men made their way toward the cliff and Dr. Bird raised the corner of the flap and they peered into the hill. Before them was a cave fitted up as a cross between a laboratory and a hospital.

Almost directly opposite them and at the left of a door in the farther wall was a ray machine of some sort. It was a puzzle to Carnes, and even Dr. Bird, although he could grasp the principle at a glance, was at a loss to divine its use. From a set of coils attached to a generator was connected a tube of the Crookes tube type with the rays from it gathered and thrown by a parabolic reflector onto the space where a man's head would rest when he was seated in a white metal chair with rubber insulated feet, which stood beneath it. An operating table occupied the other side of the room while a gas cylinder and other common hospital apparatus stood around ready for use.

Seated at a table which occupied the center of the room were three men. The sound of their voices rose

from an indistinct murmur to audibility as the flap was raised and the watchers could readily understand their words. Two of them sat with their faces toward the main entrance and the third man faced them. Carnes bit his lip as he looked at the man at the head of the table. He was twisted and misshapen in body, a grotesque dwarf with a hunched back, not over four feet in height. His massive head, sunken between his hunched shoulders, showed a tremendous dome of cranium and a brow wider and even higher than Dr. Bird's. The rest of his face was lined and drawn as though by years of acute suffering. Sharp black eyes glared brightly from deep sunk caverns. The dwarf was entirely bald; even the bushy eyebrows which would be expected from his face, were missing.

"They ought to be getting back," said the dwarf sharply.

"If they get back at all," said one of the two figures facing him.

"What do you mean?" growled the dwarf, his eyes glittering ominously. "They'll return all right; they

know they'd better."

"They'll return if they can, but I tell you again, Slavatsky, I think it was a piece of foolishness to try to take two men in one night. We got Bird all right, but it is getting late for a second one, and they had to take Bird over a hundred miles and then go nearly three hundred more for Williams. The news about Bird may have been discovered and spread and others may be looking out for us. Carnes might have recovered."

"Didn't he get a full dose of lethane?"

"So Frick says, and Bird certainly had a full dose, but I can't help but feel uneasy. Our operations were going too nicely on schedule and you had to break it up and take on an extra case in the same night as a scheduled one. I tell you, I don't like it."

"I'm sorry that I did it, Carson, but only because the results were so poor. We had planned on Williams for a month and I wanted him. And Bird was so easy that I couldn't resist it."

"And what did you get? Not as much menthium as would have come from an ordinary bookkeeper."

"I'll admit that Bird is a grossly overrated man. He must have worked in sheer luck in his work in the past, for there was nothing in his brain to show it above average. We got barely enough menthium to replace what we used in capturing him."

"We ought to have taken Carnes and left Bird alone," snorted Carson. "Even a wooden-headed detective ought to have given us a better supply than Bird yielded."

"We are bound to meet with disappointments once in a while. I had marked Bird down long ago as soon as I could get a chance at him."

"Well, you ran that show, Slavatsky, but I'll warn you that we aren't going to let you pull off another one like it. I take no more crazy chances, even on your orders."

The hunchback rose to his feet, his eyes glittering

ominously.

"What do you mean, Carson?" he asked slowly, his hand slipping behind him as he spoke.

"Don't try any rough stuff, Slavatsky!" warned Carson sharply. "I can pull a tube as fast as you can, and I'll do it if I have to."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" protested the third man rising, "we are all too deep in this to quarrel. Sit down and let's talk this over. Carson is just worried."

"What is there to be worried about?" grunted the dwarf as he slid back into his chair. "Everything has gone nicely so far and no suspicion has been raised."

"Maybe it has and then again maybe it hasn't," growled Carson. "I think this Bird episode to-night looks bad. In the first place, it came too opportunely and too easily. In the second place Bird should have yielded more menthium, and in the third place, did you notice his hands? They weren't the type of hands to expect on a man of his type."

"Nonsense, they were acid stained."

"Acid stains can be put on. It may be all right, but I am worried. While we are talking about this matter, there is another thing I want cleared up."

"What is it?"

"I think, Slavatsky, that you are holding out on us. You are getting more than your share of the menthium."

Again the dwarf leaped to his feet, but the peace-maker intervened.

"Carson has a right to look at the records, Slavatsky," he said. "I am satisfied, but I'd like to look at them, too. None of us have seen them for two months."

The dwarf glared at first one and then the other.

"All right," he said shortly and limped to a cabinet on the wall. He drew a key from his pocket and opened it and pulled out a leather-bound book. "Look all you please. I was supposed to get the most. It was my

idea."

"You were to get one share and a half, while Willis, Frink and I got one share each and the rest half a share," said Carson. "I know how much has been given and it won't take me but a minute to check up."

He bent over the book, but Willis interrupted.

"Better put it away, Carson," he said, "here come the rest and we don't want them to know we suspect anything."

He pointed toward a disc on the wall which had begun to glow. Slavatsky looked at it and grasped the book from Carson and replaced it in the cabinet. He moved over and started the generator and the tube began to glow with a violet light. A noise came from the outside and the door opened. Four men entered carrying a fifth whom they propped up in the chair under the glowing tube.

"Did everything go all right?" asked the dwarf eagerly.

"Smooth as silk," replied one of the four. "I hope we get some results this time."

The dwarf bent over the ray apparatus and made some adjustments and the head of the unconscious man was bathed with a violet glow. For three minutes the flood of light poured on his head and then the dwarf shut off the light and Carson and Willis lifted the figure and laid it on the operating table. The dwarf bent over the man and inserted the needle of a hypodermic syringe into the back of the neck at the base of the brain. The needle was an extremely long one, and Dr. Bird gasped as he saw four inches of shining steel buried in the brain of the unconscious man.

Slowly Slavatsky drew back the plunger of the syringe and Dr. Bird could see it was being filled with an amber fluid. For two minutes the slow work continued, until a speck of red appeared in the glass syringe barrel.

"Seven and a half cubic centimeters!" cried the dwarf in a tone of delight.

"Fine!" cried Carson. "That's a record, isn't it?"

"No, we got eight once. Now hold him carefully while I return some of it."

Slavatsky slowly pressed home the plunger and a portion of the amber fluid was returned to the patient's skull. Presently he withdrew the needle and straightened up and held it toward the light.

"Six centimeters net," he announced. "Take him back, Frink. I'll give Carson and Willis their share now and we'll take care of the rest of you when you return. Is the ship well stocked?"

"Enough for two or three more trips."

"In that case, I'll inject this whole lot. Better get going, Frink, it's pretty late."

The four men who had brought the patient in stepped forward and lifted him from the table and bore him out. Dr. Bird dropped the canvas screen and strained his ears. A faint whir told him that the globe had

taken to the air. He slid back along the limb of the tree until he touched the rope and silently climbed hand over hand until he gained the crest. He bent his back to the task of raising Carnes, and the operative soon stood beside him on the ledge surmounting the cliff.

"What on earth were they doing?" asked Carnes in a whisper.

"That was Professor Williams of Yale. They were depriving him of his memory. There will be another amnesia case in the papers to-morrow. I haven't time to explain their methods now: we've got to act. You have a flash-light?"

"Yes, and my gun. Shall we break in? There are only three of them, and I think we could handle the lot."

"Yes, but the others may return at any time and we want to bag the whole lot. They've done their damage for to-night. You heard my orders to Lieutenant Maynard, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"He should be somewhere in these hills to the south with assistance of some sort. The signal to them is three long flashes followed in turn by three short ones and three more long. Go and find them and bring them here. When you get close give me the same light signal and don't try to break in unless I am with you. I am going to reconnoitre a little more and make sure that there is no back entrance through which they can escape. Good luck. Carnes: hurry all you can. There is no time to be lost."

The secret service operative stole away into the night and Dr. Bird climbed back down the rope and took his place at the window. Willis lay on the operating table unconscious, while Slavatsky and Carson studied the now partially emptied syringe.

"You gave him his full share all right," Carson was saying. "I guess you are playing square with us. I'll take mine now."

He lay down on the operating table and the dwarf

fitted an anesthesia cone over his face and opened the valve of the gas cylinder. In a moment he closed it and rolled the unconscious man on his face and deftly inserted the long needle. Instead of injecting a portion of the contents of the syringe as Dr. Bird had expected to do, he drew back on the plunger for a minute and then took out the needle and held the syringe to the light.

"Well, Mr. Carson," he said with a malignant glance at the unconscious figure, "that recovers the dose you got a couple of weeks ago while Willis watched me. I don't think you really need any menthium; your brain is too active to suit me as it is."

He gave an evil chuckle and walked to the far side of the cave and opened a secret panel. He drew from a recess a flask and carefully emptied a portion of the contents of the syringe into it. He replaced the flask and closed the panel, and with another chuckle he limped over to a chair and threw himself down in it. For an hour he sat motionless and Dr. Bird carefully worked his way back along the branch and climbed the rope and started for the hollow.

A faint whirring noise attracted his attention, and he could see the faintly luminous globe in the distance, rapidly approaching. It came to a stop at the spot where it had previously landed and four men got out. Instead of going toward the cave, they towed the globe, which floated a few inches from the earth, toward the side of the hill farthest from where the doctor stood. Three of them held it, while the fourth went forward and bent over some controls on the ground. A creaking sound came through the night and the men moved forward with the globe. Presently its movement stopped and men reappeared. Again came the creaking sound and the glow faded out as though a screen had been drawn in front of it. The four men walked toward the door of the cave.

Dr. Bird dropped flat on the ground and saw them pause a few yards below him on the hill and again work some hidden controls. A glare of light showed for an instant and they disappeared and everything was again quiet. Dr. Bird debated the advisability of returning to the window but decided against it and moved down the face of the hill.

Inch by inch he went over the ground, but found nothing. In the darkness he could not locate the door and he made his way around to the back of the hill. The precipice loomed above him and he swept it with his gaze, but he could locate no opening in the darkness and he dared not use a flash-light. As he turned he faced the east and noted with a start of surprise that the sky was getting red. He glanced at his watch and found that Carnes had been gone for nearly three hours.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Time has gone faster than I realized. He ought to be back at any time now."

He mounted the highest point of the hill and sent three long flashes, followed in turn by three short and three more long to the south and watched eagerly for an answer. He waited five minutes and repeated the signal, but no answering flashes came from the empty hills. With a grunt which might have meant anything, he turned and made his way toward the opposite side of the hollow where the globe had disappeared. Here he met with more luck. He had marked the location

with extreme care and he had not spent over twenty minutes feeling over the ground before his hand encountered a bit of metal. As he pulled on it his eyes sought the side of the hill.

The dawn had grown sufficiently bright for him to see the result of his action. A portion of the hill folded back and the faintly glowing ship became visible. With a muttered exclamation of triumph he approached it.

The globe was about nine feet in diameter and was without visible doors or windows. Around and around it the doctor went, searching for an entrance. The ship now rested solidly on the ground. He failed to find what he sought and his sensitive hands began to go over it searching for an irregularity. He had covered nearly half of it before his finger found a hidden button and pressed it. Silently a door in the side of the craft opened and he advanced to enter.

"Keep them up!" said a sharp voice behind him.

Dr. Bird froze into instant immobility and the voice

spoke again.

"Turn around!"

Dr. Bird turned and looked full into the eye of a revolver held by the man the dwarf had addressed as Frink. Behind Frink stood the dwarf and three other men.

As his eye fell on Dr. Bird, Frink turned momentarily pale and staggered back, the revolver wavering as he did so. Dr. Bird made a lightning-like grab for his own weapon, but before he could draw it Frink had recovered and the revolver was again steady.

"Dr. Bird!" gasped Slavatsky. "Impossible!"

"Get his gun, Harris," said Frink.

One of the men stepped forward and dextrously removed the doctor's automatic and frisked him expertly to insure himself that he had no other weapon concealed.

"Bring him to the cave," directed Slavatsky, who, though obviously still shaken, had just as obviously recovered enough to be a very dangerous man. Two of the men grasped the doctor and led him along toward the entrance to the laboratory cave which stood wide open in the gathering daylight. Frink paused long enough to shut the side of the hill and conceal the ship, and then followed the doctor. In the cave the door was shut and the doctor placed against the wall under the window through which he had peered earlier in the night. Slavatsky took his seat at the table, his malignant black eyes boring into the Doctor. Carson and Willis sat on the edge of the operating table, evidently still partially under the effects of the anesthetic that had been administered to them.

"How did you get back here?" demanded Slavatsky.

"Find out!" snapped Dr. Bird.

The dwarf rose threateningly.

"Speak respectfully to me; I am the Master of the World!" he roared in an angry voice. "Answer my

questions when I speak, or means will be found to make you answer. How did you get back here?"

Dr. Bird maintained a stubborn silence, his fierce eyes answering the dwarf's, look for look, and his prominent chin jutting out a little more squarely. Carson suddenly broke the silence.

"That's not the Bird we had here earlier," he cried as he staggered to his feet.

"What do you mean?" demanded Slavatsky whirling on him.

"Look at his hands!" replied Carson pointing.

Slavatsky looked at Dr. Bird's long mobile fingers and an evil leer came over his countenance.

"So, Dr. Bird," he said slowly, "you thought to match wits with Ivan Slavatsky, the greatest mind of all the ages. For a time you fooled me when your double was operated on here, but not for long. I presume you thought that we had no way of detecting the

substitution? You have discovered differently. Where is your friend, Mr. Carnes?"

"Didn't your men leave him in the cabin when you kidnapped me?"

Slavatsky looked at Frink inquiringly.

"He stayed in the cabin if he was in it when we got there," the leader of the kidnapping gang replied. "He got a full shot of lethane and he's due to be asleep yet. I don't know how this man recovered. I left him there myself."

"Fool!" shrieked Slavatsky. "You brought me a double, a dummy whom I wasted my time in operating on. Was the other a dummy, too?"

"I didn't enter the cabin."

Slavatsky shrugged his shoulders.

"If that is all the good the menthium I have injected has done you, I might as well have saved it. It doesn't

matter, however: we have the one we wanted. Dr. Bird, it was very thoughtful of you to come here and offer your marvelous brain to strengthen mine. I have no doubt that you will yield even more menthium than Professor Williams did this evening especially as I will extract your entire supply and reduce you to permanent idiocy. I will have no mercy on you as I have on the others I have operated on."

Dr. Bird blanched in spite of himself at the ominous words.

"You have the whip-hand for the moment, Slavatsky, but my time may come—and if it does, I will remember your kindness. I saw your operation on Professor Williams this evening and know your power. I also know that you stole the idea and the method from Sweigert of Vienna. I saw you inject the fluid you drew into Willis' brain. Shall I tell what else I saw?"

It was the dwarf's turn to blanch, but he recovered himself quickly.

"Into the chair with him!" he roared.

Three of the men grasped the doctor and forced him into the chair and Slavatsky started the generator. The violet light bathed Dr. Bird's head and he felt a stiffness and contraction of his neck muscles, and as he tried to shout out his knowledge of Slavatsky's treachery, he found that his vocal chords were paralyzed. Through a gathering haze he could see Carson approaching with an anesthesia cone and the sweet smell of lethane assailed his nostrils. He fought with all his force, but strong hands held him, and he felt himself slipping—slipping—slipping—and then falling into an immense void. His head slumped forward on his chest and Slavatsky shut off the generator.

"On the table," he said briefly.

Four men picked up the herculean frame of the unconscious doctor and hoisted him up on the table. Carson seized his head and bent it forward and the dwarf took from a case a syringe with a five-inch needle. He touched the point of it to the base of the doctor's brain.

"Slavatsky! Look!" cried Frink.

With an exclamation of impatience the dwarf turned and stared at a disc set on the wall of the cave. It was glowing brightly. With an oath he dropped the syringe and snapped a switch, plunging the cave into darkness. A tiny panel in the door opened to his touch and he stared out into the light.

"Soldiers!" he gasped. "Quick, the back way!"

As he spoke there came a sound as of a heavy body falling at the back of the cave. Slavatsky turned the switch and flooded the cave with light. At the back of the cave stood Operative Carnes, an automatic pistol in his hand.

"Open the main door!" Carnes snapped.

Slavatsky made a move toward the light, and Carnes' gun roared deafeningly in the confined space. The heavy bullet smashed into the wall an inch from the dwarf's hand and he started back.

"Open the main door!" ordered Carnes again.

The men stared at one another for a moment and the dwarf's eyes fell.

"Open the door, Frink," he said.

Frink moved over to a lever. He glanced at Slavatsky and a momentary gleam of intelligence passed between them. Frink raised his hand toward the lever and Carnes gun roared again and Frink's arm fell limp from a smashed shoulder.

"Slavatsky," said Carnes sternly, "come here!"

Slowly the dwarf approached.

"Turn around!" said Carnes.

He turned and felt the cold muzzle of Carnes' gun against the back of his neck.

"Now tell one of your men to open the door," said the detective. "If he promptly obeys your order, you are

safe. If he doesn't, you die."

Slavatsky hesitated for a moment, but the cold muzzle of the automatic bored into the back of his neck and when he spoke it was in a quavering whine.

"Open the door, Carson," he whimpered.

There was moment of pause.

"If that door isn't open by the time I count three," said Carnes, "—as far as Slavatsky is concerned, it's just too bad. I'll have four shots left—and I'm a dead shot at this range. One! Two!"

His lips framed the word "three" and his fingers were tightening on the trigger when Carson jumped forward with an oath. He pulled a lever on the wall and the door swung open. Carnes shouted and through the opened door came a half dozen marines followed by an officer.

"Tie these men up!" snapped Carnes.

In a trice the six men were securely bound and Frink's bleeding shoulder was being skilfully treated by two of the marines. Carnes turned his attention to the unconscious doctor.

He rolled him over on his back and began to chafe his hands. An officer in a naval uniform came through the door and with a swift glance around, bent over Dr. Bird. He raised one of the doctor's eyelids and peered closely at his eye and then sniffed at his breath.

"It's some anesthetic I don't know," he said. "I'll try a stimulant."

He reached in his pocket for a hypodermic, but Carnes interrupted him.

"Earlier in the evening Dr. Bird said they were using lethane," he said.

"Oh, that new gas the Chemical Warfare Service has discovered," said the surgeon. "In that case I guess it'll just have to wear off. I know of nothing that will neutralize it."

Without replying, Carnes began to feverishly search the pockets of the unconscious scientist. With an exclamation of triumph he drew out a bottle and uncorked it. A strong smell as of garlic penetrated the room and he held the opened bottle under Dr. Bird's nose. The doctor lay for a moment without movement, and then he coughed and sat up half strangled with tears running down his face.

"Take that confounded bottle away, Carnes!" he said.
"Do you want to strangle me?"

He sat up and looked around.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Oh, yes, I remember now. That brute was about to operate on me. How did you get here?"

"Never mind that, Doctor. Are you all right?"

"Right as a trivet, old dear. How did you get here so opportunely?"

"I was a little slow in locating Lieutenant Maynard

and the marines. When we got here I was afraid that we couldn't find the door, so I took Maynard and a detail around to the back and I went up to the top and slid down our cord and looked in the window. You were unconscious and Slavatsky was bending over you with a needle in his hand. I was about to try a shot at him when something called their attention to the men in front and I squeezed through the window and dropped in on them. They didn't seem any too glad to see me, but I overlooked that and insisted on inviting the rest of my friends in to share in the party. That's all."

"Carnes," said the Doctor, "you're probably lying like a trooper when you make out that you did nothing, but I'll pry the truth out of you sooner or later. Now I've got to get to work. Send for Lieutenant Maynard."

One of the marines went out to get the flyer, and Dr. Bird stepped to the cabinet from which Slavatsky had taken his record book earlier in the evening and took out the leather-bound volume. He opened it and had started to read when Lieutenant Maynard entered the cave.

"Hello, Maynard," said the Doctor, looking up. "Are the rest of the party on their way?"

"They will be here in less than two hours, Doctor."

"Good enough! Have some one sent to guide them here. In the meanwhile, I'm going to study these records. Keep the prisoners quiet. If they make a noise, gag them. I want to concentrate."

For an hour and a half silence reigned in the cave. A stir was heard outside and Admiral Clay, the President's personal physician, entered leading a stout gray-haired man. Dr. Bird whistled when he saw them and leaped to his feet as another figure followed the admiral.

"The President!" gasped Carnes as the officers came to a salute and the marines presented arms.

The President nodded to his ex-guard, acknowledged the salute of the rest and turned to Dr. Bird.

"Have you met with success, Doctor?" he asked.

"I have, Mr. President; or, rather, I hope that I have. At the same time, I would rather experiment on some other victim of their deviltry than the one you have brought me."

"My decision that the one I have brought shall be the first to be experimented on, as you term it, is unalterable."

Dr. Bird bowed and turned to the dwarf who had been a sullen witness of what had gone on.

"Slavatsky," he said slowly, "your game is up. I have witnessed one of your brain transfusions and I know the method. I gather from your notes that the menthium you have hidden in that cabinet is still as potent as when it was first extracted from a living brain, but in this case I am going to draw it fresh from one of your gang. Some of the details of the operation are a little hazy to me, but those you will teach me. I am going to restore this man to the condition he was in before you did your devil's work on him and you will direct my movements. Just what is the first step in removing the menthium from a brain?"

The dwarf maintained a stubborn silence.

"You refuse to answer?" asked the Doctor in feigned surprise. "I thought that you would rather instruct me and have me try the operation first on other men. Since you prefer that I operate on you first, I will be glad to do so."

He stepped to the opposite wall and in a few moments had opened the dwarf's hiding place and taken out the flask of menthium.

"Carson," he said, "after you had watched Slavatsky inject menthium into Willis, you took lethane and expected him to inject menthium into your brain. Instead of doing so he withdrew a portion from your brain and put it in this flask. I have reason to believe from his secret records which I found in the cabinet with this flask that he has done so regularly. Are you willing to instruct me while I remove the menthium from him?"

"The dirty swine!" shouted Carson. "I'll do anything to get even with him, but I have never performed the

operation. Only Slavatsky and Willis have operated."

"Will you help me, Willis? asked Dr. Bird.

"I'll be glad to, Doctor. I am sick of this business anyway. At first, Slavatsky just planned to give us abnormally keen brains, but lately he has been talking of setting himself up as Emperor of the World, and I am sick of it. I think I would have broken with him and told all I know, soon, anyway."

"Throw him in that chair," said Dr. Bird.

Despite the howlings and strugglings of the dwarf, three of the marines strapped him in the chair beneath the tube. The dwarf howled and frothed at the mouth and directed a final appeal for mercy to the President.

"Spare me, Your Excellency," he howled. "I will put my brains at your service and make you the greatest mentality of all time. Together we can conquer and rule the world. I will show you how to build hundreds of ships like mine—"

The President turned his back on the dwarf and spoke curtly.

"Proceed with your experiments, Dr. Bird," he said.

Slavatsky directed his appeals to the doctor, who peremptorily silenced him.

"I told you a few hours ago, Slavatsky, that the time might come when I would remember your threats against me. I will show you the same mercy now as you promised me then. Carnes, put a cone over his face."

Despite the howls of the dwarf, the operative forced an anesthesia cone over his face and Dr. Bird turned to the valve of the lethane cylinder. With Willis directing his movements, he turned on the ray for three minutes and removed the unconscious dwarf to the operating table. He took the long-needed syringe from a case and sterilized it and then turned to the President.

"I am about to operate," he said, "but before I do so, I

wish to explain to all just what I have learned and what I am about to do. With that data, the decision of whether I shall proceed will rest with you and Admiral Clay. Have I your permission to do so?"

The President nodded.

"When I first read of these amnesia cases, I took them for coincidences—until you consulted me and gave me an opportunity to examine one of the victims. I found a small puncture at the base of the brain which I could not explain, and I began to dig into old records. I knew, of course, of Sweigert of Vienna, and the extravagant claims he had put forward in 1911. He was far ahead of his time, but he mixed up some profound scientific discoveries with mysticism and occultism until he was discredited. Nevertheless, he continued his experiments with the aid of his principal assistant, a man named Slavatsky.

"Sweigert's theory was that intellectuality, brain power, intelligence, call it what you will, was the result of the presence of a fluid which he called 'menthium' in the brain. He thought that it could be

transferred from one person to another, and with the aid of Slavatsky, he experimented on himself. He removed the menthium from an unfortunate victim, who was reduced to a state of imbecility, and Slavatsky injected the substance into Sweigert's brain. The experiment resulted fatally and Slavatsky was tried for murder. He was acquitted of intentional murder but was imprisoned for a time for manslaughter. He was released when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up, and for a time I lost track of him.

"I found translations of both the records of the trials and of Sweigert's original reports, and the thing that attracted my attention was that the puncture I found in the victim corresponded exactly with the puncture described by Sweigert as the one he made in extracting the menthium. I asked the immigration authorities to check over their records and they found that a man named Slavatsky whose description corresponded with the ill-fated Sweigert's assistant had entered the United States under Austria's quota about a year ago. The chain of evidence seemed

complete to me, and it only remained to find the man who was systematically robbing brains.

"If such a thing was really going on, I felt that my reputation would make me an attractive bait and I secured a double, as you know, and placed him in a position where his kidnapping would be an easy matter. I was sure that the victims were being taken away by air and that lethane was being used to reduce the neighborhood to a state of profound somnolence, so I hid myself near my double with a gas detector which would find even minute traces of lethane in the air.

"My fish rose to the lure and came after the bait last night. When his ship arrived, I found a strange gas in the air, and followed the ship by the trail of the substance which it left behind it. Carnes was with me, and we got here in time to witness the extraction of the menthium from my friend, Professor Williams of Yale, and to see it injected into one of Slavatsky's gang. I sent Carnes for help and messed around until I was captured myself—and help arrived just in time. That's about all there is to tell. I am now about to

reverse the process and try to remove the stolen brains from the criminals and restore them to their rightful owners. I have never operated and the result may be fatal. Shall I proceed?"

The President and Admiral Clay consulted for a moment in undertones.

"Go on with your experiments, Dr. Bird," said the President, "and we will hold you blameless for a failure. You have worked so many miracles in the past that we have every confidence in you."

Dr. Bird bowed acknowledgment to the compliment and bent over the unconscious dwarf. With Willis directing every move, he inserted the needle and drew back slowly on the plunger. Twenty-three and one-half cubic centimeters of amber fluid flowed into the syringe before a speck of blood appeared.

"Enough!" cried Willis. Dr. Bird withdrew the syringe and motioned to Admiral Clay. The man the Admiral had brought in was placed in the chair and lethane administered. He was laid on the table, and, with a

silent prayer, Dr. Bird inserted the needle and pressed the plunger. When five and one-quarter centimeters had flowed into the man's brains, he withdrew the needle and held the bottle which Carnes had used to revive him under the man's nose. The patient coughed a moment and sat up.

"Where am I?" he demanded. His gaze roved the cave and fell on the President. "Hello, Robert," he exclaimed. "What has happened?"

With a cry of joy the President sprang forward and wrung the hand of the man.

"Are you all right, William?" he asked anxiously. "Do you feel perfectly normal?"

"Of course I do. My neck feels a little stiff. What are you talking about? Why shouldn't I feel normal? How did I get here?"

"Take him outside, Admiral, and explain to him," said the President.

Admiral Clay led the puzzled man outside and the President turned to Dr. Bird.

"Doctor," he said, "I need not tell you that I again add my personal gratitude to the gratitude of a nation which would be yours, could the miracles you work be told off. If there is ever any way that can serve you, either personally or officially, do not hesitate to ask. The other victims will be brought here to-day. Will you be able to restore them?"

"I will, Mr. President. From Slavatsky's records I find that I will have enough if I reduce all of his men to a state of imbecility except Willis. In view of his assistance, I propose to leave him with enough menthium to give him the intelligence of an ordinary schoolboy."

"I quite approve of that," said the President as Willis humbly expressed his gratitude. "Have you had time to make an examination of that ship of Slavatsky's, yet?"

"I have not. As soon as the work of restoration is

completed, I will go over it, and when I master the principles I will be glad to take them up with the Army-Navy General Board."

"Thank you, Doctor," said the President. He shook hands heartily and left the cave. Carnes turned and looked at the Doctor.

"Will you answer a question, Doctor?" he asked. "Ever since this case started, I have been wondering at your extraordinary powers. You have ordered the army, the navy, the department of justice and everyone else around as though you were an absolute monarch. I know the President was behind you, but what puzzles me is how he came to be so vitally interested in the case."

Dr. Bird smiled quizzically at the detective.

"Even the secret service doesn't know everything," he said. "Evidently you didn't recognize the man whose memory I restored. Besides being one of the most brilliant corporation executives in the country, he has another unique distinction. He happens to be the only

brother of the President of the United States."

#52 The Invisible Death, By Victor Rousseau Emanuel:

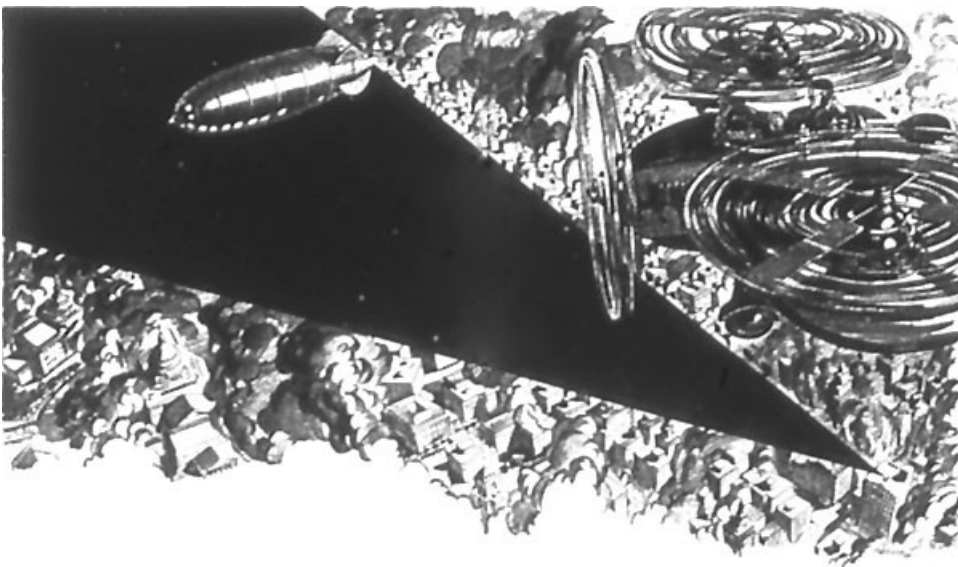
With night-rays and darkness-antidote, America strikes back at the terrific and destructive invisible empire.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

far overhead a



Chapter 1: *Out of the Hangman's Hands*

"You speak," said Von Kettler, jeering, "as if you really believed that you had the power of life and death over me."

With night-rays and darkness-antidote America strikes back at the terrific and destructive Invisible Empire.

The Superintendent of the penitentiary frowned, yet there was something of perplexity in the look he gave the prisoner. "Von Kettler, I think it is time that you dropped this absurd pose of yours," he said, "in view of the fact that you are scheduled to die by hanging at eight o'clock to-morrow night. Your life and death are in your own hands."

Von Kettler bowed ironically. Standing in the Superintendent's presence in the uniform of the condemned cell, collarless, bare-headed, he yet seemed to dominate the other by a certain poise, breeding, nonchalance.

"Your life is offered you in consideration of your making a complete written confession of the whole ramifications of the plot against the Federal Government," the Superintendent continued.

"Rather a confession of weakness, my dear Superintendent," jeered the prisoner.

"Oh don't worry about that! The Government has unravelled a good deal of the conspiracy. It knows that you and your international associates are planning to strike at civilized government throughout the world, in the effort to restore the days of autocracy. It knows you are planning a world federation of states, based on the principles of absolutism and aristocracy. It is aware of the immense financial resources behind the movement. Also that you have obtained the use of certain scientific discoveries which you believe will aid you in your schemes."

"I was wondering," jeered the prisoner, "how soon you were coming to that."

"They didn't help you in your murderous scheme," the Superintendent thundered. "You were found in the War Office by the night watchman, rifling a safe of valuable documents. You shot him with a pistol equipped with a silencer. You shot down two more who, hearing his cries, rushed to his aid. And you attempted to stroll out of the building, apparently under the belief that you possessed mysterious power which would afford you security."

"A little lapse of judgment such as may happen with the best laid plans," smiled Von Kettler. "No, Superintendent, I'll be franker with you than that. My capture was designed. It was decided to give the Government an object lesson in our power. It was resolved that I should permit myself to be captured, in order to demonstrate that you cannot hang me, that I have merely to open the door of my cell, the gates of this penitentiary, and walk out to freedom."

"Have you quite finished?" rasped the Superintendent.

"At your disposal," smiled the other.

"Here's your last chance, Von Kettler. Your persistence in this absurd claim has actually shaken the expressed conviction of some of the medical examiners that you are sane. If you will make that complete written confession that the Government asks of you, I pledge you that you shall be declared insane to-night, and sent to a sanitarium from which you will be permitted to escape as soon as this affair has blown over."

"The United States Government has sunk pretty low, to involve itself in a deal of this character, don't you think, my dear Superintendent?" jeered Von Kettler.

"The Government is prepared to act as it thinks best in the interests of humanity. It knows that the death of one wretched murderer such as yourself is not worth the lives of thousands of innocent men!"

"And there," smiled Von Kettler, without abating an atom of his nonchalance, "there, my dear Superintendent, you hit the nail on the head. Only, instead of thousands, you might have said millions."

Von Kettler's aspect changed. Suddenly his eyes blazed, his voice shook with excitement, his face was the face of a fanatic, of a prophet.

"Yes, millions, Superintendent," he thundered. "It is a holy cause that inspires us. We know that it is our sacred mission to save the world from the drabness of modern democracy. The people—always the people! Bah! what are the lives of these swarming millions worth when compared with a Caesar, a Napoleon, an Alexander, a Charlemagne? Nothing can stop us or defeat us. And you, with your confession of defeat, your petty bargaining—I laugh at you!"

"You'll laugh on the gallows to-morrow night!" the Superintendent shouted.

Again Von Kettler was the calm, superior, arrogant prisoner of before. "I shall never stand on the gallows trap, my dear Superintendent, as I have told you many times," he replied. "And, since we have reached what diplomacy calls a deadlock, permit me to return to my cell."

The Superintendent pressed a button on his desk; the guards, who had been waiting outside the office, entered hastily. "Take this man back," he commanded, and Von Kettler, head held high, and smiling, left the room between them.

The Superintendent pressed another button, and his assistant entered, a rugged, red-haired man of forty—Anstruther, familiarly known as "Bull" Anstruther, the man who had in three weeks reduced the penitentiary from a place of undisciplined chaos to a model of law and order. Anstruther knew nothing of the Superintendent's offer to Von Kettler, but he knew that the latter had powerful friends outside.

"Anstruther, I'm worried about Von Kettler," said the Superintendent. "He actually laughed at me when I spoke of the possibility of another medical examination. He seemed confident that he could not be hanged. Swore that he will never stand on the gallows trap. How about your precautions for tomorrow night?"

"We've taken all possible precautions," answered

Anstruther. "Special armed guards have been posted at every entrance to the building. Detectives are patrolling all streets leading up to it. Every car that passes is being scrutinized, its plate numbers taken, and forwarded to the Motor Bureau. There's no chance of even an attempt at rescue—literally none."

"He's insane," said the Superintendent, with conviction, and the words filled him with new confidence. It had been less Von Kettler's statements than the man's cool confidence and arrogant superiority that had made him doubt. "But he's not too insane to have known what he was doing. He'll hang."

"He certainly will," replied Anstruther. "He's just a big bluff, sir."

"Have him searched rigorously again to-morrow morning, and his cell too—every inch of it, Anstruther. And don't relax an iota of your precautions. I'll be glad when it's all over."

He proceeded to hold a long-distance conversation

with Washington over a special wire.

In his cell, Von Kettler could be seen reading a book. It was Nietzsche's "Thus Spake Zarathustra," that compendium of aristocratic insolence that once took the world by storm, until the author's mentality was revealed by his commitment to a mad-house. Von Kettler read till midnight, closely observed by the guard at the trap, then laid the word aside with a yawn, lay down on his cot, and appeared to fall instantly asleep.

Dawn broke. Von Kettler rose, breakfasted, smoked the perfecto that came with his ham and eggs, resumed his book. At ten o'clock Bull Anstruther came with a guard and stripped him to the skin, examining every inch of his prison garments. The bedding followed; the cell was gone over microscopically. Von Kettler, permitted to dress again, smiled ironically. That smile stirred Anstruther's gall.

"We know you're just a big bluff, Von Kettler," snarled the big man. "Don't think you've got us going. We're just taking the usual precautions, that's all."

"So unnecessary," smiled Von Kettler. "To-night I shall dine at the Ambassador grill. Watch for me there. I'll leave a memento."

Anstruther went out, choking. Early in the afternoon two guards came for Von Kettler.

"Your sister's come to say good-by to you," he was told, as he was taken to the visitors' cell.

This was a large and fairly comfortable cell in a corridor leading off the death house, designed to impress visitors with the belief that it was the condemned man's permanent abode; and, by a sort of convention, it was understood that prisoners were not to disabuse their visitors' minds of the idea. The convention had been honorably kept. The visitor's approach was checked by a grill, with a two-yards space between it and the bars of the cell. Within this space a guard was seated: it was his duty to see that nothing passed.

As soon as Von Kettler had been temporarily established in his new quarters, a pretty, fair-haired

young woman came along the corridor, conducted by the Superintendent himself. She walked with dignity, her bearing was proud, she smiled at her brother through the grill, and there was no trace of weeping about her eyes.

She bowed with pretty formality, and Von Kettler saluted her with an airy wave of the hand. Then they began to speak, and the German guard who had been selected for the purpose of interpreting to the Superintendent afterward, was baffled.

It was not German—neither was it French, Italian, or any of the Romance languages. As a matter of fact, it was Hungarian.

Not until the half-hour was up did they lapse into English, and all the while they might have been conversing on art, literature, or sport. There was no hint of tragedy in this last meeting.

"Good-by, Rudy," smiled his sister, "I'll see you soon."

"To-night or to-morrow," replied Von Kettler

indifferently.

The girl blew him a kiss. She seemed to detach it from her mouth and extend it through the grill with a graceful gesture of the hand, and Von Kettler caught it with a romantic wave of the fingers and strained it to his heart. But it was only one of those queer foreign ways. Nothing was passed. The alert guard, sitting under the electric light, was sure of that.

They searched Von Kettler again after he was back in the death house. The other cells were empty. In three of them detectives were placed. In the yard beyond the hangman was experimenting with the trap. He himself was under close observation. Nothing was being left to chance.

At seven o'clock two men collided in the death-house entrance. One was a guard, carrying Von Kettler's last meal on a tray. He had demanded Perigord truffles and paté de foie gras, cold lobster, endive salad, and near-beer, and he had got them. The other was the chaplain, in a state of visible agitation.

"If he was an atheist and mocked at me it wouldn't be so bad," the good man declared. "I've had plenty of that kind. But he says he's not going to be hanged. He's mad, mad as a March hare. The Government has no right to send an insane man to the gallows."

"All bluff, my dear Mr. Wright," answered the Superintendent, when the chaplain voiced his protest. "He thinks he can get away with it. The commission has pronounced him sane, and he must pay the penalty of his crime."

By that mysterious process of telegraphy that exists in all penal institutions, Von Kettler's boast that he would beat the hangman had become the common information of the inmates. Bets were being laid, and the odds against Von Kettler ranged from ten to fifteen to one. It was generally agreed, however, that Von Kettler would die game to the last.

"You all ready, Mr. Squires?" the prowling Superintendent asked the hangman.

"Everything's O. K., sir."

The Superintendent glanced at the group of newspaper men gathered about the gallows. They, too, had heard of the prisoner's boast. One of them asked him a question. He silenced him with an angry look.

"The prisoner is in his cell, and will be led out in ten minutes. You shall see for yourselves how much truth there is in this absurdity," he said.

He looked at his watch. It lacked five minutes of eight. The preparations for an execution had been reduced almost to a formula. One minute in the cell, twenty seconds to the trap, forty seconds for the hangman to complete his arrangements: two minutes, and then the thud of the false floor.

Four minutes of eight. The little group had fallen silent. The hangman furtively took a drink from his hip-pocket flask. Three minutes! The Superintendent walked back to the door of the death house and nodded to the guard.

"Bring him out quick!" he said.

The guard shot the bolt of Von Kettler's cell. The Superintendent saw him enter, heard a loud exclamation, and hurried to his side. One glance told him that the prisoner had made good his boast.

Von Kettler's cell was empty!

Chapter 2: Conference

Captain Richard Rennell, of the U. S. Air Service, but temporarily detached to Intelligence, thought that Fredegonde Valmy had never looked so lovely as when he helped her out of the cockpit.

Her dark hair fell in disorder over her flushed cheeks, and her eyes were sparkling with pleasure.

"A thousand thanks, M'sieur Rennell," she said, in her low voice with its slight foreign intonation. "Never have I enjoyed a ride more than to-day. And I shall see you at Mrs. Wansleigh's ball to-night?"

"I hope so—if I'm not wanted at Headquarters," answered Dick, looking at the girl in undisguised admiration.

"Ah, that Headquarters of yours! It claims so much of your time!" she pouted. "But these are times when the Intelligence Service demands much of its men, is it not so?"

"Who told you I was attached to Intelligence?" demanded Dick bluntly.

She laughed mockingly. "Do you think that is not known all over Washington?" she asked. "It is strange that Intelligence should act like the—the ostrich, who buries his head in the sand and thinks that no one sees him because it is hidden."

Dick looked at the girl in perplexity. During the past month he had completely lost his head and heart over her, and he was trying to view her with the dispassionate judgment that his position demanded.

As the niece of the Slovakian Ambassador, Mademoiselle Valmy had the entry to Washington society. The Ambassador was away on leave, and she had appeared during his absence, but she had been accepted unquestionably at the Embassy, where she had taken up her quarters, explaining—as the Ambassador confirmed by cable—that she had sailed under a misconception as to the date of his leave.

Brunette, beautiful, charming, she had a score of

hearts to play with, and yet Dick flattered himself that he stood first. Perhaps the others did too.

"Of course," the girl went on, "with the Invisible Emperor threatening organized society, you gentlemen find yourselves extremely busy. Well, let us hope that you locate him and bring him to book."

"Sometimes," said Dick slowly, "I almost think that you know something about the Invisible Emperor."

Again she laughed merrily. "Now, if you had said that my sympathies were with the Invisible Emperor, I might have been surprised into an acknowledgment," she answered. "After all, he does stand for that aristocracy that has disappeared from the modern world, does he not? For refinement of manners, for beauty of life, for all those things men used to prize."

"Likewise for the existence of the vast body of the nation in ignorance and poverty, in filth and squalor," answered Dick. "No, my sympathies are with law and order and democracy, and your Invisible Emperor and his crowd are simply a gang of thieves and hold-up

men."

"Be careful!" A warning fire burned in the girl's eyes.

"At least, it is known that the Emperor's ears are long."

"So are a jackass's," retorted Dick.

He was sorry next moment, for the girl received his answer in icy silence. In his car, which conveyed them from the tarmac to the Embassy, she received all his overtures in the same silence. A frigid little bow was her farewell to him, while Dick, struggling between resentment and humiliation, sat dumb and wretched at the wheel.

Yet the idea that Fredegonde Valmy had any knowledge of the conspiracy or its leaders never entered Dick's head. He was only miserable that he had offended her, and he would have done anything to have straightened out the trouble.

It seemed impossible that in the year 1940 the peace of the civilized world could be threatened by an

international conspiracy bent on restoring absolutism, and yet each day showed more clearly the immense ramifications of the plot. Each day, too, brought home to the investigating governments more clearly the fact that the things they had discovered were few in number in comparison with those they had not.

The headquarters of the conspirators had never been discovered, and it was suspected that the powerful mind behind them was intentionally leading the investigators along false trails.

The conspiracy was world-wide. It had been behind the revolution that had recreated an absolutist monarchy in Spain. It had plunged Italy into civil war. It had thrown England into the convulsions of a succession of general strikes, using the communist movement as a cloak for its activities.

But nobody dreamed that America could become a fertile field for its insidious propaganda. Yet it was behind the millions of adherents of the so-called Freeman's Party, clamoring for the destruction of the constitution. Upon the anarchy that would follow the

absolutist regime was to be erected.

Already the mysterious powers had struck.

Departments of State had been entered and important papers abstracted. The *Germania* had mysteriously disappeared in mid-Atlantic, and a shipping panic had ensued. There were tales of mysterious figures materializing out of nothingness. It was known that the conspirators were in possession of certain chemical and electrical devices with which they hoped to achieve their ends.

The Superintendent of the penitentiary had had in his pocket an authorization to stop the execution of Von Kettler after he stood on the trap. Dead, he would be a mere mark of vengeance: alive, he might be persuaded to furnish some clue to the headquarters of the miscreants.

And behind the conspirators loomed the unknown figure that signed itself the Invisible Emperor—in the communications that poured in to the White House and to the rulers of other nations. In the threats that were materializing with stunning swiftness.

Who was he? Rumor said that a former European ruler had not died as was supposed: that a coffin weighted with lead had been buried, and that he himself in his old age, had gone forth to a mad scheme of world conquest with a body of his nobles.

It had been practically a state of war since the shipment of gold, guarded by a detachment of police, had been stolen in broad daylight outside Baltimore, the police clubbed and killed by invisible assailants—as they claimed. The press was under censorship, troops under arms, and it was reported that the fleet was mobilizing.

In the midst of it all, Washington shopped, danced, feasted, flirted, like a swarm of may flies over a treacherous stream.

Intelligence was alert. As Dick started to drive away from the Slovakian Embassy, a man stepped quickly to the side of the car and thrust an envelope into his hand. Dick opened it quickly. He was wanted by Colonel Stopford at once, not at the camouflaged Headquarters at the War Department, but at the real

Headquarters where no papers were kept but weighty decisions were made. And to that devious course the Government had already been driven.

Dick parked his car in a side street—it would have been under espionage in any of the official parking places—and set off at a smart walk toward his destination. Nobody would have guessed, from the appearance of the streets, that a national calamity was impending. The shopping crowds were swarming along the sidewalks, cars tailed each other through the streets; only a detachment of soldiers on the White House lawn lent a touch of the martial to the scene.

The building which Dick entered was an ordinary ten-story one in the business section; the various legal firms and commercial concerns that occupied it would have been greatly surprised to have known the identity of the Ira T. Graves, Importer, whose name appeared in modest letters upon the opaque glass door on the seventh story. Inside a flapper stenographer—actually one of the most trusted members of Intelligence's staff—asked Dick's name,

which she knew perfectly well. Not a smile or a flicker of an eyelid betrayed the fact.

"Mr. Rennell," said Dick with equal gravity.

The girl passed into an inner room, and a buzzer sounded. In a few moments the girl came back.

"Mr. Graves will be here in a few minutes, Mr. Rennell, if you'll kindly wait in his office," she said.

Dick thanked her, and walked through into the empty office. He waited there till the girl had closed the door behind him, then went out by another door and found himself again in the corridor. Opposite him was a door with the words "Entrance 769" and a hand pointing down the corridor to where the Intelligence service had established another perfectly innocent front. Dick tapped lightly at this door, and a key turned in the lock.

The man who stepped quickly back was one of the heads of the Civil Service. The man at the flat-topped desk was Colonel Stopford. The man on a chair beside

him was one of the heads of the police force.

The Colonel, a big, elderly man, dressed in a grey sack suit, checked Dick's commencing salutation. "Never mind etiquette, Rennell," he said. "Sit down. You've heard about the man Von Kettler's escape last night, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's known, then. We can't keep things dark. He vanished from his cell in the death house, three minutes before the time appointed for his execution, though, as a matter of fact, he wasn't going to be hanged. Apparently he walked through the walls.

"There's a sequel to it, Rennell. It seems he had told the assistant-superintendent, a man named Anstruther, that he'd meet him at a restaurant in town that night. He promised to leave him a memento. Anstruther happened to remember this boast of Von Kettler's, and he surrounded the restaurant with armed detectives, on the chance that the fellow would show up. Rennell, *Von Kettler was there!*"

"He went to this restaurant, sir?"

"He walked in, just before the place was surrounded, engaged a table, and ordered a sumptuous meal. He told the waiter his name, said he expected a friend to join him, walked into the wash-room—and vanished! Two minutes later Anstruther and his men were on the job. Von Kettler never came out of the wash-room, so far as anybody knows.

"In the midst of the hue and cry somebody pointed to the table that Von Kettler had engaged. There was a twenty-dollar bill upon it, and a scrap of paper reading: 'I've kept my word. Von K.'"

Colonel Stopford looked at Dick fixedly. "Rennell, we may be fools," he said, "but we realize what we're up against. It's a big thing, and we're going to need all our fighting grit to overcome it. You're one of the four men we're depending on. We're counting on you because of your record, and because of your degree in science at Heidelberg. The President wishes you to take charge of the whole Eastern Intelligence District, covering the entire south-eastern seaboard of the

United States. You are to have complete freedom of action, and all civil, military, and naval officials have received instructions to co-operate with you."

"There goes Mrs. Wansleigh's ball," thought Dick, but he said nothing.

"We're not the hunters, Dick Rennell," went on Colonel Stopford. "We're hiding under cover, and I'm counting on you to turn the tables. They even know my office is here. I had a long distance call from Savannah this morning in mocking vein. They advised me to have the White House watched to-night. I warned the President, and we've posted guards all round it."

"They held the wire while you called up the President?" asked Dick.

"Damn it, no! They called me up from Scranton the instant he'd finished speaking. They have the power of the devil, Rennell, with that infernal invisibility invention of theirs. Rennell, we're fighting unknown forces. Who this Invisible Emperor is, we don't even

know. But one thing we've found out. He has his headquarters somewhere in your district. Somewhere along the south Atlantic seaboard. The greater part of his activities emanate from there. But we're fighting in the dark. The clue, the master clue that will enable us to locate him—that's what we lack."

The sun had set, it was beginning to grow dark. Colonel Stopford switched on the electric lamp beside his desk.

"What have you to say, Rennell?" he asked; and Dick was aware that the two other men were regarding him attentively.

"It's evident," said Dick, "that Von Kettler possessed this means of invisibility in his cell, and wasn't detected. He simply slipped out when the guard came to fetch him."

"Invisibility? Yes! But invisible's not the same thing as transparent," cried Stopford. "These folks have operated in broad daylight. They're transparent, damn them! Not even a shadow! You know what I

mean, Rennell! What I'm thinking of! That crazy man you were in touch with six months ago, who prophesied this! We turned him down! He showed me a watch and said the salvation of the world was inside the case! I thought him insane!"

"You mean Luke Evans, sir. That watch was his pocket model. He went off in a huff, saying the time would come when we'd want him and not be able to find him."

"But, damn him, he wanted to produce universal darkness, or some such nonsense, Rennell, and I told him that we wanted light, not darkness."

"It wasn't exactly that, sir." Colonel Stopford was a man of the old school: he had been an artillery officer in the Great War, and was characteristically impatient of new notions. Dick began carefully: "You'll remember, sir, old Evans claimed to have been the inventor of that shadow-breaking device that was stolen from him and sold in England."

"To a moving picture company!" snorted Stopford. "I

asked him what moving pictures had to do with war."

"Evans was convinced that the invention would be applied to war. He claimed that it made the modern methods of military camouflage out of date completely. He said that by destroying shadows one could produce invisibility, since visibility consists in the refraction of wave lengths by material objects.

"When they stole his invention, he foresaw that it would be used in war. He set to work to nullify his own invention. He told me that he had unintentionally given to the enemies of the United States a means of bringing us to our knees, since he believed that British motion picture company was actually a subsidiary of Krupp's. He worked out a method of counteracting it."

"You must get him, Rennell. Even if it's all nonsense, we can't afford to let any chance go. If Evans's invention will counteract this damned invisibility business—"

The telephone on the Colonel's desk rang. He picked

it up, and his face assumed an expression of incredulity. He looked about him, like a man bewildered. He beckoned to the police official, who hurried to his side, and thrust the receiver into his hand. The official listened.

"All right," he said. He turned to Dick and the Civil Service representative.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the President has disappeared from his office in the White House, and there are grave fears that he has been kidnapped!"

Chapter 3: In the White House

Colonel Stopford's car had been parked around the corner of the building, and within a minute the four men were inside it, Stopford at the wheel, and racing in the direction of the White House. A nod to the guard at the gate, and they were inside the grounds. At the entrance a single guard, in place of the four who should have been posted there, challenged sharply, and attempted to bar the way, not recognizing Dick or Stopford in their civilian clothes.

"Where's your officer?" demanded Stopford sharply.

Half-cowed by the Colonel's manner, the young recruit hesitated, and the four swept him out of the way and hurried on. The scene outside the main entrance to the White House was one of indescribable confusion. Soldiers were swarming in confused groups, some trying to force an entrance, others pouring out. Every moment civilians, streaming over the lawn, added to the number. Discipline seemed almost abandoned. From inside the building came outbursts of screams and cursing, the scuffling of a

mob.

"Roscoe! Roscoe!" shouted Stopford. "Where's the President's secretary? Who's seen him? Let us pass immediately!"

No one paid the least attention to him. But a short, bare-headed civilian, who was struggling in the crowd, heard, and shouted in answer, waved his arms, and began to force his way toward the four. It was Roscoe, the secretary of President Hargreaves. The President was a childless widower, and Roscoe lived in the White House with him and was intimately in his confidence.

Roscoe gained Stopford's side. "Say—they've got him!" he panted. "They've got him somewhere—inside the building. They're trying to get him out! We've got to save him—but we can't see them—or him. They've made him invisible too, curse them! I heard him crying, 'Help me, Roscoe!' He saw me, I tell you—and I didn't know where he was!"

The little secretary was almost incoherent with fear

and anger. The five men, forming a wedge, hurled themselves forward. Out of the White House entrance appeared a tall officer, revolver in hand. It was Colonel Simpson, of the President's staff. Half beside himself, he swept the weapon menacingly about him, shouting incoherently, and clearing a passage, into which the five hurled themselves.

Stopford seized his revolver hand, and after a brief struggle Simpson recognized him.

"He's in the building!" he shouted wildly. "Somewhere upstairs! I'm trying to form a cordon, but this damned mob's in the way. Kick those civilians out!" he cried to the soldiers. "Shoot them if they don't go! Guard the windows!"

Stopford and Dick, at the head of the wedge, pushed past into the White House. The interior was packed, men were struggling frantically on the staircase; it seemed hopeless to try to do anything.

Suddenly renewed yells sounded from above, a scream of anguish, howls of terror. There came a

downward surge, then a forward and upward one, which carried the two men up the stairs and into the President's private apartments above.

In the large reception-room a mob was struggling at a window, beneath a blaze of electric light. A soldier was standing there like a statue, his face fixed with a leer of horror. In his hands was a rifle, with a blood-stained bayonet, dripping upon the hardwood floor at the edge of the rug. Upon the rug itself a stream of blood was spouting out of the air.

Dick looked at the sight and choked. There was something appalling in the sight: it was the quintessence of horror, that widening pool of blood, staining the rug, and flowing from an invisible body that writhed and twisted, while moans of anguish came from unseen lips.

Colonel Stopford leaped back, livid and staring. "God, it's got eyes—two eyes!" he shouted.

Dick saw them too. The eyes, which alone were visible, were about six inches from the floor, and they

were appearing and disappearing, as they opened and shut alternately. It was a man lying there, a dying man, pierced by the soldier's bayonet by pure accident, dying and yet invisible.

The mob had scattered with shrieks of terror, but a few bolder spirits remained in a thin circle about that fearful thing on the rug. Dick bent over the man, and felt the outlines of the writhing body. It was a man, apparently dressed in some sort of uniform, but this was covered, from the top of the head to the feet, with a sort of sheer silken garment, bifurcating below the waist, and resembling a cocoon. It seemed to appear and alternately to vanish.

Dick seized the filmy stuff in his fingers, rent it, and stripped it away. Yells of terror and amazement broke from the throats of all. Instantly the thin circle of spectators had become reinforced by a struggling mass of men.

The half-visible cocoon clung to Dick's body like spider webs. But the man who had been wearing it had sprung instantly into view beneath the cluster of

electric lights. He was a fair-haired young fellow of about thirty years, his features white and set in the agony of death.

He was dressed in a trim uniform of black, with silver braid, and on his shoulders were the insignia of a lieutenant. He opened his eyes, blue as the skies, and stared about him. He seemed to understand what had happened to him.

"Dogs!" he muttered.

Shrieks of fury answered him. The mob surged toward him as if to grind his face to pieces under their feet—and then recoiled, mouthing and gibbering. But it was at Dick that they were looking, not at the dying man.

He raised himself upon one elbow with a mighty effort. "His Majesty the Invisible Emperor! Long be his reign triumphant!" he chanted. It was his last credo. The words broke from his lips accompanied by a torrent of red foam. His head dropped back, his body slipped down; he was gone. And no one seemed

to observe his passing. They were all screaming and gibbering at Dick.

"Rennell! Rennell!" yelled Stopford. "Where are you, Rennell? God, man, what's happened to your legs?"

Dick looked down at himself. For a moment he had the illusion that he was a head and a trunk, floating in the air. His lower limbs had become invisible, except for patches of trousering that seemed to drift through space. The mob in the room had fallen back gaping at him in horror.

Then Dick understood. It was the invisible garment that had coiled itself about him. He tore it from him and became visibly a man once more.

Shouts from another room! A surging movement of the crowd toward it. The muffled sounds of an automatic pistol, fitted with a silencer! Then screams:

"The devils are in there! They're murdering the soldiers!"

There followed a panic-stricken rush, more muffled firing, and then the sharp roar of rifles, and the fall of plaster. Some one was bawling the President's name. The rooms became a mass of milling human beings, lost to all self-control.

A bedlam of noise and struggle. Men fought with one another blindly, cursing soldiers fired promiscuously among the mob, riddling the walls, stabbing at the air. The plaster was falling in great chunks everywhere, filling the rooms with a heavy white cloud, in which all choked and struggled. The yells of the civilian mob below, struggling helplessly in the packed crowd that wedged the great stairway, made babel. Outside the White House a dense mob that filled the lawns was yelling back, and struggling to gain admittance. Suddenly the lights went out.

"They've cut the wires!" rose a wild, wailing voice.
"The devils have cut the wires! Kill them! Kill everybody!"

His cry ended in a gurgle. Somewhere in that dark hell a struggle was going on, a well defined struggle,

different from the random, aimless battling of the half-crazed soldiers and the civilians. President Hargreaves was still within the walls of the White House, it was known; it was physically impossible for him to have been carried away when every foot of space was packed. And through that darkness the invisible assailants were edging him, foot by foot, toward the outside.

Dick was on the edge of this silent battle. He sensed it. Bracing himself against a bureau, while the mob surged past him, he tried to pierce the gloom, to reinforce with his perceptions what his instinct told him. A soldier, crazed with fear, came leaping at him, bayonet leveled. He thrust with a grunt. Dick avoided the glancing steel by a hand's breadth, and, as the impetus of the man's attack carried him forward, caught him beneath the chin with a stiff right-hand jolt that sent him sprawling.

From below the cries broke out again, with renewed violence: "They've got the President! Get them! Get them! Close all doors and windows!"

But a door went crashing down somewhere, to the tune of savage yells. The mob was pouring down the stairs. It was growing less packed above. Dick heard Stopford's voice calling his name.

"Here, sir" he shouted back, and the two men collided.

"For God's sake do what you can, Rennell!" shouted the Colonel. "They've got the President downstairs. They had him in this very room, in the thick of it all. I heard him cry out, as if under a gag. They put one of those damned cloths over him. God, Rennell, I'm going crazy!"

The upper floor of the White House was almost empty now. Dick thrust himself into the crowd that still jammed the stairs. He reached the ground floor. It was lighter here, but a glance showed him that it was impossible to attempt to restore any semblance of order. The big East Room was jammed with a fighting, cursing throng. Dick stumbled over the bodies of those who had fallen in the press, or had been shot down. Outside the mob was thickening, swarming

through the grounds and screeching like madmen.

Nothing that could be done! Dick found himself caught once more in the human torrent. Presently he was wedged up against a broken window. He precipitated himself through the frame, dropped to the ground, stopped for an instant to catch breath.

The yelling mob was congregated about the main entrance of the White House, and on this side the grounds were comparatively empty. As Dick stopped, trying desperately to form some plan of action, he heard footsteps and low voices near him. Then two men came toward him, followed by three or four others.

The men—but, though the light was faint, Dick realized instantly that they were wearing invisible garments. He could see nothing of them; he could see through where they seemed to be—the trees, the buildings of the streets. Yet they were at his elbow. And they saw him. He heard one of them leap, and sprang aside as the butt of a pistol descended through the air and dropped where his head had

been.

Yet no hand had seemed to hold it. It had been a pistol, reversed, and flashing downward, to be arrested in mid-air six inches from his face. But the men were not wholly invisible. Nearly six feet above the ground, three or four pairs of eyes were staring malevolently into Dick's. Only the eyes were there.

The two foremost men were breathing heavily. They were carrying something. Grotesquely through a rent in the invisible garment Dick saw a patch of trouser. He heard a muffled sigh. President Hargreaves, in the hands of his abductors!

Dick's actions were reflex. As the pistol hung beside his face, he snatched at it, wrested it away, struck with it, and heard a curse and felt the yielding impact of bone and flesh. He had missed the head but struck the shoulder. Next moment hands gripped the weapon, and a desperate struggle began.

It was torn from Dick's grasp. He struck out at random, and his fist collided with the chin of a

substantial flesh and blood human being. Invisible arms grasped him. He fought free. The pistol slashed his face sidewise, the sight ripping a strip of flesh from the cheek. He was surrounded, he was being beaten down, though he was fighting gamely.

"Kill the swine! Shoot! Shoot!" Dick heard one of his assailants muttering.

Out of the void appeared the blue muzzle of another automatic, with a silencer on it. Dick ducked as a flame spurted from it. He felt the bullet stir his hair. He grasped at the hand that held it, and missed. Then he was held fast, and the muzzle swung implacably toward his head again. Helpless, he watched it describe that arc of death. It was only later that he wondered why he had fought all the while in silence, instead of crying for help.

But of a sudden the pistol was dashed aside. A woman's voice spoke peremptorily, in some language Dick did not understand. And he saw her eyes among the eyes that glared at him. Dark eyes that he knew, even if the voice had not revealed her identity. The

eyes and voice of Fredegonde Valmy!

Dick cried her name. He put forth all his strength in a final struggle. Suddenly he felt a stunning impact on the back of the head. He slipped, reeled, threw out his hands, and sank down unconscious on the grass at the side of the path.

Chapter 4: The Invisible Ambassador

Fredegonde Valmy implicated in the conspiracy! That was the first thought that flashed into Dick's mind as he recovered consciousness. He might have suspected it! But the idea that the girl he loved was bound up with the murderous gang that was attacking the very foundations of civilization chilled him to the soul.

Dick had been picked up a few minutes after he had been struck down, identified by Colonel Stopford as he was about to be removed to a hospital, and carried into the White House. Order had been restored by the arrival of a detachment of troops from Fort Myers, the severed cables located and mended, and by midnight the interior of the Presidential home had been made habitable again.

President Hargreaves was gone—kidnapped despite the utmost efforts to protect him; and it was impossible to conceal that fact from the world. But the wheels of government still revolved. All night an emergency council sat in the White House, and, deciding that in a time of such grave danger heroic

means must be adopted, with the consent of such of the Congressional leaders as could be summoned, a Council of Defence was organized.

The whole country east of the Mississippi was placed under martial law. The fleet and army were put on a war footing. Flights of airplanes were assembled at numerous points along the eastern seaboard. To this Council Donald was attached as head of Intelligence for the Eastern Division. Yet all this availed little unless the location of the Invisible Empire could be ascertained, and, despite telegraphic reports that came in hourly, alleging to have discovered its headquarters, nothing had been achieved in this direction.

The garment taken from the slain soldier had been examined by a half-dozen of the leading chemists of the East. Pending the arrival from New York of the celebrated Professor Hosmeyer, it was deposited under military guard in a dark closet. The result was unfortunate. The garment exhibited to the assembled scientists was a mere bifurcated silken bag.

The gas with which it had been impregnated, though it had been heavy enough to adhere to the fabric for hours, had also been volatile enough to have disappeared completely, leaving a residue which was identified as a magnesium isotope.

Equally spectacular had been the disappearance of Mademoiselle Fredegonde Valmy. A cable from the Slovakian Ambassador had arrived a few hours later, denying her authenticity. And with her disappearance came the discovery that she had been at the head of an espionage system with ramifications in every state department, and in every statesman's home.

Three days passed with no sign from the enemy. The Council sat all day. In the executive offices of the White House Dick toiled ceaselessly, planning, receiving reports, organizing the flights of airplanes at strategic points throughout his district. From time to time he would be summoned to the Council. At night he threw himself upon a cot in his office and slept a sleep broken by the constant arrival of messengers. And still there was no clue to the location of the headquarters of the marauders.

But in those three days there had been no sign of them. Hope had succeeded despair; in the rebound of confidence the populace was beginning to ridicule the nation-wide precautions against what were coming to be considered merely a gang of super-criminals. It was even whispered that President Hargreaves had not been kidnapped at all. The Freeman's Party accused the Government of a plot to subvert popular liberties.

Dick received a summons on the third evening. Utterly worn out with his work, he pulled himself together and made his way into the Blue Room, where the Council was assembled. Vice-president Tomlinson, an elderly man, was in the chair. A non-entity, pushed into a post it had been thought he would adorn innocuously, he had been overwhelmed by his succession to the chief office of State.

Tomlinson did not like Dick, or any of the hustling younger officers who, unlike himself, realized the real significance of the danger that overhung the country. He sat pompously in his leather chair, regarding Dick as he entered in obedience to the summons.

"Well, Captain Rennell, what have you to report to us this evening?" he inquired, as Dick saluted and stood to attention at the table.

"We're improving our concentrations, Mr. Vice-president. We've eight flights of seaplanes scouring the coast in the hope of locating the stronghold of the Invisible Emperor. We've—"

"I'm sick and tired of that title," shouted Tomlinson. He sprang to his feet, his face flushed with anger. His nerves had broken under the continuous strain. "I'll give you my opinion, Captain Rennell," he said. "And that is that this so-called Invisible Emperor is a myth.

"A gang of thieves has invented a paint that renders them inconspicuous, has created a panic, and is taking advantage of it to terrorize the country. The whole business is poppycock, in my opinion, and the sooner this bubble bursts the better. Well, sir, what have you to say to that?"

"Have you ever seen any of these men in their invisible clothing, if I may ask, Mr. Vice-president?"

inquired Dick, trying to keep down his anger. His nerves, too, were badly frazzled.

"No, sir, I have not, but my opinion is that this story is grossly exaggerated, and that the persons responsible are the reporters of our sensational press!" thundered Tomlinson.

He looked about him, a weak man proud of having asserted his authority. Somebody laughed.

Tomlinson glared at Dick, his rubicund visage purpling. But it was not Dick who had laughed. Nor any one at the council table.

That laugh had come from the wall beside the door. Again it broke forth, high-pitched, cold, derisive. All heads turned as if upon pivots to see who had uttered it.

"Good God!" exclaimed Secretary Norris, of the War Department, and slumped in his chair.

Five feet eight inches from the floor a pair of grey

eyes looked at the Council members out of emptiness. Grey eyes, a man's eyes, cool, contemptuous, and filled with authority, with a contemptuous sense of superiority that left every man there dumb.

Dick was the first to recover himself. He stepped forward, not to where the invisible man was standing, but to a point between him and the door.

That cold laugh broke forth again. "Gentlemen, I am an ambassador from my sovereign, who chooses to be known as the Invisible Emperor," came the words. "As such, I claim immunity. Not that I greatly care, should you wish to violate the laws of nations and put me to death. But, believe me, in such case the retribution will be a terrible one."

Suddenly the envoy peeled off the gas-impregnated garments that covered him. He stood before the Council, a fair-haired young man, clad in the same fashion of trim black uniform as the bayoneted soldier had worn upstairs three nights before.

He bowed disdainfully, and it was Tomlinson who

shouted:

"Arrest that man! I know his face! I've seen it in the papers. He's Von Kettler, the murderer who escaped from jail in an invisible suit."

"Oh, come, Mr. Vice-president," laughed Von Kettler, "are you sure this isn't all very much exaggerated?"

Tomlinson sank back in his chair, his ruddy face covered with sweat. Dick stared at Von Kettler. A suspicion was forming in his mind. He had seen eyes like those before, dark instead of grey, and yet with the same look of pride and breeding in them; the look of the face, too, impossible to mistake—he knew!

Fredegonde Valmy was Von Kettler's sister!

"Well, gentlemen, am I to receive the courtesies of an ambassador?" inquired Van Kettler, advancing.

"You shall have the privileges of the gallows rope!" shouted Tomlinson. "Arrest that man at once, Captain Rennell!"

"Pardon me, Mr. Vice-president," suggested the Secretary for the Navy blandly, "but perhaps it would be more desirable to hear what he has to say."

"Immunity for thieves, robbers, murderers!"

"Might I suggest," said Von Kettler suavely, "that, since the United States has honored my master by placing itself upon a war footing, it has accorded him the rights of a belligerent?"

"We'll hear you, Mr. Von Kettler," said the Secretary of State, glancing along the table. Three or four nodded, two shook their heads: Tomlinson only glared speechlessly at the intruder. Von Kettler advanced to the table and laid a paper upon it.

"You recognize that signature, gentlemen?" he asked.

At the bottom of the paper Dick saw scrawled the bold and unmistakable signature of President Hargreaves.

"An order signed by the President of your country,"

purred Von Kettler, "ordering your military forces replaced upon a peace footing, and the acceptance of our conditions. They are not onerous, and will not interfere with the daily life of the country. Merely a little change in that outworn document, the Constitution. My master rules America henceforward."

Somebody laughed: another laughed: but it was the Secretary of State who did the fine thing. He took up the paper bearing what purported to be President Hargreaves's signature, and tore it in two.

"The people of this country are her rulers," he said, "not an old man dragooned into signing a proclamation while in captivity—if indeed that is President Hargreaves's signature."

There came a sudden burst of applause. Von Kettler's face became the mask of a savage beast. He shook his fist furiously.

"You call my master a forger?" he shouted. "You yourselves repudiate your own Constitution, which

places the control of army and navy in the hands of your President? You refuse to honor his signature?"

"Listen to me, Mr. Von Kettler!" The voice of the Secretary of State cut like a steel edge. "You totally mistake the temper of the people of this country. We don't surrender, even to worthy adversaries, much less to a gang of common thieves, murderers, and criminals like yourselves. You have been accorded the privilege you sought, that of an envoy, and that was straining the point. Show yourself here again after two minutes have elapsed, and you'll go to the gallows—for keeps."

"Dogs!" shouted Von Kettler, beside himself with fury. "Your doom is upon you even at this moment. I have but to wave my arm, and Washington shall be destroyed, and with her a score of other cities. I tell you you are at our mercy. Thousands of lives shall pay for this insult to my master. I warn you, such a catastrophe is coming as shall show you the Invisible Emperor does not threaten in vain!"

With complete nonchalance the Secretary of State

took out his watch. "One minute and fifteen seconds remaining. Captain Rennell," he said. "At the expiration of that time, put Mr. Von Kettler under arrest. I advise you to go back to your master quickly, Mr. Von Kettler," he added, "and tell him that we'll have no dealings with him, now or ever."

For a moment longer Von Kettler stood glaring; then, with a laugh of derision and a gesture of the hands he vanished from view. And, though they might have expected that denouement, the members of the Council leaped to their feet, staring incredulously at the place where he had been. Nothing of Von Kettler was visible, not even the eyes, and there sounded not the slightest footfall.

Dick sprang forward to the door, but his outstretched arms encountered only emptiness. In spite of the Secretary of State's instructions, he was almost minded to apprehend the man. If he could get him!

The corridor was empty. A guard of soldiers was at the entrance, but they did not block the entrance. Even now Von Kettler might be passing them! Why

didn't his feet sound upon the floor? How could a bulky man glide so smoothly?

Perhaps because Dick was undecided what to do, Von Kettler escaped him. By the time he reached the guards he knew he had escaped. Suddenly there came an unexpected denouement. Somewhere on the White House lawn a guard challenged, fired. The snap of one of the silenced automatics answered him.

When Dick and the guards reached the spot, the man was lying in a crumpled heap.

"An airplane," he gasped. "Invisible airplane. I—bumped into it. Men—in it. The damned dogs!"

He died. Dick stared around him. There was no sign of any airplane on the lawn, nothing but the tents of the guards, white in the moonlight, and the grim array of anti-aircraft guns that Dick had placed there.

But behind the White House, in hastily constructed hangars, were a half-dozen of the latest pursuit airships—beautiful slim hulls, heavily armored, with

armored turrets containing each a quick-firer with the new armor-piercing bullets. One of these ships, Dick's own, was kept perpetually warmed and ready to take the air.

Dick raced across the lawn, yelled to the startled guard in charge. The mechanics came running from their quarters. Almost by the time Dick reached it the ship was ready.

He twirled the helicopter starter, and she roared and zoomed, taking an angle of a hundred and twenty-five degrees upward off a runway of twenty yards. Into the air she soared, into the moonlight, up like an arrow for five hundred feet.

Dick pulled the soaring lever, and she hung there, buzzing like a bee as her helicopters, counteracting the pull of gravity, held her comparatively stable. He scanned the air all about him.

Washington lay below, her myriad lights gleaming. Immediately beneath him Dick saw the guns and the tents of the soldiers, and the little group that was

removing the body of the murdered soldier on a stretcher. But there were no signs of any hostile craft.

Had the murdered man really bumped into an invisible airship, or had he only thought he had? Had those devils learned to apply the gas to the surfaces of airplanes? There was no reason why they should not have done so.

But surely the utmost ingenuity of man had not contrived to render a modern plane, with its metalwork and machinery, absolutely transparent?

And, again, how was it possible to have silenced the sound of engines, the whir of a propeller, so that there should be no auditory indication whatever of a plane's presence?

Dick looked all about him. Nothing was in the air—he could have sworn it. He replaced the soaring lever and banked in a close circle, his glance piercing the night. No, there was nothing.

Crash! Boom! The plane rocked violently, tossing

upon gusts of air. A huge, gaping hole of blackness had suddenly appeared in the middle of the White House lawn. The tents were flat upon the ground. Through the rising smoke clouds Dick saw tongues of flame.

No shell that, but a bomb, and dropped from the skies less than five hundred feet from where Dick hovered. Yet there was nothing visible in the skies save the round orb of the moon.

A rush of wind past Dick's face! One of the vanes of the helicopter crumpled and fluttered away into the night. Dick needed no further persuasion. The dead soldier had not lied.

Von Kettler had begun the fulfillment of his threat!

Chapter 5: The Enemy Strikes

As Dick's airship veered and side-slipped, he kicked hard on the left rudder and brought the nose around. Furiously he sprayed the air with a leaden hail from his quick-firer. He heard a rush of wind go past him, and realized that his unseen antagonist had all but rammed him.

Yet nothing was visible at all, save the moon and the empty sky. He had heard the rush of the prop-wash, but he had seen nothing, heard nothing else. Incredible as it seemed, the pilot was flying a plane that had attained not merely invisibility but complete absence of all sound.

Dick side-slipped down, pancaked, and crashed. He emerged from a plane wrecked beyond hope of early repair, yet luckily with no injury beyond a few minor bruises. He rushed toward the hangar, to encounter a bevy of scared mechanics.

"Another plane! Rev one up quick!" he shouted.

Planes were already being wheeled out, pilots in flying suits and goggles were striding beside them. Dick ordered one of them away, stepped into his plane, and in a moment was in the air again.

In the minute or two that had elapsed since the encounter, the enemy had been active. Crash after crash was resounding from various parts of Washington. Buildings were rocking and toppling, débris strewn the streets, fires were springing up everywhere. A thousand feet aloft, Dick could see the holocaust of destruction that was being wrought by the infernal missiles.

Bombs of such power had been the unattained ambition of every government of the world—and it had been left to the men of the Invisible Emperor to attain to them. Whole streets went into ruin at each discharge and from everywhere within the city the wailing cry of the injured went up, in a resonant moan of pain.

In the central part of the city, the district about F Street and the government buildings, nothing was

standing, except those buildings fashioned of structural steel, and these showed twisted girders like the skeletons of primeval monsters, supporting sections of sagging floors. Houses, hotels had melted into shapeless heaps of rubble, which filled the streets to a depth of a dozen yards, burying everything beneath them. Yet here and there could be seen the forms of dead pedestrians, motor-cars emerging out of the débris, lying in every conceivable position; horses, horribly mangled, were shrieking as they tried to free themselves. And yet, despite this ruin, the general impression upon Dick's mind, as he beat to and fro, signaling to his flight to spread, was that of a vast, empty desolation.

Further away: where the ruin had not yet fallen, thousands of human beings were milling in a mass, those upon the fringes of the crowd perpetually breaking away, other swarms approaching them, so that the entire agglomeration resembled a seething whirlpool turning slowly upon itself.

Then of a sudden the strains of the national anthem floated up to Dick's ears. A band was playing in the

White House grounds. The tune was ragged, and the drum came in a fraction of a second late, but an immense pride and elation filled Dick's soul.

"They'll never beat us!" he thought, intensely, "with such a spirit as that!"

He had signaled his flight to spread, and search the air. He could see the individual ships darting here and there over the immensity of the city, but none knew better than he how fruitless their effort was. And the marauders had not ceased their deadly work.

A bomb dropped near the Washington Monument, sending up a huge spout of dust that veiled it from his eyes. Instinctively Dick shot toward the scene. Slowly the dust subsided, and then a yell of exultation broke from Dick's lips. The noble shaft still stood, a slim taper pointing to the skies.

It was an omen of ultimate success, and Dick took heart. No, they'd never beat the grim, unconquerable tenacity of the American people.

Yet the damage was proceeding at a frightful rate. A bomb dropped squarely on the Corcoran Gallery and resolved it into a heap of silly stones. A bomb fell in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue, and the houses on either side collapsed like houses of cards, falling into a sulphurous, fiery pit. And still there was nothing visible but the sky and the moon.

Dick gritted his teeth and swore as he circled over the site of destruction, out of which tiny figures were struggling. He heard the clang of the fire bells as the motor trucks came roaring toward the scene. Then crash! again. Five blocks northward another dense cloud of dust arose, and the new area of destruction, spreading as swiftly as ripples over a pond, joined the former one, leaving a huge, irregular open space, piled up with masonry and brick in a number of flat-topped pyramids.

Into this, houses went crashing every moment, with a sound like the clatter of falling crockery, but infinitely magnified.

"The devils! The swine!" shouted Dick. "And we gave

Von Kettler the privileges of an ambassador!"

And Fredegonde was the sister of this devil! The remembrance of that struck a cold chill to Dick's heart again. He tried to blot out her picture from his mind, but he still saw her as she had appeared that day after the air ride, flushed, smiling, radiant in her dark beauty.

A murderess and a spy! He cursed her as he banked and circled back. He was helpless. He could do nothing. And all Washington would be destroyed by morning, if the supply of bombs kept up. But there was more to come. Suddenly Dick became aware that two of his flight, at widely separated distances, were going down in flames. Flaming comets, they dropped plump into the destruction below. Another caught fire and was going down. No need to question what was happening.

The invisible enemy was attacking his flight and picking off his men one by one!

He drove furiously toward two of his planes whose

erratic movements showed that they were being attacked. As he neared them he saw one catch fire and begin its earthward swoop. Then the fuselage crackled beside him, and his instrument board dissolved into ruin. Instinctively he went round in a tight bank and loosed his machine-gun. Nothing there! Nothing at all! Yet his right wing went ragged, and his own furious blasts into the sky, their echoes drowned by the roar of his propeller, were productive of nothing.

He shot past the uninjured plane, signalling it to descend. He wasn't going to let his men ride aloft to helpless butchery. Nothing could be done until some means was discovered of counteracting the enemy's terrific advantage.

He darted across the heart of the city to where another of the flight was circling, wagging his wings to indicate to it to descend. Then on to the next plane and the next, shepherding them. Thank God they understood! They were bunching toward the hangar. Yet another took fire and dropped, a burning wreck. Half his flight out of commission, and not an enemy

visible!

He was aloft alone now, courting death—instant, invisible death. He wouldn't descend until that carnival of murder was at an end. But it was not at an end. Another crash, far up Pennsylvania Avenue, showed an attempt upon the Capitol. Again—again, and a smoking hell wreathed the noble buildings so that it was no longer possible to see them. A lull, and then a crash nearer the city's heart. Crash! Crash!

Invisible though the enemy was, it was easy to trace the movements of this particular plane by the successive areas of destruction that it left behind it. It was coming back over Pennsylvania Avenue, dropping its bombs at intervals. It was methodically wiping out an entire section of Washington.

Dick drove his plane toward it. There was one chance in a thousand that, if he could accurately gauge the progress of his invisible antagonist, he could crash him and go down with him to death. If he could get close enough to feel his prop-wash! A wild chance, but Dick's mind was keyed up to desperation. He shot

like an arrow toward the scene, with a view to intercepting the murderer.

Then of a sudden he became aware of a curious phenomenon. A black beam was shooting across the sky. A black searchlight! It came from the flat top of a large hotel that had somehow escaped the universal destruction, and, with its gaunt skeleton of structural steel showing in squares, towered out of the ruin all about it like an island.

It was from here that the black beam started. It spread fanwise across the sky. But it was not merely blackness. It was utter and impenetrable darkness, cleaving the sky like a knife. Where it passed, the rays of the moon were extinguished as fire is extinguished by water.

A beam of absolute blackness, that pierced the air like a widening cone, and made the night seem, by contrast, of dazzling brightness along either dark border.

High into the air that dark beam shot, moving to and

fro in the sky. Dick, darting toward the spot where he hoped to find his invisible enemy, found himself caught in it.

In utter, inextinguishable darkness! Like a trapped bird he fluttered, hurling himself this way and that till suddenly he found himself blinking in the dazzling light of the moon again, and the black beam was overhead.

Crash! Another widening sphere of ruin as the invisible marauder dropped a bomb. Dick cursed bitterly. Trapped in that black beam, he had lost his direction. The invisible plane had shot past the point where he had hoped to intercept it.

He flung his soaring lever, and hung suspended in the air. An easy mark for the enemy, if he chose to take the opportunity. No matter. Death was all that Dick craved. He had seen half his flight wiped out, and a hundred thousand human beings hurled to destruction. He wanted to die.

Then suddenly a wild shout came to his ears, as if all

Washington had gone mad with triumph. And Dick heard himself shouting too, before he knew it, almost before he knew why.

For overhead, where the inky finger searched the sky, a luminous shape appeared, a silvery cigar, riding in the void. The finger missed it, and again there was only the moonlight. It caught it again—and again the whole devastated city rang with yells of derision, hate, and anger as the black beam held it.

It held it! To and fro that silvery cigar scurried in a frantic attempt to avoid detection, and remorselessly the black beam held it down.

It held it down, and it outlined it as clearly as a figure on the moving picture screen. Then suddenly there came a flash, followed by a dull detonation, and a black cloud appeared, spreading into a flower of death near the cigar, and at the edge of the black beam. The cheers grew frantic. The anti-aircraft battery in the White House grounds had grasped the situation, and was opening fire.

To and fro, like a trapped beast, the cigar-shaped airplane fled. Once it seemed to escape. It faded from the edge of the black finger—faded into nothingness amid a roar of excretion. Then it was caught and held.

Truncated, bounded by an arc of sky, the black finger followed the murderer in his flight remorselessly. And all around him the anti-aircraft guns were placing a barrage of death.

He was trapped. No need for Dick to rush in to battle. To do so might call off that deadly barrage that held the murderer in a ring of death. Hovering, Dick watched. And then, perhaps panic-stricken, perhaps rendered desperate, perhaps through sheer, wanton courage that might have commanded admiration under nobler circumstances, the airship turned and drove straight in the direction of the battery, dropping another bomb as she did so.

It fell in a crowded street, swarming with spectators who had clambered upon the fallen débris, and it wrought hideous destruction. But this time there was

hardly a cry—no unison of despair such as had come to Dick's ears before. The suspense was too tense. All eyes watched the airship as, seeming to bear a charmed life, she drove for the White House itself, through a ring of shells that widened and contracted alternately, with the object of placing a last bomb squarely upon the building before going down in death. And all the while the black searchlight held it.

Dick Rennell was to experience many thrilling moments afterward, but there was never a period, measurable by seconds, yet seeming to extend through all eternity—never a period quite so fraught with suspense as, hovering there, he watched the flight of that silvery plane speeding straight toward the executive mansion while all around it the shells bloomed and spread. It was over the White House grounds. The arches had failed; they were being outmaneuvered, they could not be swung in time to follow the trajectory of the plane. Dick held his breath.

Then suddenly the silvery ship dissolved in a blaze of fire, a shower of golden sparks such as fly from a

rocket, and simultaneously the last bomb that she was to drop broke upon the ground below.

Down she plunged, instantly invisible as she escaped the finger of the black beam; but she dropped into the vortex of ruin that she herself had created. Into a pit of blazing fire, criss-crossed by falling trees, that had engulfed the battery and a score of men.

Then suddenly Dick understood. He flung home the soaring lever, banked, and headed, not for the White House, but for the flat roof of the hotel from which the black searchlight was still projecting itself through the skies. He hovered above, and dropped, light as a feather, upon the rooftop.

There was only one person there—an old man dressed in a shabby suit, kneeling before a great block of stone that had been dislodged upward from the parapet and formed a sort of table. Upon this table the old man had placed a large, square box, resembling an exaggerated kodak, and it was from the lens of this box that the black beam was projecting.

Dick sprang from his cockpit as the old man rose in alarm. He ran to him and caught him by the arm.

"Luke Evans!" he cried. "Thank God you've come back in time to save America!"

Chapter 6: The Gas

In the Blue Room of the White House the Council listened to old Luke Evans's exposition of his invention with feelings ranging from incredulity to hope.

"I've been at work all the time," said the old man, "not far from here. I knew the day would come when you'd need me. I put my pride aside for the sake of my country."

"Tell us in a few words about this discovery of yours, Mr. Evans," said Colonel Stopford.

Luke Evans placed the square black case upon the table. "It's simple, like all big things, sir," he answered. "The original shadow-breaking device that I invented was a heavy, inert gas, invisible, but almost as viscous as paint. Applied to textiles, to inorganic matter, to animal bodies, it adheres for hours. Its property is to render such substances invisible by absorbing all the visible light rays that fall upon it, from red to violet. Light passes through all

substances that are coated with this paint as if they did not exist."

"And this antidote of yours?" asked Colonel Stopford.

"Darkness," replied Luke Evans. "A beam of darkness that means absolute invisibility. It can be shot from this apparatus"—he indicated the box upon the table. "This box contains a minute portion of a gas which exists in nature in the form of a black, crystalline powder. The peculiar property of this powder is that it is the solidified form of a gas more volatile than any that is known. So volatile is it that, when the ordinary atmospheric pressure of fifteen pounds to the square inch is removed, the powder instantly changes to the gaseous condition."

"By pressing this lever"—Evans pointed at the box—"a vacuum is created. Instantly the powder becomes a gas, which shoots forth through this aperture with the speed of a projectile, taking the form of a beam of absolute blackness. Or it can be discharged from cylinders in such a way as to extend over a large area within a few minutes."

"But how does this darkness make the invisible airships luminous?" asked Stopford. "Why does not your darkness destroy all light?"

"In this way, sir," replied the old inventor. "The shadow-breaking gas with which the airships are painted confers invisibility because it absorbs sunlight. But it does not absorb the still more rapid waves, or oscillations which manifest themselves as radio-activity. On the contrary, it gathers and reflects these.

"Now Roentgen, the discoverer of the X-ray, observed that if X-rays are allowed to enter the eye of an observer who is in complete darkness, the retina receives a stimulus, and light is perceived, due to the fluorescent action of the X-rays upon the eyeball.

"Consequently, by creating a beam of complete darkness, I bring into clear visibility the fluorescent gas that coats the airships; in other words, the airships become visible."

"If a light ray is nullified upon entering the field of

darkness, will it emerge at the other edge as a perfect light ray again?" asked Stopford.

"It will emerge unchanged, since the black beam destroys light by slightly slowing down the vibrations to a point where they are not perceived as light by the human eye. On emerging from the beam, however, these vibrations immediately resume their natural frequency. To give you a homely parallel, the telephone changes sound waves to electric waves, and re-converts them into sound waves at the other end, without any appreciable interruption."

"Then," said Stopford, "the logical application of your method is to plunge every city in the land into darkness by means of this gas?"

"That is so, sir, and then we shall have the advantage of invisibility, and the enemy ships will be in fluorescence."

"Damned impracticable!" muttered Stopford.

"You seriously propose to darken the greater part of

eastern North America?" asked the Secretary for War.

"The gas can be produced in large quantities from coal tar besides existing in crystalline deposits," replied Luke Evans. "It is so volatile that I estimate that a single ton will darken all eastern North America for five days. Whereas the concentration would be made only in specific areas liable to attack. The gas is distilled with great facility from one of the tri-phenyl-carbinol coal-tar derivatives."

Vice-president Tomlinson was a pompous, irascible old man, but it was he who hit the nail on the head.

"That's all very well as an emergency measure, but we've got to find the haunt of that gang and smash it!"

An orderly brought in a telegraphic dispatch and handed it to him. The Vice-president opened it, glanced through it, and tried to hand it to the Secretary of State. Instead, it fluttered from his nerveless fingers, and he sank back with a groan. The Secretary picked it up and glanced at it.

"Gentlemen," he said, trying to control his voice, "New York was bombed out of the blue at sunrise this morning, and the whole lower part of the city is a heap of ruins."

In the days that followed it became clear that all the resources of America would be needed to cope with the Invisible Empire. Not a day passed without some blow being struck. Boston, Charleston, Baltimore, Pittsburg in turn were devastated. Three cruisers and a score of minor craft were sunk in the harbor of Newport News, where they were concentrating, and thenceforward the fleet became a fugitive force, seeking concealment rather than an offensive. Trans-Atlantic sea-traffic ceased.

Meanwhile the black gas was being hurriedly manufactured. From cylinders placed in central positions in a score of cities it was discharged continuously, covering these centers with an impenetrable pall of night that no light would penetrate. Only by the glow of radium paint, which commanded fabulous prices, could official business be transacted, and that only to a very small degree.

Courts were closed, business suspended, prisoners released, perforce, from jails. Famine ruled. The remedy was proving worse than the disease. Within a week the use of the dark gas had had to be discontinued. And a temporary suspension of the raids served only to accentuate the general terror.

There were food riots everywhere, demands that the Government come to terms, and counter-demands that the war be fought out to the bitter end.

Fought out, when everything was disorganized? Stocks of food congested all the terminals, mobs rioted and battled and plundered all through the east.

"It means surrender," was voiced at the Council meeting by one of the members. And nobody answered him.

Three days of respite, then, instead of bombs, proclamations fluttering down from a cloudless sky. Unless the white flag of surrender was hoisted from the summit of the battered Capitol, the Invisible Emperor would strike such a blow as should bring

America to her knees!

It was a twelve-hour ultimatum, and before three hours had passed thousands of citizens had taken possession of the Capitol and filled all the approaches. Over their heads floated banners—the Stars and Stripes, and, blazoned across them the words, "No Surrender."

It was a spontaneous uprising of the people of Washington. Hungry, homeless in the sharpening autumn weather, and nearly all bereft of members of their families, too often of the breadwinner, now lying deep beneath the rubble that littered the streets, they had gathered in their thousands to protest against any attempt to yield.

Dick, flying overhead at the apex of his squadron, felt his heart swell with elation as he watched the orderly crowds. This was at three in the afternoon: at six the ultimatum ended, the new frightfulness was to begin.

At five, Vice-president Tomlinson was to address the crowds. The old man had risen to the occasion. He

had cast off his pompousness and vanity, and was known to favor war to the bitter end. Dick and his squadron circled above the broken dome as the car that carried the Vice-president and the secretaries of State and for War approached along the Avenue.

Rat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat!

Out of the blue sky streams of lead were poured into the assembled multitudes. Instantly they had become converted into a panic-stricken mob, turning this way and that.

Rat-a-tat-tat. Swaths of dead and dying men rolled in the dust, and, as wheat falls under the reaper's blade, the mob melted away in lines and by battalions. Within thirty seconds the whole terrain was piled with dead and dying.

"My God, it's massacre! It's murder!" shouted Dick.

They had not even waited for the twelve hours to expire. To and fro the invisible airplanes shot through the blue evening sky, till the last fugitives were

streaming away in all directions like hunted deer, and the dead lay piled in ghastly heaps everywhere.

Out of these heaps wounded and dying men would stagger to their feet to shake their fists impotently at their murderers.

In vain Dick and his squadron strove to dash themselves into the invisible airships. The pilots eluded them with ease, sometimes sending a contemptuous round of machine-gun bullets in their direction, but not troubling to shoot them down.

Two small boys, carrying a huge banner with "No Surrender" across it, were walking off the ghastly field. Twelve or fourteen years old at most, they disdained to run. They were singing, singing the National Anthem, though their voices were inaudible through the turmoil.

Rat-tat! Rat-tat-a-tat! The fiends above loosed a storm of lead upon them. Both fell. One rose, still clutching the banner in his hand and waved it aloft. In a sudden silence his childish treble could be heard:

My country, 'tis of thee
Sweet land of lib-er-ty—

The guns rattled again. Clutching the blood-stained banner, he dropped across the body of his companion.

Suddenly a broad band of black soared upward from the earth. Those in charge of the cylinders placed about the Capitol had released the gas.

A band of darkness, rising into the blue, cutting off the earth, making the summit of the ruined Capitol a floating dome. But, fast as it rose, the invisible airships rose faster above it.

A last vicious volley! Two of Dick's flight crashing down upon the piles of dead men underneath! And nothing was visible, though the darkness rose till it obliterated the blue above.

At dawn the Council sat, after an all-night meeting. Vice-president Tomlinson, one arm shattered by a machine-gun bullet, still occupied the chair at the head of the table.

Outside, immediately about the White House, there was not a sound. Washington might have been a city of the dead. The railroad terminals, however, were occupied by a mob of people, busily looting. There was great disorder. Organized government had simply disappeared.

Each man was occupied only with obtaining as much food as he could carry, and taking his family into rural districts where the Terror would not be likely to pursue. All the roads leading out of Washington—into Virginia, into Maryland, were congested with columns of fugitives that stretched for miles.

Some, who were fortunate enough to possess automobiles, and—what was rarer—a few gallons of gas, were trying to force their way through the masses ahead of them; here and there a family trudged beside a pack-horse, or a big dog drew an improvised sled on wheels, loaded with flour, bacon, blankets, pillows. Old men and young children trudged on uncomplaining.

The telegraph wires were still, for the most part,

working. All the world knew what was happening. From all the big cities of the East a similar exodus was proceeding. There was little bitterness and little disorder.

It was not the airship raids from which these crowds were fleeing. Something grimmer was happening. The murderous attack upon the populace about the Capitol had been merely an incident. This later development was the fulfilment of the Invisible Emperor's ultimatum.

Death was afield, death, invisible, instantaneous, and inevitable. Death blown on the winds, in the form of the deadliest of unknown gases.

In the Blue Room of the White House a score of experts had gathered. Dick, too, with the chiefs of his staff, Stopford, and the army and naval heads. Among them was the chief of the Meteorological Bureau, and it was to him primarily that Tomlinson was reading a telegraphic dispatch from Wilmington, South Carolina:

"The Invisible Death has reached this point and is working havoc throughout the city, spreading from street to street. Men are dropping dead everywhere. A few have fled, but—"

The sudden ending of the dispatch was significant enough. Tomlinson picked up another dispatch from Columbia, in the same State:

"Invisible Death now circling city," he read. "Business section already invaded. All other telegraphists have left posts. Can't say how long—"

And this, too, ended in the same way. There were piles of such communications, and they had been coming in for eighteen hours. At that moment an orderly brought in a dozen more.

Tomlinson showed the head of the Meteorological Bureau the chart upon the table. "We've plotted out a map as the wires came in, Mr. Graves," he said. "The Invisible Death struck the southeast shore of the United States yesterday afternoon near Charleston. It has spread approximately at a steady rate. The wind

velocity—?"

"Remains constant. Seventy miles an hour. Dying down a little," answered Graves.

"The death line now runs from Wilmington, South Carolina, straight to Augusta, Georgia," the Vice-president pursued. "Every living thing that this gas has encountered has been instantly destroyed. Men, cattle, birds, vermin, wild beasts. The gas is invisible and inodorous. These gentlemen believe it may be a form of hydrocyanic acid, but of a concentration beyond anything known to chemistry, so deadly that a billionth part of it to one of air must be fatal, otherwise it could not have traveled as it has done. Warnings have been broadcasted, but there are no stocks of chemicals that might counteract it. Flight is the only hope—flight at seventy miles an hour!"

His voice shook. "This gas has been loosed, as you told us, upon the wings of the hurricane that came through the Florida Strait. What are the chances of its reaching Washington?"

"Mr. Vice-president, if the wind continues, and this gas has sufficient concentration, it should be in Washington within the next eight hours." Graves replied. "If the wind changes direction, however, this gas will probably be blown out to sea, or into the Alleghanies, where it will probably be dissipated among the hills, or by the foliage on the mountains. I'm not a chemist—"

"No, sir, and I am not consulting you as one," answered old Tomlinson. "A death belt several hundred miles in length and three or four hundred deep has already been cut across this continent. We are faced with wholesale, unmitigated murder, on such a scale as was never known before. But we are an integral part of America, and Washington has no more right to expect immunity than our devastated Southern States. The question we wish to put to you is, can you trace the exact course taken by the hurricane?"

"I can, Mr. Vice-president," answered Graves. "It originated somewhere in the West Indian seas, like all these storms. We've been getting our reports almost

as usual. Our first one came from Nassau, which was badly damaged. The storm missed the Florida coast, as many of them do, and struck the coast of South Carolina—in fact, we received a report from Charleston, which must have almost coincided with your first report of the gas."

"If the storm missed the Florida coast, it follows that the gas was not discharged from any point on the American continent," said Tomlinson. "From some point off Florida—from some island, or from a plane or from a ship at sea."

"Not from a ship at sea, Mr. Vice-president," interposed the head of the Chemical Bureau. "To discharge gas on such an extensive scale would require more space than could be furnished by the largest vessel, in my opinion."

"In all probability the gas was 'loaded,' so to say, onto the gale somewhere in the Bahamas," said Graves. "That seems to me the most likely explanation."

Vice-president Tomlinson nodded, and picked up one

of the latest telegraphic dispatches, as if absently.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the Invisible Death has already reached Charlotte."

He picked up another. "Reported Abaco Island, Bahamas, totally wrecked by storm. All communication has ceased," he read. He turned to Dick and spoke as if inspired. "Captain Rennell, there is your destination," he thundered. "They've betrayed themselves. We've got them now. You understand?"

"By God, sir! It's from Abaco Island, then, that those devils have been carrying on their game of wholesale murder!"

Suddenly a contagion of enthusiasm seemed to sweep the whole assemblage. Every man was upon his feet in an instant, white, quivering, lips opened for speech that trembled there and did not come.

It was Secretary Norris spoke. "The Vice-president has hit the mark," he said, with a dramatic gesture of his arm. "Yes, they've betrayed themselves. Their

headquarters are on Abaco Island. It's one of the largest in the Bahamas." He turned to the Secretary for the Navy. "You can rush the fleet there, sir?" he asked.

"Within forty-eight hours I'll have every vessel that can float off Abaco Island."

"I'll concentrate all airplanes. Take your flight, Captain Rennell. We'll stamp out that nest of murderers if we blow Abaco Island to the bottom of the sea. It can be done!"

"It can be done, sir—with Luke Evans and his invention," answered Dick.

Chapter 7: On the Trail

Three hours later, about the time when the war council rose after completing its plans, a sudden shift of the wind blew the poison gas out to sea, just when it appeared certain that it would reach the capital of the nation.

The southern half of Virginia had been swept over. Operators, telegraph and telephone, staying at their posts had sent in constant messages that had terminated with an abruptness which told of the tragic sequel. Yet, at that distance from its source, the intensity of the gas had been to some extent dissipated.

Poisonous beyond any gas known, so deadly as to make hydrocyanic gas innocuous in comparison, still as it was swept northward on the wings of the wind, there had been an increasing number of non-fatal casualties. The most northernly point reached by the gas was Richmond, and here some fifty per cent of those stricken had suffered paralysis instead of death.

But a new element had been injected into the situation. Even the heroic courage shown by the populace in the beginning had had its limits. The morning after the news of the Invisible Death's advent was made public mobs had gathered in all the large cities of the East, demanding surrender.

The submerged elements of crime and disorder had come to the surface at last. Committees were formed, with the avowed object of yielding to the Invisible Emperor, and averting further disaster. In Washington, a city of the dead, half the members of Congress and the Senators had gathered in the ruined Capitol, to debate the situation.

There were rumors of an impending march on the White House, of a coup d'état.

The action of the Government was prompt. Five hundred loyalists were enrolled, armed, and posted round the White House: every avenue of approach was commanded by machine-guns. Meanwhile the news was spread by radio that the headquarters of the Invisible Emperor had been located, and that a

strong bombing squadron was being dispatched to destroy it.

The entire fleet was to follow, and it was confidently anticipated that within a little while the Terror would be at an end.

Those at the white House were less sanguine. There was none but realized the diabolical strength of their antagonists.

"Everything depends upon the outcome of the next forty-eight hours, and everything depends on you, Rennell," said Secretary Norris to Dick, as he stood beside his plane. Behind him his flight of a dozen airships was drawn up.

"Find them," added the Secretary; "cover Abaco Island with the black gas, and the navy and the marines will wipe up the mess that you leave behind you. God help you—and all of us, Rennell!"

He gripped Dick's hand and turned away. Dick was very sober-minded as he climbed into his cockpit. He

knew to the full how much depended upon himself and Luke Evans. Already the shouts of the insurgents were to be heard at the ends of the barriers, commanded by the machine-guns, and patrolled by the enlisted volunteers.

Negro mobs were building counter-barricades of their own with rubble from the fallen edifices. Civil war might be postponed for eight-and-forty hours, but after that unless there was news of victory, the whole structure of civilization would be smashed irreparably.

It was up to Dick and Luke Evans, and they had assumed such a responsibility as rarely falls to the lot of man in war.

Dick was to lead the flight in a two-seater Barwell plane. This was one of the latest types, and had been hurriedly adapted to the purpose for which it was to be used. Dick himself occupied the rear seat, with its dual controls, and the gun in its armored casing. In front sat old Luke Evans, in charge of the black gas projector.

His famous camera box, containing a minute quantity of gas in slow combustion, and projecting the black searchlight, had been built into the plane. In the rack beside him were a number of the black gas bombs, each of which, dropped to earth, would release enough gas to cover a considerable area with darkness. Both Luke and Dick wore respirators filled with charcoal and sodium thio-sulphate, and beside Dick a cage containing three guinea-pigs rested.

These little rodents were so sensitive to atmospheric changes that a quantity of hydrocyanic acid too minute to affect a man would produce instantaneous death on them.

From its hiding-place off the Virginia coast the American fleet was steaming hotly southward toward Abaco Island, cruisers, destroyers, submarines. That Abaco was British territory had simply not been considered in this crisis of history.

The twelve airships that followed Dick's contained enough bombs to put the headquarters of the Invisible Empire out of business for good. The naval

guns would complete the same business.

All day Dick and Luke Evans flew southwestward. At first glance, everything appeared normal. The catastrophe that had fallen upon the land was visible only in the shape of the lines of tiny figures, extending for miles, that choked all the roads radiating out of the principal cities. It was only when they were over the southern portion of Virginia that the ravages of deadly gas became apparent.

Flying low, Dick could see the fields strewn with the bodies of dead cattle. Here and there, at the doors of farmhouses, the inmates could be seen, lying together in gruesome heaps, caught and killed instantaneously as they attempted flight. Here, too, were figures on the roads. But they were figures of dead men and women.

They strewed the roads for miles, lying as they had been trapped—men, women, children, horses, mules, and dogs. The spectacle was an appalling one. Dick set his jaws grimly. He was thinking that the Council had let Von Kettler escape. He was thinking of

Fredegonde. But he would not let himself think of her. She deserved no more pity than the rest of the murderous crew.

Over the Carolinas the conditions were still more appalling. Here deadly gas had struck with all its concentrated power. A city materialized out of the blue distance, a factory town with all chimneys spiring upward into the blue, a section of tall buildings intersected by canyonlike streets, around it a rim of trim houses, bungalows, indicative of prosperity and comfort. And it was a city of the dead.

For everywhere around it, on all the roads, the dead lay piled on top of one another. For miles—all the inhabitants, rich and poor, business men, factory hands, negroes. There had been a mad rush as the fatal gas drove onward upon its lethal way, and all the fugitives had been overwhelmed simultaneously.

Here were golf links, with little groups strewn on the grass and fairways; here, at one of the holes, four men, their putters still in their hands, crouched in death. Here was the wreckage of a train that had

collided with a string of freight cars at an untended switch, and from the shattered windows the heads and bodies of the dead protruded in serried ranks.

Dick looked back. His flight was driving on behind him. He guessed their feelings. They had sworn, as he had sworn, that none of them would return without stamping out that abomination from the earth forever.

He signaled to the flight to rise, and zoomed upward to twelve thousand feet. He did not want to look upon any more of those horrors. At that height, the peaceful landscape lay extended underneath, in a checker-board of farms and woodlands. One could pretend that it was all a vile dream.

He avoided Charleston, and winged out above the Atlantic, striking a straight course along the coast toward the Bahamas. The shores of Georgia vanished in the west. Dick began to breathe more freely. His mind shook off its weight of horror. Only the blue sea and the blue sky were visible. The aftermath of the gale remained in the shape of a strong head breeze and white crests below.

Dick glanced at the guinea-pigs. They were busily gnawing their cabbage and carrots. The gas had evidently been entirely dissipated by the wind.

Toward sunset the low jutting fore-land of Canaveral on the east coast of Florida, came into view. Dick shifted course a little. Three hours more should see them over Abaco.

His flight had explicit instructions. As soon as the black gas had rendered visible the headquarters of the Invisible Emperor, they were to circle above, dropping their bombs. When these were exhausted, the machine guns would come into play. There was to be no attention paid to signals of surrender. They were to wipe out the headquarters, to kill every living thing that showed itself—and the navy and the marines would mop up anything left over.

The sun went down in a blaze of gold and crimson. Night fell. The moon began to climb the east. The black sea, stretching beneath, was as empty as on the day when it was created. Nothing in the shape of navigation appeared.

Two hours, three hours, and old Evans turned round in his cockpit and pointed. On the horizon a black thread was beginning to stretch against the sky. It was Abaco Island, in the Bahama group. They were nearly at their destination. An hour more—perhaps two hours, and the deadly menace that threatened America might be removed forever. Dick breathed a silent prayer for success.

They were over Abaco. A long, flat island, seventy miles or so in extreme length, and fairly wide, covered with a dense growth of tropical brush and forest, with here and there open spaces, near the seacoast an occasional farm-house. Dick dropped to five thousand, to three, to one. The moon made the whole land underneath as bright as day.

There were no evidence of destruction by the hurricane. The farmhouses stood substantial and well roofed. If death had struck Abaco Island, it had been the work of man, not Nature.

Dick zoomed almost to his ceiling, until, in the brilliant moonlight, he could see Abaco Island from

side to side. For the most part it was heavily wooded with mahogany and lignum vitae: toward the central portion there was open land, but there was not the least sign of any construction work.

Again he swooped, indicating to his flight to follow him. At a thousand feet he examined the open district intently. Here, if anywhere upon the island, the Invisible Emperor had his headquarters. Was it conceivable that a gas factory, hangars, ammunition depots could exist here invisibly, when he could look straight down upon the ground?

Dick's heart sank. The hideous fear came to him that Graves had been mistaken, that he had come on a wild-goose chase. This could not be the place. It was quite incredible.

Again and again he circled, studying the ground beneath. Now he could see that the tough grass and undergrowth marked curious geometrical patterns. Here, for example, was an oblong of bare earth around which the vegetation grew, and it was obviously the work of man.

Here were four squares of bare ground set side by side, with thin strips of vegetation growing between them.

Then of a sudden Dick knew! Those squares and parallelograms of bare ground indicated the foundations of buildings. *He was looking down on the very site of the Invisible Emperor's stronghold!*

He shouted, and pointed downward. Luke Evans looked round and nodded. He understood. He patted the camera-box with a grim smile on his old face.

Chapter 8: The Magnetic Trap

Upon those squares and oblongs of bare earth, incredible as it seemed, rose the structures of the Invisible Empire, themselves both invisible and transparent, so that one looked straight down through them and saw only the ground beneath them.

Every interior floor and girder must have been treated with the gas. They had been cunning. They must have discovered some permanent means of charging paint with the shadow-breaking gas, so that the buildings would remain invisible for months and years instead of hours.

But they had not been cunning enough. It had not occurred to them that the foundations would still be visible underneath, for the simple reason that grass does not grow without sunlight.

Dick saw old Luke Evans nodding and pointing downward. The old man picked up his end of the speaking-tube, but Dick ignored the gesture. He signaled to his flight to rise, and zoomed up, circling,

and studying the land beneath.

That oblong was evidently the central building. Those four squares probably housed airplanes, and each would hold half a dozen. That elliptical building might contain a dirigible. That round patch was probably the gas factory.

Now Dick could see more patches of bare ground, extending in the direction of the sea. He gunned his ship and followed the gap among the trees to the ocean, a few miles distant. Yes, there were more evidence of activity here. Beside the water, in what looked like a deep natural harbor, was what seemed to be the foundations of a dock. Perhaps even vessels of war floated on the phosphorescent Bahama sea.

He circled back, his flock wheeling like a flight of birds and following him. He signaled to them to scatter. They had certainly been observed; at any moment a hail of lead might assail them invisibly out of the air. They must get to work quickly. But had they understood the significance of those bare patches?

Dick saw Luke Evans still fidgeting impatiently with his end of the speaking-tube, and picked it up.

"I'm thinking, Captain Rennell, we've got no time to lose if we want to keep the upper hand of those devils," called the old man.

"Yes, you're right," Dick answered. "Lay a trail of gas bombs all around those hangars and buildings, enough to hold them dark for some time. And keep a bomb or two in reserve."

Luke Evans shouted back. The plane was again above the structures. The old man dropped a bomb over the side, and Dick zoomed again, his flight wheeling up behind him.

Higher and higher, banking and going round in a succession of tight spirals, Dick flew. Every moment he expected the blow to fall. As he rose, Luke Evans dropped bomb after bomb. A thousand feet beneath the flight was taking up positions, hovering with the helicopters, looking up to Dick for the signal, and waiting.

Then from beneath the cloud of black gas began to rise, as Luke Evans dropped his bombs. It filled the lower spaces of the sky, blotting out the land in impenetrable darkness. That darkness, above which Dick and his flight were soaring, rose like a solid wall, built by some prehistoric race that aimed to fling a tower into the heavens.

And then—the miracle! Dick gasped in sheer delight as he realized that he had made no mistake.

At first all he could see was a number of criss-crossing phosphorescent lines that appeared shimmering through the blackness underneath. They ran luminously here and there, forming no particular pattern, much like the figures on the radium dial of a watch when first they come into wavering visibility at night.

Then the lines began to intersect one another, to assume geometric patterns and curves. And bit by bit they took meaning and significance.

And suddenly the whole invisible stronghold lay

revealed upon the ground beneath, a shining, dazzling play of weaving light.

Buildings and hangars stood out, clearly revealed; the rounded vault of a dirigible hangar, and the shining ribbon of a road that ran through a pitch-dark tarmac, and was evidently constructed from some gas-impregnated materials. On this tarmac was a flight of shining airplanes, ready to take off. There were the odd, ovoid figures of the aviators in their silken overalls. More figures appeared, running out from the buildings. It was clear that the sudden raid had taken them all by surprise.

Luke Evans yelled and pointed. "We've got them now, sir!" Dick heard above the whine of the helicopter engine. "We've—"

But of a sudden the old man's voice died away, though his mouth was still moving.

Dick leaned out of his cockpit and fired a single red Very light, the signal for the attack. And from each plane of his flight, beneath him, a bomb slid from its

rack and went hurtling down upon the gang below, while the airplanes circled and hovered, each taking up its station.

Dick was too late. By a whole minute he had missed his chance. He realized that immediately, for before the red light had flared from his pistol, the hostile planes were in the air. He had flown too low, and given the alarm.

It meant a fight now, instead of a mad dog destruction, and Dick did not underestimate the power of the enemy. But he felt a thrill of furious satisfaction at the prospect of battle. From every plane the bombs were falling. Underneath, ruin and destruction, and leaping flames—and yet darkness, save for the phosphorescent outlines of the buildings.

And the lines of these were broken, converging into strange criss-crosses of luminosity, as the beams fell in shapeless heaps. Dark fire, sweeping through the headquarters of the Invisible Emperor, a veritable hell for those below! A taste of the hell that they had made for others!

Then a strange phenomenon obtruded itself upon Dick's notice. *Nothing was audible!* The bombs were falling, but they were falling silently. No sound came up from beneath. And, except for the throbbing of his engine, Dick would have thought it had stopped. He could no longer hear it.

That terrific holocaust of death and destruction was inaudible. Skimming the upper reach of the air, high above that wall of darkness, Dick saw old Luke Evans pick up his end of the speaking-tube, and mechanically followed suit. He could see the old man's lips moving. But he heard nothing!

And now another phenomenon was borne in on his notice. His flight were perhaps five hundred feet beneath him, hovering a little above the barrage of black gas. But they were converging oddly. And there was no sight of the airplanes that Dick had just seen taking off from the invisible tarmac.

Dick fired two Very lights as a signal to his flight to scatter. What were they doing, bunching together like a flock of sheep, when at any moment the enemy

planes might come swooping in, riddling them with bullets? He thrust the stick forward—and then realized that his controls had gone dead!

He thought for a moment that a wire had snapped. But the stick responded perfectly to his hand, only it had no longer control over his plane. He kicked right rudder, and the plane remained motionless. He pushed home the soaring lever, to neutralize the helicopter and the plane still soared.

Then he noticed that the needle of his earth-inductor compass-indicator was oscillating madly, and realized that it was not his plane that was at fault.

Underneath him, his flight seemed to be milling wildly as the ships turned in every direction of the compass. But not for long. They were nosing in, until the whole flight resembled an enormous airplane engine, with twelve radial points, corresponding to their propellers, and the noses pointing symmetrically inward, like a herd of game, yarding in winter time.

And now the true significance came home to Dick. A

vertical line of magnetic force, an invisible mast, had been shot upward from the ground. The airplanes were moored to it by their noses, as effectively as if they had been fastened with steel wires.

And he, too, was struggling against that magnetic force that was slowly drawing him, despite his utmost efforts, to a fixed position five hundred feet above his flight.

For a few moments, by feeding his engine gas to the limit, Dick thought he might have a chance of escaping. Her nose a fixed point, Dick whirled round and round in a dizzy maze, attempting to break that invisible mooring-chain. Then suddenly the engine went dead. He was trapped helplessly.

He saw old Evans gesticulating wildly in the front cockpit. The old man hoisted himself, leaned over the cowlings gibbered in Dick's ear. The silent engine had ceased to throb, and the old man's shouts were simply not translated into sound.

Suddenly the flight beneath jerked downward, just as

a flag jerks when it is hauled down a pole. They vanished into the dark cloud beneath. At the same time there came a jerk that dropped Dick's plane a hundred feet, and flung him violently against the rim of the cockpit.

Another followed. By drops of a hundred feet at a time, Dick was being hauled down into the darkness underneath him.

It rushed up at him. One moment he was suspended upon the rim of it, seeing the moon and stars above him; the next he had been plunged into utter blackness. Blackness more intense than anything that could be conceived—soundless blackness, that was the added horror of it. Blackness of Luke Evans's contriving, but none the less fearful on that account!

And yet, as Dick was jerked slowly downward, slowly a pale visibility began to diffuse itself underneath. The black cloud was beginning to roll away. The luminous lines began to fade, and in place of them appeared little leaping tongues of fire. In front of him Dick saw Luke Evans's form begin to pattern itself

upon the darkness. He saw the form move sidewise, and caught at Luke's arm as he was about to hurl another gas bomb. "No!" he shouted—and heard no sound come from his lips.

Luke understood. He seemed to be replacing the bomb in the rack. Beneath them now, as they were jerked downward, were fantastic swirls of black mist, and, at the bottom, a pit of fire that was slowly coming into visibility.

Dick uttered a cry of horror! Five hundred feet below his plane he saw the dim forms of his flight, still bunched together, noses almost touching. And they were dropping straight into that flaming furnace of ruin underneath, which was growing clearer every instant.

Down, jerk by jerk. Down! The black cloud was fast dispersing from the ground. The flight were hardly a thousand feet above the fire. Down—a long jerk that one! Once more! The flames leaped up hungrily about the doomed airships. Cries of mad horror broke from Dick's lips as he witnessed the destruction of ships

and men.

He could see almost clearly now. The twelve ships, still retaining their nose-to-nose formation, were in the very heart of the fire. spurts of exploding gasoline thrust their white tongues upward. There was only one consolation: for the doomed men, death must have come practically instantaneously.

From where he hung, Dick could feel the fierce heat of the flames below. In front of him, old Luke Evans sat in his cockpit like one petrified. He was feebly fumbling at his camera-box, as if he had some idea of using it, and had forgotten that it was fixed to the plane, but the old man seemed temporarily to have lost his wits.

Rushing flames surrounded the burning airships, reducing them to a solid, welded mass of incandescent metal. Dick looked down, waiting for the next jerk that would summon him to join his men. At the moment he was not conscious of either fear or horror, only intense rage against the murderers and regret that he could never bring back the news of

victory.

The cloud had almost dissipated. In place of the phosphorescence, electric lights had appeared, making the ground beneath perfectly visible. Dick could see a number of men grouped together at the entrance to a large building, part of which had been wrecked by a bomb, though there were no evidences of fire. Other structures had been dismantled and knocked about, but what remained of them had not been charred by fire. Evidently they had been fireproofed. Perhaps the gas itself was incombustible. Only in the middle of the tarmac, where the remnants of the airplanes blazed, was there any sign of fire.

There were three machines resembling dynamos, placed one at each corner of the tarmac, equidistant from the central holocaust. A half-dozen men were grouped about each of them, and by the light from the huge reflector over each Dick saw that they were whirring busily. At the time it did not occur to him that these were the machines that were sending out the electrical force that had held the airplanes powerless.

But as he looked, his mind still a turmoil of hate and hopeless anger, he saw one of the three machines cease whirring. The group about it dispersed, the light above went out. And now his plane, as if drawn by the power of the two remaining machines, began to move jerkily again, not down toward the burning wreckage, but sidewise, away from it.

Straight out toward the side of the tarmac it moved jerked downward diagonally, until it rested only a few feet above the ground.

Then suddenly Dick felt the plane quiver, as if released from the power of the force that had held it. It nosed down and crashed, rolled over amid the wreckage of a shattered wing. The concussion shot Dick from the cockpit clear of the smashed machine.

He landed upon his head, and went out instantly.

Chapter 9: The Invisible Emperor

It was the sound of his name, spoken repeatedly, that brought Dick back to consciousness. He opened his eyes, blinking in broad daylight. He stared about him, and the first thing he saw was Luke Evans, regarding him anxiously from a little distance away. He saw that it was Luke who had spoken.

He had heard the old man distinctly. The condition of inaudibility was gone.

Not that of invisibility. Dick stared about him in bewilderment. For a moment, before he quite realized what had happened to him, he thought he had lost his mind. Underneath him was a thick rug, beneath his head a pillow; he could feel both of them, and yet all he could see was the open country, a clearing with shrubbery on either side, and, beyond that, a luxurious growth of tropical trees. Under him, to all visual appearance, was the bare ground.

He moved, and heard the clank of chains. He looked down at himself. His wrists were loosely linked to a

chain that seemed to stretch tight into vacancy and end in nothing. His ankles were bound likewise.

And both chains appeared to be of solid silver, but thick enough to give them the strength of iron!

Then he perceived that old Evans was bound in the same way.

"Rennell! Rennell!" repeated the old man in a sort of whimper. "Thank God you've come out of it! I was afraid you were dead."

"What's happened?" asked Dick. "Where are we? Didn't they get us?"

"They've got us, damn them!" snarled old Evans. "All the rest burned to cinders, those fine fellows, Rennell! You were thrown unconscious, but none of my tough old bones were hurt. They pulled us out of the wreckage and brought us in here and tied us with these silver chains."

"In here? But where are we?" demanded Dick, trying

to pass his hand across his aching forehead, and realizing that the chain, though it seemed fastened to nothing, was perfectly taut.

"In one of their damned invisible houses," whimpered the old man. "They're fireproof. Nearly all our bombs fell on the tarmac, and they did hardly any damage at all. One of those devils was bragging about it to me. I couldn't see anything but his eyes. And they've taken away my gas-box," wailed old Luke.

Dick cursed comprehensively and was silent. The burning rage that filled him left him incapable of other utterance. Silver chains! They must be madmen—yes, that was the only explanation. Madmen who had escaped from somewhere, obtained possession of scientific secrets, and banded themselves together to overcome the world. If he could get the chance of a blow at them before he died!

He heard a door swing open—a door somewhere out on the prairie. Two men sprang into sudden visibility and approached him. There was nothing invisible about these men, though they had seemed to have

materialized out of nothing. They wore the same black, trimly fitting uniform that Dick had seen in the White House. They were flesh and blood human beings like themselves.

"I congratulate you upon your recovery, Captain Rennell," remarked one of them with ironical politeness. "Also upon your shrewd coup. Needless to say, it had no chance of success, but we were misinformed as to the hour at which you might be expected. We thought it would take the fools at Washington a little longer to puzzle out our location—and then we did not put quite sufficient force into our hurricane. Quite an artificial one, Captain."

Dick, glaring at them, said nothing, and the one who had spoken turned to his companion, laughing, and said something in a foreign language that he did not recognize.

"His Majesty the Emperor commands your presence, and that of this old fool," said the first man. "Do not attempt to escape us. Death will be instantaneous." He drew a glass rod from his pocket, the tip of which

glowed with a pale blue light.

Again he spoke to his companion, who moved apparently a few feet distant out on the prairie. Suddenly Dick saw old Evans' chain slacken: then Dick's slackened too. He understood that he was unbound, though his wrists and ankles were still loosely fastened.

The second man took his station beside Luke Evans and motioned to him to rise. The first man beckoned to Dick to do the same. The two prisoners got upon their feet, trailing each a length of clanking chain. Each of the two guards covered his captive with the glass rod and motioned to him to precede him.

Choking with fury, Dick obeyed. He had taken a dozen steps with his guard uttered a sharp command to halt, at the same time shouting some word of command.

The edge of a door appeared, also seeming to materialize out of space. It widened, and Dick realized that he was looking at the unpainted inner side of a door whose outside was invisible. Beyond the

door appeared a flight of steps.

Dick passed through and descended them. He counted fifteen. He emerged into a timbered underground passage, well lit with lamps, filled with what seemed to be mercury vapor. Behind him walked his guard: behind the guard he heard Luke Evans shambling. Both chains were clinking, and again Dick's fury almost overcame him.

He controlled himself. He had no hope or desire for life, but he meant to strike some sort of blow before he died, if it were possible.

They turned out of the timbered passage, Dick's guard now walking at his side, the glass rod menacing his back. Dick found himself in a large subterranean room of extraordinary character. The walls were not merely timbered, but paneled. Pictures hung upon them, there were soft rugs underfoot, there was antique furniture. Everything was in plain sight.

There was a door at the farther end, from beyond which came the murmur of voices. Two guards in the

same black uniform, but without the ornamental silver braid, stood to attention, long halberds in their hands. One spoke a challenge.

The guard at Dick's side answered. The two men stepped backward, each about two feet, and pulled the two cords on either side of a curtain behind the open door. Dick passed through.

He stopped in sheer amazement. The gorgeousness of this larger room into which he entered was almost stupefying. It seemed to have been lifted bodily from some European palace. Mirrors with gilt edges ran along the side. On the floor was a single huge rug of Oriental weave.

At the farther end was a throne of gilt, lined with red velvet in which sat a man. An old man, of perhaps eighty years, with a grey peaked beard and fierce, commanding features. On his head was a gold crown glittering with gems. About him were gathered some twoscore men and a few women.

Those ranged on either side of the throne wore, like

its occupant, robes of red, lined with ermine. The rank behind wore shorter robes, less decorative, but no less extraordinary. They might all have stepped out of some medieval court.

Behind this second line, and half-encircling them, were officers in the black uniform with the silver braid.

There had been chattering, but as Dick passed through into the room it was succeeded by complete silence. Dick fixed his eyes upon the old man on the throne.

He knew him! Knew him for a once famous European ruler who had lost his throne in the war. A man always of unbalanced mentality, who, after living for years in exile, had been reported dead three years before. A madman who had vanished to make this last attempt upon the world, aided and abetted by the secret group of nobles who had surrounded him in the days of his pomp and power.

Old men, all of those in the first line! Madmen too,

perhaps, as madness begets madness. Behind them, younger men, infected by the strange malady, and enthusiastic for their desperate cause.

Yes, Dick knew this Invisible Emperor, lurking here in his underground palace. He knew Von Kettler, too, in the second line, close to the Emperor's throne. And, among the women in their robes, grouped picturesquely about that throne, he knew Fredegonde Valmy.

Dark-haired beneath her coronet, of radiant beauty, she fixed her eyes upon Dick's. Not a muscle of her face quivered.

Then only did Dick see something else, which he had not hitherto observed, owing to its concealment by the robes of those grouped about the Emperor, and the sight of it sent such a thrill of fury through him that he stood where he was, unable to speak or move a muscle.

The throne was set on a sort of dais, with three steps in front of it. The lowest of these steps was hollow.

Within this hollow appeared the head and shoulders of a man.

An elderly man clothed in parti-colored red and yellow, the time-honored garment of court fools. He was on his hands and knees, and the round of his back fitted into the hollow of the step, and had a flat board over it, so that the Emperor, in ascending his throne, would place his foot upon it.

He was kept in that position with heavy chains of what looked like gold, which passed about his neck and arms, and fitted into heavy gold staples in the wood. And the old man was President Hargreaves of the United States!

The President of the American Republic, chained as a footstool for the Invisible Emperor, the madman who defied the world. Dick stood petrified, staring into the mild face of the old man, still incapable of speech. Then a herald, carrying a long trumpet, to which a square banner was attached, strode forward from one side of the grotesque assemblage.

"Dog, on your knees when His Majesty deigns to admit you to the Presence!" he shouted.

The guard at Dick's side prodded him with his glass rod.

Then the storm of mad fury in Dick's heart released limbs and voice. The cry that came from his lips was like nothing human. He leaped upon the guard with a swift uppercut that sent him sprawling.

The glass rod slipped from his hands to the rug, striking the edge of his shoe, and broke to fragments. A single streak of fire shot from it, blasting a black streak across the Oriental rug.

Dick leaped toward the throne, and the assemblage, as if paralyzed by his sudden maneuver, remained watching him without moving. Then a woman screamed, and instantly the picturesque gathering had dissolved into a mob placing itself about the person of the Emperor, who sprang from his throne in agitation.

Dick was almost at the steps. But it was not at the Emperor that he leaped. He sprang to Hargreaves's side. "Mr. President, I'm an American," he babbled. "We've located this gang, we'll blow them off the face of the earth. In chains—God, in chains, sir—"

Dick stumbled over the length of his own chain that he had been dragging behind him—stumbled and fell prone upon the floor. Before he could regain his feet they were upon him.

A dozen men were holding him, despite his mad, frenzied struggles, and as, at length, he paused, exhausted, one of them, covering his head with a glass rod, looked up at the Emperor, who had resumed his seat.

Dick calmed himself. Still gripped, he straightened his body, and gave the mad monarch back look for look. For a moment the two men regarded each other. Then a peal of laughter broke from the Invisible Emperor's lips. And any one who heard that peal—any one save

those accustomed to him—might have known that it was a madman's laughter.

He flung back his head and laughed, and the whole crowd laughed too. All those sycophants roared and chuckled—all except Fredegonde. It was not till afterward that Dick remembered that.

He stood up. "Dog of an American," he roared, "do you know why you were brought here? It was because I wanted one Yankee to live and see the irresistible powers that I exercise, so that he can go back and report on them to those fools in Washington who still think they can defy me, the messenger of the All-Highest.

"I tell you that the things I have done are nothing in comparison with the things that I have yet to do, if your insane government of pig-headed fools persists in its defiance. It is my plan to send you back to tell them that their President lies bound in gold chains as my footstool. That the hurricane which spread the gas through southern America was a mere summer zephyr in comparison with the storm that I shall send

next.

"All the resources of Nature are at my command thanks to the illustrious chemists who have been secretly working for the past ten years to serve me. I, the All-Highest, have been commanded by the Almighty to scourge the world for its insolence in rejecting me, and especially the pig-race of Yankees whose pride has grown so great. Mine is the divinely appointed task to cast down your ridiculous democracies and re-establish the divine world-order of an Emperor and his nobility.

"That is why I have chosen, to permit so mean a thing as you to live. As for the old fool beside you, who thought to stay my power with his box of tricks—his gas-box is already being analyzed by my chemists, and in a few hours the trivial secret will be at my disposal."

"And that's just where you're wrong," piped old Luke Evans in his cracked voice. "That gas can't be analyzed, because it contains an unknown isotope, and, as for yourself, you're nothing but a daft old fool,

with your tin-horn trumpery!"

For a moment the Emperor stood like a statue, staring at old Luke. The expression on his face was that of a madman, but a madman through whose brain a straggling ray of realization has dawned. It was the look upon his face that held the whole assemblage spellbound. Then suddenly came intervention.

Through a doorway in the side of the hall came one of the officers in black. He advanced to the foot of the throne and made a deep, hurried bow, speaking rapidly in some language incomprehensible to Dick.

The Emperor started, and then a peal of laughter left his lips.

"Pig of a Yankee," he shouted to Dick, "your contemptible navy's now approaching our shores, with a dirigible scout above it. You shall now see how I deal with such swine!"

Chapter 10: The Tricks of the Trade

He barked a command, and instantly Dick was seized by two of the guards, one of whom—the one Dick had knocked down—took the occasion to administer a buffeting in the process of overcoming him. For the sight of the honored President of the United States—that kindly old man straining his eyes to meet Dick's own—in the parti-colored garb of red and yellow, and chained like a beast below the madman's throne, again filled Dick with a fury beyond all control.

It was only when he had been half-stunned again by the vicious blows of his captors, delivered with short truncheons of heavy wood, that at length he desisted from his futile struggle.

With swimming eyes he looked upon the gathering about the throne, which, again taking its cue from the madman, was roaring with laughter at his antics. And again Dick's eyes encountered those of Fredegonde Valmy.

The girl was not smiling. She was looking straight at

him, and for a moment it seemed to Dick as if he read some message in her eyes.

Only for an instant that idea flashed through his mind. He was in no mood to receive messages. As he stood panting like a wild beast at bay, suddenly a filmy substance was thrown over his head from behind. Then, as his face emerged, and the rest of his body was swiftly enveloped, he realized what was happening.

They had thrown over him one of the invisible garments. He could feel the stuff about him, but he could no longer see his own body or limbs.

From his own ken, Dick Rennell had vanished utterly. Where his legs and feet should have been, there was only the rug, with the burn from the glass tube. He raised one arm and could not see arm or fingers.

In another moment invisible cords had been flung around him. Dick's efforts to renew the struggle were quickly cut short. Trussed helplessly, he could only stand glaring at the madman rocking with laughter

upon his tinsel throne. Beside him, similarly bound, stood Luke Evans, but Dick was only conscious of the old man's presence by reason of the short, rasping, emphatic curses that broke from his lips.

The Emperor turned on his throne and beckoned to Von Kettler, who approached with a deferential bow.

"Nobility, we charge you with the care of these two prisoners," he addressed him. "Have the old one removed to the laboratory, and give orders that he shall assist our chemists to the best of his power in their analysis of the black gas. As for the other, take him up to the central office, and show him how we deal with Yankees and all other pigs. Show him everything, so that he may take back a correct account of our irresistible powers when we dismiss him."

"Come!" barked one of the guards in Dick's ear.

Dick attempted no further resistance. Convinced of its futility, sick and reeling from the blows he had received, he accompanied his captors quietly. There

was nothing more that he could do, either for President Hargreaves or for old Luke, but he still imagined the possibility of somehow warning the approaching fleet or the occupants of the dirigible.

He was led along the passage, past the guards, and up the stairs again. The top door opened upon vacancy; it closed, and vanished. Dick felt the rugs beneath his feet, but he was to all appearances standing on a square of bare earth in the middle of a prairie.

"Come!" barked the guard again, and Dick accompanied him, trailing his silver chain. Behind came Von Kettler.

"Here are steps!" said the guard, after they had proceeded a short distance.

Dick stumbled against the lowest step of an invisible flight. The breeze was cut off, showing that they had entered a building. Underneath was a large oval of bare ground. Dick found a handrail and groped his way up around a spiral staircase, four flights of it.

"Here is a room!"

Dick saw that widening edge of door again. The room inside was perfectly visible, though it seemed to be supported upon air. It was a spheroid, of huge size, with a number of large windows set into the walls, and it was filled with machinery. About a dozen workmen in blue blouses were moving to and fro, attending to what appeared to be a number of enormous dynamos, but there were other apparatus of whose significance Dick was ignorant. The dynamos were whirring with intense velocity, but not the slightest sound was audible.

Von Kettler stepped to a switch attached to a stanchion of white metal, surmounted by a huge opaque glass dome, and threw it over. Instantly the hum and whir of machinery became audible, the sound of footsteps, the voices of the workmen, and the creak of boards beneath their feet.

"You see, we have discovered the means of destroying sound waves as well as shadows, and it was a much simpler feat," said Von Kettler with a sneer. "Tell them

that when you get back to Washington, Yankee pig. Also you might be interested to know that most of your bombs fell on camouflaged structures that we had erected with the intention of deceiving you."

He gestured to Dick to precede him, and halted him at a plain round iron pipe or rod that rose up through the floor and passed through the roof. It was surrounded by a mesh of fine wire. Attached to it were various gauges, with dials showing red and black numbers.

"This is perhaps our greatest achievement, swine," remarked Von Kettler, affably. "You shall see its operations from above." He pointed to a narrow spiral staircase rising at the far end of the room. "It is the practical application of Einstein's gravitation and electricity in field relation. It is by means of this, and the three dynamos on the ground that we were able to neutralize your engines last night and bring them down where we wanted them. You must be sure to tell the Washington hogs about that."

He motioned to Dick to cross the room and ascend the

spiral staircase. Following him, he flung another switch similar to the first one, and instantly all sound within the room was cut off.

They ascended the winding flight and emerged upon a floor or platform. Dick felt it under his feet, but he could see nothing except the ground, far beneath him. He seemed to be suspended in the void. He stopped, groping, hesitating to advance. Von Kettler's jarring laugh grated on his ears.

"Don't be afraid, swine," he jeered. "This place is enclosed. There is a shadow-breaking device on every floor, which renders us complete masters of camouflage."

A switch snapped. Dick found himself instantly in a rotunda, roofed with glass, sections of which were raised to a height of three or four feet from the wooden base, admitting a gentle breeze. Three or four men were moving about in it, but these wore the black uniform with the silver braid, and Von Kettler's manner was deferential as he addressed them, jerking his hand contemptuously toward Dick. Grins of

derision and malice appeared on all the faces.

Save one, an elderly officer, apparently of high rank, who came forward and raised his hand to the salute.

"Captain Rennell," he said, "we are at war with your nation, but we are also, I hope, gentlemen." He turned to Von Kettler. "Is it seemly," he asked, "that an officer of the American army should be brought here in chains and cords?"

"Excellency, it is His Majesty's command," responded Von Kettler, with a servile smirk that hardly concealed his elation. "Moreover, the American is to witness the forthcoming destruction of the Yankee fleet."

The elderly officer reddened, turned away without replying. Dick looked about him.

There was less machinery in this room. The iron pillar that he had seen came through the floor and terminated some five feet above it in another of the opaque glass domes, filled with iridescent fire. About it was a complicated arrangement of dials and

gauges.

In the centre of the room was a sort of camera obscura. A large hood projected above a flat table, and an officer was half-concealed beneath it, apparently studying the table busily.

"Come, American, you shall see your navy on its way to destruction," said Von Kettler, beckoning Dick within the hood.

The officer stepped from the table, whose top was a sheet of silvered glass, leaving Von Kettler and Dick in front of it. Dick looked. At first he could see nothing but the vast stretch of sea; then he began to make out tiny dots at the table's end, terminating in minute blurs that were evidently smoke from the funnels.

"Your ships," said Von Kettler, smiling. "This is the dirigible." He pointed to another dot that came into sight and disappeared almost instantly. "They are a hundred and fifty miles away. Explain to your friends in Washington that our super-telescopic sights are based upon a refraction of light that overcomes the

earth's curvature. It is simple, but it happens not to have been worked out until my Master commanded it."

Dick watched those tiny dots in fascination, mentally computing. At an average speed of fifty knots an hour, the squadron's steaming rate, they should be off the coast within three hours. The dirigible would take two, if it went ahead to scout, as was almost certain.

Dick stepped back from beneath the hood and glanced about him. If only his arms were not bound, he might do enough damage within a few seconds to put the deadlier machinery out of commission, if only the silvered mirror. He glanced about him. Von Kettler, interpreting his thought, smiled coolly.

"You are helpless, my dear Yankee pig," he said. "But there is more to see. Oblige me by accompanying me up to the top story."

He pointed to a ladder running up beside the iron pillar through an opening in the roof, and Dick, with a shrug of the shoulders, complied. He emerged upon a

small platform, apparently protruding into vacancy. Far underneath he saw the clearing, and two airplanes on the tarmac, the aviators looking like beetles from that height. He looked out to sea and saw no signs of the fleet.

"You have heard of St. Simeon Stylites, Yankee?" purred Von Kettler. "The gentleman who spent forty years of his life upon a tall pillar, in atonement for his sins? It is His Majesty's desire that you spend, not forty years, but two or three hours up here, meditating upon his grandeur, before returning to earth. It is also possible that you will witness something of considerable interest. Look out to sea!"

Dick turned his head involuntarily. He heard Von Kettler's laugh, heard the snap of a switch—then suddenly he was alone in the void.

At that snap of the switch, everything had vanished from view behind him, the building, even the platform on which he stood. His feet seemed to rest on nothing. Yet below him he could still see the airplanes, and more being wheeled out.

A sense of extreme physical nausea overcame him. He reeled, then managed to steady himself. He, too, was invisible to his own eyes. Involuntarily he cried out. No sound came from his lips. He stood there, invisible in an invisible, soundless void.

For what seemed an unending period he occupied himself with endeavoring to obtain the sense of balance. Then, with a great effort, he managed to loosen the cords that bound his right arm to his side. A mighty wrench, and he had slipped them up above his elbow. His right lower arm was free.

He extended it cautiously, and his hand encountered a railing. Instantly he felt more at ease. He began moving slowly around in a widening circle, and discovered that the platform was enclosed. The further side was, however, open, and he began sliding forward, foot by foot, to locate himself. Once his foot slipped over the edge, and he drew back hastily. He felt on the other side, and discovered that he was upon what seemed a plank walk, perhaps a hundred and fifty feet above the ground, with no rail on either side, and some six feet wide.

Very cautiously he shuffled his way along it. It was solid enough, although invisible, but more than once Dick walked perilously close to one edge or the other. At length he went down on his hands and knees, and proceeded, crawling, until his movements were arrested by what was unmistakably a door.

The plank bridge, then, connected the top stories of two buildings, but what the second was, there was no means of knowing. The door was barred on the other side, and did not yield an iota to Dick's cautious pressure. Dick felt the frame. Beyond was glass, reinforced with iron on the outside, the latter metal forming a sort of lattice work. Cautiously Dick began to crawl up the rounded dome.

Foot by foot he made his way, clinging to the iron bars, until he felt that he had reached the point of the dome's maximum convexity. He wedged his feet against a bar and rested. Only now was it brought home to him that it would be impossible for him to find his way back to the plank.

A long time must have passed, for, looking out to sea,

he could see the squadron now, minute points on the horizon, exuding smudges of smoke. The dirigible was still invisible. The airplanes had either left the tarmac or had been wrapped in the gas-impregnated cloth, for both they and the aviators had vanished.

Suddenly Dick had an odd sensation that the iron was growing warm.

In another moment or two he had no doubt of it. The iron bar he clutched was distinctly warm; it was growing hot. He shifted his grasp to the adjacent bar and even in that moment the heat had increased perceptibly.

Suddenly there came a vibration, a sense of movement. Dick was being swung outward. The whole dome seemed to be dropping into space. He dug his feet and fingers under the hot rods, and felt himself sliding over on his back.

Back—back, till he was lying horizontally in space, and clutching desperately at the iron bar, which was growing hotter every moment.

The sliding movement ceased. It was as if the whole upper section of the glass dome had opened outward. But the heat of the bars was becoming unbearable, and gusts of hot air seemed to be proceeding from within.

Hot or not, Dick's only alternative was to work his way back to the stable portion of the dome, or to frizzle until he dropped through space.

Clinging desperately to the bars, he began working back, reaching from bar to bar with his right hand and dragging his feet, with the clanking chain attached, from bar to bar also.

How he gained the base of the dome he was never able afterward to understand. The heat had grown intolerable; his hands were blistering. Somehow he reached it. He rested a moment despite the heat. But to find the plank walk was clearly impossible. In another minute he must drop. Better that than to fry there like St. Lawrence on his griddle.

And then, just when he had resigned himself to that

last drop, there came an unexpected diversion. Almost beside him a window was hung back. A man looked out. Dick saw one of the workmen in the blue blouses, and, behind him, within the dome, what seemed like an empty room.

Dick was slightly above the man. As his head and shoulders appeared, he let himself go, landing squarely across his back. He slid down his shoulders through the open window into the interior of the dome.

The man, flung against the frame of the window by the shock, uttered a piercing cry. Before he could recover his stand, or take in what had happened to him, Dick had gained his feet and leaped upon him. His right hand closed upon his throat. He bore him to the floor and choked him into insensibility.

Chapter 11: In the Laboratory

Not until the man's struggles had ceased, and he lay unconscious, panting, and blue in the face, did Dick release him. Then he looked about him.

Save for the workman, he was alone in a rotunda, open to the sky, and, as he had supposed, the whole upper portion of the dome had been flung back, leaving an immense aperture into which the sun was shining, flecking the interior with shafts of light. The temperature, despite the opening of the dome, must have been in excess of a hundred and twenty-five degrees.

There was nothing except an immense central shaft, up which ran a hollow pole of glass, cut off by the invisible paint at the summit of the dome. The inside of this glass pole was glowing with colored fires, and it was from this that the intolerable heat came, though its function Dick could not imagine.

One thing was clear: It was growing hotter each moment. To remain in that rotunda meant death

within a brief period of time.

And there was no way out! Dick glared around him, searching the glass walls in vain. No semblance of a stairway or ladder, even. Yet the workman must have entered by some ingress—if only Dick could discover it!

He began running round the interior of the dome in the brilliant sunshine, searching frantically for that ingress. And it was growing hotter! The sweat was pouring down his face beneath the invisible garment.

Dick was vaguely aware that the silence switch had been thrown in the room, for his feet made no sound, but the knowledge was latent in his mind. Two or three times he circumnavigated the interior of the dome, like a rat in a trap.

Then suddenly he saw a section of the flooring rise in a corner, and a workman in a blue blouse appear out of the trap door.

He stood there, his face muscles working as he

shouted for his companion, but no sound came from his lips. He looked about him, and saw the unconscious man beside the window. He started in his direction.

With a shout, Dick hurled himself toward him. And he checked himself even as he was about to leap. For he realized that the second workman neither saw nor heard him.

Yet some subconscious impression of danger must have reached his mind, for the workman stopped too, instinctively assuming an attitude of defense. Dick gathered a dozen links of his wrist-chain in his right hand, leaped and struck.

The workman crumpled to the floor, a little thread of blood creeping from his right temple.

It was the thing upon which Dick looked back afterward with less satisfaction than any other, leaving the two unconscious men in that room of death. Yet there was nothing else he could have done. He ran to the trap, and saw a ladder leading down. In

a moment he had swung himself through and closed the trap behind him.

The material that lined the walls below must have had almost perfect insulating qualities, for the temperature here was no hotter than in the Bahamas on a hot summer day. Dick scrambled down the ladder and found himself in a machine-shop. Nobody was there, and tools of all sorts were lying about, as well as machinery whose purpose he did not understand. A pair of heavy pliers and a vise were sufficient to rid Dick of his wrist and ankle chains in a minute or two. With a knife he slashed the cords of invisible stuff that bound him. He stood up, cramped, but free.

He picked up an iron bar that was lying loose on a table beside a machine, and advanced to the staircase in one corner of the shop. As he approached it, another workman came running up.

Dick stood aside in an embrasure in the wall partly occupied by a machine. The man passed within two feet of him and never saw him. Only then did Dick quite realize that he was actually invisible.

The moment the man had passed him, Dick ran to the staircase. He descended one flight; he was half way down another when a yell of pain and imprecation came to his ears. He knew that voice: it was Luke Evans's!

With three bounds Dick reached the bottom of the stairs. He saw a large room in front of him. No mistaking the nature of this room; it was an ordinary laboratory, fitted out with the greatest elaboration, and divided into two parts by paneling. And sight and sound were on.

In the part nearer Dick three men were grouped about a large dynamo, which was sending out a high, musical note as it spun. Levers and dials were all about it, and above it was the base of the glass tube that Dick had seen above. In the other part were five or six men. Three of them were testing some substance at a table; three more were gathered about old Luke Evans, whose silver chains had been removed and replaced by ropes, which bound his limbs, and also bound him to a heavy chair, which seemed to be affixed to the ground. One of the three

had a piece of metal in a pair of long-handled pliers. It was white hot, and a white electric spark that shot to and fro between two terminals close by, showed where it had been heated.

Dick started; he recognized one of the three men as Von Kettler. He moved slowly forward, very softly, his feet making no sound on the fiber matting that covered the floor.

"Did that feel good, American swine?" asked Von Kettler softly, and Dick saw, with horror, a red weal on the old man's forehead. "Now you are perhaps in a more gracious mood, Professor? The unknown isotope in that black gas of yours—you are disposed to give us the chemical formula?"

"I'll see you in hell first," raved old Luke Evans, writhing in his chair.

Von Kettler turned to the man holding the white-hot metal, and nodded. But at that moment a door behind Evans's chair opened, and Fredegonde Valmy appeared in the entrance. Von Kettler turned hastily,

snatched the pliers from the man's hand, and laid the metal in a receptacle.

But the girl had seen the action. She looked at the weal on Luke's forehead, and clenched her hands; her eyes dilated with horror.

"You have been torturing him, Hugo!" she cried.

"Freda, what are you doing in here? Oblige me by withdrawing immediately!" cried Von Kettler.

"Where is Captain Rennell?" the girl retorted. "I will know!"

"He is upstairs, watching the approaching Yankee fleet, and waiting to see its destruction," returned the other.

"You are lying to me! He has been killed, and this old man has been tortured!" cried Fredegonde. "I tell you, Hugo Von Kettler, you are no longer a half-brother of mine! I am through with you!"

"Unfortunately," sneered Von Kettler, "it is not possible to dispose of a family relationship so easily."

"It is cheap to sneer," the girl retorted. "But you sang a very different song when you were in the penitentiary, in terror of death, and you begged me to come and throw you the invisible robe through the bars. You promised me then that you would abandon this mad enterprise and come away with me. You swore it!"

"I have sworn allegiance to my Emperor, and that comes first," retorted Von Kettler. "Oblige me by retiring."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," cried the girl hysterically. "When you used me as a tool in your enterprises in Washington, you played upon my patriotism for my conquered country. I thought I was undertaking a heroic act. I didn't dream of the villainy, the cold-blooded murder that was to be wrought."

"You've kept me here virtually a prisoner," she went

on, with rising violence, "an attendant upon that old madman, your Emperor, and his sham court, while more murder is being planned. Where is Captain Rennell, I say?" She stamped her foot. "I demand that he and this old man be set at liberty at once. Hugo," she pleaded, "come away with me. Don't you see what the end must be? This is no heroic enterprise, it is wholesale murder that will arouse the conscience of civilized mankind against you! Order that the vortex-ray be turned off," she went on, looking through the opening in the partition toward the dynamo. "That gas—you cannot be so vile as to send it forth again, to destroy the American ships?"

"My dear Freda," retorted the young man coolly, "the vortex-ray is already charged with the gas, and at a height of twenty thousand feet it is now creating a vacuum that will send the gas upon the wings of a hurricane straight up the Atlantic seaboard. It will obliterate every living thing on board the battleships, from men to rats, and this time we mean to reach New York.

"As for that swine Rennell," he went on, "you heard

His Majesty announce his intention of sending him back to Washington with the information of our irresistible power. Of course I know you are in love with him, and that these qualms of conscience are due to that circumstance."

But Dick hardly heard the latter part of Von Kettler's remarks. Suddenly the significance of the dynamo and the superheated room above had come home to him. He had read of such a project years before, in some newspaper, and had forgotten about it until that moment.

By sending a high-tension current almost to the limits of the earth's atmosphere, the article had said, a vortex or vacuum could be set up which would create a hurricane.

The tremendous pressure of the in-rushing air would make a veritable cyclone, which, taking the course of the prevailing winds, would rush forth on a mission of widespread disaster.

And on this hurricane would go the deadly gas,

infinitely diluted, and yet deadly to all life in its infinitesimal proportion to the atmosphere.

And the American fleet was now approaching the Bahama shores.

Dick forgot Luke Evans, everything else, as the significance of that mechanism in the next room came home to him. He ran like a madman through the space in the partition, and, raising the bar aloft, brought it thudding down upon the dials, twisting and warping them.

He struck at the hollow pole, but, glass or not, it defied all his efforts. He seized a heavy lever and flung it into reverse—and two others.

Yelling, the three attendants broke and ran. Out of the laboratory the six came running, collided with the three. Behind them Dick could see Fredegonde Valmy, a knife in her hand, slashing at Luke Evans's bonds.

Dick swung his bar and brought it crashing down on a head, felling the man like a log. He saw Von Kettler

pull one of the glass rods from his pocket and fire blindly. The discharge struck a second attendant, and the man dropped screeching, his clothes ablaze.

Somebody yelled, "He's there! Look at his eyes!" and pointed at Dick's face.

Dick leaped aside and swung the rod again, felling a third man. The others turned and ran. Von Kettler in the van, broke through the door behind Luke Evans's chair, and disappeared.

Dick ran back to where the old man was standing beside the girl, the discarded ropes at his feet. He flung his hood back. "Luke, don't you know me?" he shouted.

It was creditable to Luke Evans's composure that, though Dick must have presented the aspect of nothing more than a face floating in the air, he retained his composure.

"Sure I know you, Rennell," replied the old man. "And you and me's going to best them devils yet."

"But the fleet—it's approaching Abaco," Dick cried.
"I've got to warn them."

Fredegonde seized him by the arm.

"Come with me," she cried. "If they find you here, they'll kill you."

Dick hesitated only a moment, then followed the girl as she dashed for another door on the same side of the laboratory as that by which Von Kettler and his men had fled. They dashed down the staircase, and a corridor disclosed itself at the bottom. The girl stopped.

"There is a private way—the Emperor's," she panted. "He had it constructed—in case of necessity. I got the keys. I was planning—something desperate—to stop these murders; I didn't know what."

Dick seized her by the arm. "What keys?" he demanded. "The key to the place where President Hargreaves is?"

"Yes, but—"

"We must get him. Where is he?"

"In a cell beneath the throne room. That's overhead. But they'll catch us—"

"Which is the key?" asked Dick.

The girl produced three or four keys, fumbled with them, handed one to Dick. "This way!" she cried.

They ran along the corridor. Two guards appeared, moving toward them under the electric lights. At the sight of the girl running, and Luke Evans, they stopped in surprise.

Dick had pulled the hood back over his head. He ran toward them, wielding the iron bar. A mighty swing sent the two toppling over, one unconscious, the other bruised and yelling loudly.

"Here! Here!" gasped Fredegonde, stopping before a door.

Dick fitted the key to the lock and turned it. Inside, upon a quite visible bed, sat President Hargreaves, unchained. He looked up inquiringly as the three entered.

"Mr. President," said Dick, throwing back his hood, "I'm an American officer, and I want to save you. There's not much chance, but, if you'll come with me —"

Hargreaves got up and smiled. "I'm not a military man, sir," he answered, "but I'm ready to take that chance rather than—"

He did not complete the sentence. Shouts echoed along the corridor behind them. Dick replaced his hood, handed the keys back to the girl. "Take Mr. Hargreaves to any place of temporary safety you can," he said. "And Mr. Evans. I'll hold them!"

"It's right here. This door!" panted the girl, indicating a door at the end of the passage.

The three ran toward it. Dick turned. Five or six

guards with Von Kettler at their head, were running toward him. They saw the three fugitives and set up a shout.

Dick had a quick inspiration. He dashed back into the cell, seized the light bed, and dragged it through the doorway into the passage, just in time to send Von Kettler and two others sprawling. He brought down the bar upon the head of one of them, shouting as he did so.

Then he became aware that the passage was flooded with sunshine. Fredegonde had got the door open.

He darted back, passed through in the wake of the three, and slammed it shut. Fredegonde turned the key. Instantly Dick found himself with his three companions upon the prairie. Not a vestige of the buildings was apparent anywhere, except for the patches of brown earth.

Chapter 12: Von Kettler's End

Fredegonde took command, repressing her agitation with a visible effort. "They cannot break down that door," she said, "and they dare not ask for another key. It will take them a minute or two to go back and reach us around the building. But there may be a score of people watching us. Let us walk quietly toward the thickets. If I am present, they will not suspect anything is wrong."

But Dick stood still, driven into absolute immobility by the conflicting claims of duty. For overhead, high in the blue, was an American dirigible.

And at his side was the President of the United States. One or other of them he must sacrifice.

He chose. He ran forward without answering. Those squares of brown earth, set side by side, were the airplane hangars, and he meant to seize an airplane, if he could find one beneath its coat of invisibility, and fly to warn the dirigible and the fleet.

A curious wind was blowing. It seemed to come swirling downward, as no wind that Dick had ever known. It was growing in violence each moment, beating upon his face.

As he ran, he was aware of Luke beside him. He heard shouting all about them. Luke had been seen. Not only Luke, but Hargreaves, who was running after Luke, with Fredegonde trying in vain to change his intentions. At the edge of the first brown patch Dick collided violently with the wall of the invisible hangar, and went reeling back. The shouts were growing louder.

"Wait!" gasped Luke Evans. He had something like a large watch in his hand. He held it out like a pistol, and from it projected a beam of the black gas.

Then Dick remembered Colonel Stopford's words: "He showed me a watch and said the salvation of the world was inside the case. I thought him insane."

Insane or not, old Luke Evans had concealed the tiny model of the camera-box to good purpose. As he

swept the black beam around him, the whole mass of buildings sprang into luminosity, the figures of a score of men, grouped together, and advancing in a threatening mass, some distance away—and more.

Two airplanes, standing side by side upon the tarmac, just in front of the hangar—not mere pursuit planes, but six-seaters, formidably armed, with central turrets and bow and rear guns, and propellers revolving.

Two mechanics stood staring in the direction of the little group.

"I'm with you," gasped Hargreaves. "I'm not a military man, but I've got fighting blood, and I come of a fighting race."

Dick leaped and once more swung the iron bar. The nearer of the two mechanics went down like lead, the second, seeing his companion bludgeoned out of the air, turned and ran.

Dick shouted, pointing. Fredegonde jumped into the plane, and the President scrambled in behind her. The

group, dismayed by the black beam, which Luke Evans was now turning steadily upon them, had halted irresolutely. But suddenly a head appeared, moving swiftly through the air toward the plane. It was Von Kettler, with hood flung back, the face distorted with rage and fury.

At his yells, the whole crowd started forward. Dick leaped into the central cockpit, swung the helicopter lever. Something spitted past his face, and a long streak appeared on the turret, where the gas-paint had been scored. But he was rising, rising into that increasing wind....

He heard a yell of triumph behind him. And that yell of Von Kettler's was his undoing. There is the telepathy between close friends, but there is also telepathic sympathy between enemies, and in an instant Dick understood what that shout of triumph portended.

He was rising into the line of magnetic force that would anchor his airplane helplessly, and leave it to be jerked down and held at Von Kettler's mercy.

He released the helicopter lever and opened throttle wide. For an instant the heavy plane hung dangerously at its low elevation, threatening to nose over. Then Dick regained control, and was winging away toward the sea, while yells of baffled fury from behind indicated the chagrin of his enemies.

He glanced up. Thank heaven the dirigible had not approached the trap. It was apparently circling overhead. Of course the observers had seen nothing, had no conception that the headquarters of the Invisible Empire lay below.

And yet it seemed to be drifting aimlessly back toward the fleet—erratically, as if not under complete control. And Dick could see the ships about a mile offshore, apparently drifting too. They were moving as no American squadron ever moved since the day the first hull was launched, for some of them, turned bow inward toward others, seemed upon the point of collision, while others were lagging on the edge of the formation, as if pointing for home.

Then suddenly the awful truth dawned upon Dick. The

occupants of ships and dirigible alike had been overcome by the deadly gas.

Dick banked, turned, leaned forward and shouted to Luke Evans, and, when the old man turned his head, indicated to him to sweep the tarmac with his ray.

The thread of black, broadening into a truncated cone, revealed nothing save the luminous outlines of the buildings. Apparently the tarmac was deserted. It was queer, too, that the silence of the night before was gone. Dick shouted again, to assure himself of what he knew already, and heard his own voice again.

Something had happened, something unexpected—or perhaps the crew of the Invisible Emperor, satisfied with the effects of the deadly gas, had not thought it necessary to go to any further trouble.

Suddenly Dick discovered that he was almost within the circle of the line of magnetic force. Hurriedly he threw over the stick and kicked rudder. It was not till he was again approaching the seashore that it occurred to him that the force, too, was not in

operation.

He opened throttle wide and shot seaward. He must ascertain what had happened, and, if not too late, give warning without delay.

Then suddenly the vicious rattle of gunfire sounded in Dick's ears, and, materializing out of the sky, came Von Kettler's face. Startled for an instant, Dick quickly realized that it was Von Kettler in his plane, with his hood thrown back.

And Dick realized that his own hood was thrown back. Two faces and nothing else, were the whole visible setting for battle.

But that look upon Von Kettler's face was even more demoniacal than before. Mad with rage at the prospective escape of his prey, and infuriated by his half-sister's appearance in the plane, Von Kettler had thrown all caution to the winds. In his insane hatred he was prepared to shoot down Dick's plane and send Fredegonde to destruction with it.

If Dick chose to replace his hood he would have the madman at his mercy. And, if he had thought about it, he would have done so, with Fredegonde sitting behind him. But the idea did not enter his mind. Consumed with rage almost equal to Von Kettler's, he only saw there the face of one of those who had inflicted an unspeakable outrage upon the President of his country.

The memory of old Hargreaves, chained before the mock-Emperor's throne, enraged Dick more than the holocaust of lives taken by the assassins.

He shouted a wild answer to Von Kettler's challenge as his plane sped by, and banked. At that moment there came a roaring concussion that shook the plane from prop to tail.

Dick turned his head. Somehow, President Hargreaves had contrived to get the rear gun into action, and now he was staring at it as if he could not believe that he had fired it.

And that action heartened Dick wonderfully. As Von

Kettler's face appeared again, he loosed his turret gun in a sweeping blast, and heard Von Kettler's gun roar futilely.

Again they crossed each other's path, and again and again, two faces, only able to gauge roughly the position of their planes. Neither man had succeeded in injuring the other.

Once old Lake turned his black ray upon Von Kettler, and for a moment the plane stood out luminously in the blackness, but Dick leaned forward and yelled to the old man to desist.

And once Dick looked back and saw Fredegonde crouched in her cockpit with eyes wide with terror. And yet he read in her eyes the same determination she had expressed in the laboratory. She was through with her half-brother.

All this while the wind had been increasing, making it difficult to maneuver the heavy plane; but now, of a sudden there came a dead lull, and then, with a whining sound, the wind rushed in again.

But this was a wind still more unlike any that Dick had ever known. A mighty gale that revolved circularly, but downward too, like a vortex, catching the plane and sweeping it into an ever tightening circle.

A man-made gale, upon whose wings the poison gas would spread northward again, carrying unlimited destruction with it. Dick fought in vain to free himself.

He was revolving as in a whirlpool, and it required the utmost presence of mind and watchfulness to hold the plane steady. Round and round he spun—and then, suddenly, out of the void materialized Von Kettler's face.

Von Kettler, helpless too, was spinning round upon the opposite side of the vortex. Thus each airship was upon the tail of the other, and it was a matter of chance which would get the other within the ringsights of the turret gun.

Von Kettler was so near that his shouts of fury came fitfully to Dick's ears as the wind carried them. Dick,

working the controls, knew that not for an instant could he direct his attention from them in order to fire his gun, and the moment Von Kettler attempted to do so, he was doomed.

Round and round, struggling, battling in vain—and once more the concussion of the rear gun shook the plane. And a shout from the President reached Dick's ears.

Dick turned his head for an instant, long enough to see Von Kettler spinning down through the vortex. And he was going down afire. President Hargreaves, "no military man," had got him, the second time he had ever aligned a gun-barrel upon a target.

"Bravo, sir, bravo!" Dick shouted.

And desperately he flung the stick forward and nosed down.

No gale, man-made or heaven-made, could carry on its wings three-quarters of a ton of armored, turreted airship. Swirling like a leaf, the plane broke through

the clutch of the blast. Instantly it grew calm. Outside that vortex, hardly a breath of air was stirring. It was as if the whole fury of the air was concentrated within that circle.

The ground came rushing up. Once more Dick tried to head seaward. With flying speed lost, he was calculating the exact moment in his downward rush when he could hope to resume control. Would that moment come before he crashed?

At less than a hundred feet he partly regained control. For a moment the plane seemed to fly on an even keel. Then her nose went down as her speed slackened. And this time there was no salvation.

Working desperately to save her, Dick saw the ground loom up before him. He heard the crash as the plane broke into splintering ruin ... he had a last vision of old Luke clutching his precious watch: then everything was dissolved in darkness....

Chapter 13: You Can't Down the Marines

"He's pulling out of it! Keep it up, Gotch!"

Dick heard the words and opened his eyes. He stared in amazement at the faces about him. Honest American faces under tropical helmets and above a uniform that he had never expected to see again. It couldn't be real. And yet it was. One word broke from his lips:

"Marines!"

"He's got it. Don't let him slip, Gotch.", grinned one of the friendly faces, and the man named Gotch, who presumably had some qualifications for his job, continued what was meant to be a gentle massage of the nerve centers along Dick's spine.

"I'm all right." Dick muttered, beginning to realize his surroundings. He was lying on a strip of prairie near the beach, on which the waves were breaking in low ripples about a motorboat that was drawn up.

He sat up. The world was swimming about him, but he seemed to have no broken bones. Not far away was the wrecked plane, an incongruous mass of streaks where the fabric had ripped through the gas-paint. "Where are the others?" Dick muttered.

Then he was aware of Fredegonde Valmy lying with a white face under a shrub. Her eyes were open, and turned toward him.

He heard Luke Evans's voice. The old man hobbled round from Dick's back, one arm in a bandage.

"She's hurt rather bad, Rennell, but we won't know how bad till we can get her away," he said. "You've been lying here about an hour, since we crashed. President Hargreaves made them take him to the fleet in the other motorboat to see what he could do. He's assumed command.

"You see, Rennell, that damn gas caught the fleet and put pretty near every man out of commission for good. But these fellows wasn't going to give up. So, since all their officers were gone, they took two of the

boats and their arms and equipment, and came ashore to settle accounts. And they won't believe there's anybody on the island or any buildings. And I can't make 'em believe it. God, Rennell, those invisible devils may attack us at any moment. I don't understand what they're waiting for."

Gotch spoke: "We know you're Captain Rennell, sir. And this gentleman, we know him too, but he seems a bit queer in his head. Talking of the Invisible Emperor's headquarters on this island, a mile or so inland. The only invisible thing we've found is that piece of a garment we pulled off you."

"I broke my watch ray machine in the fall, and I can't make them believe, Rennell," almost wept old Evans. "Tell them I'm not crazy."

Dick got upon his feet with an effort, staggered a little, then made his way to Fredegonde. He kneeled down beside the girl. She was conscious, and smiled faintly, but she could not speak. He pressed her hand, rose, and came back. "Mr. Evans is not crazy," he said. "The headquarters of the gang is over there." He

pointed. "Didn't President Hargreaves tell you?"

"He was kind of incoherent, sir." The marines looked at one another, wondering. Was Captain Rennell crazy too?

"We've had scouts out through the jungle, sir. There's nothing within five miles of here. They had a clear view through to the sea from the top of a hill."

"I've been there." Dick spoke with conviction. "I must tell you they've got devices that make them practically irresistible. That gas and other things. And they're invisible. But if you boys are willing to follow me, I'll lead you. It means death. I don't know what they're waiting for. But—are you willing to follow me?"

"We'll follow you, sir"—after a pause, during which Dick read in their eyes the desire to humor a crazy man. "We'll follow to hell, sir—if that gang's really there."

"Take your arms, then!" Dick pointed to the stacked

rifles.

A minute later the twenty-odd Marines, forming an open line that extended from one side of the clearing to the other, were on their way toward the headquarters of the gang. And Dick, leading them, though his head was reeling, felt as if his own reason was slipping from him. Had he only dreamed all this? Was it possible that the headquarters of the Invisible Emperor existed on this desolate prairie? If it was true, why had they suddenly become silent, inert? Why had they not long ago wiped out these few Marines? And the gale—was it now sweeping northward on its mission of destruction?

Half an hour passed. Then the brown patches of the foundations came into view upon the open ground. Here were the hangers, here was the central building with the Emperor's headquarters. And nothing was visible, nothing stirred, yet at any moment Dick expected the rattle of machine-gun bullets or some more terrific method of destruction.

"Halt!" The line stood still. "I am going forward ahead

or you. You'll follow at a distance of twenty paces. When you see me stop, feel for the door in the wall, and if I disappear, follow me. You understand?"

The Marines assented cheerfully. No harm in humoring this poor devil of an officer who had crashed and lost his wits. Like Luke Evans, shambling up through the line to Dick's side. Dick advanced. At any moment now the concentrated fire of the Emperor's men should blast them all to smithereens. Nothing happened.

And it was no dream, for Dick's outstretched hand encountered the exterior wall of the building. He had gauged his way accurately, too, for a step or two brought him to the door. He stepped inside. He was inside the private door that led to the Emperor's quarters, through which he had passed with Fredegonde, Hargreaves, and Luke Evans in their flight. It had been broken down, contrary to the girl's predictions, and the deserted passage within was perfectly visible to them all.

Stupefied, the Marines bumped and jostled with each

other as they crowded in. If they had been anything but Marines, their own heads might have been turned at the discovery of this sudden materialization of a building out of nothingness.

Being Marines, they only grinned sheepishly, and followed along the corridor.

The first human being they saw was one of the guards, in a black tunic. He was leaning against a wall, and he was a human being no longer. He looked as if he was asleep, but he was stone dead, with a placid look on his face.

Two more dead guards lay across each other, with smiles on their faces: and there was a workman in a blue blouse who had been in a tremendous hurry to get somewhere, from his appearance, and had never got there. He had fallen asleep instead, and never wakened.

Dick found a stairway and led the way up. He thought it ran up to the laboratory, but, instead, the room into which he emerged was the ante-room of the Invisible

Emperor's audience hall. Six dead guards lay in a heap in front of the curtain, and they had died as unconcerned as their fellows, to judge by the pacific expressions on their faces.

Dick passed through into the throne room. The Marines, behind him, for the first time uttered exclamations of awe—of pity.

The terrific scene that met Dick's eyes would be burned into his brain till his last day.

Upon his throne, head flung back, sat the Invisible Emperor, his features set in a sardonic leer of death. And all about him, some sitting, some lying, supporting one another, were his court, officers in black uniforms with the silver braid, and women in court dress. And all were dead too. But they had not known they had died. They had fallen asleep—upon the instant that their own volatile gas reached them.

"I guess that's the explanation, sir," said old Luke Evans. "Those devils made the whirlwind and charged it with the gas. But when you reversed that lever, you

reversed the process. Instead of projecting the force outwardly, you made a suction, and every atom of the gas that hadn't travelled beyond the radius came rushing back and filled the building. If we'd entered a half-hour later, we'd have been dead ones ourselves, but the gas was volatile enough to disperse through the chinks and crannies. Anyway, it's all over now."

Yes, it was all over, Dick thought, as he sat in his deck chair upon the cruiser that was bearing him northward. The menace to world government had been destroyed and with it all who had been behind it. There would be a new order in the world, a new and kindlier government. Men would feel closer to one another than in the past. Half the personnel of the fleet had escaped the invisible death, and only one cruiser and the dirigible had been lost in the confusion. There would be a great reception when they put into Charleston.

Dick bent over Fredegonde, who was asleep in her chair beside him. The ship's surgeon had promised recovery for her. She shouldn't suffer for her half-voluntary part in the business, Dick said to himself. It

was going to be his task to help her to forget.

#53 Prisoners On The Electron, By Robert Henry Leitfred:

Fate throws two young Earthians into desperate conflict with the primeval monsters of an electron's savage jungles.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry: overt antiblack racism towards the end

Warnings:

the gaping mouth jerked



- - -

The blood-red glow of a slanting sun bathed the towers of New York's serrated skyline, then dropped into a molten sea beyond the winter horizon. Friday, the last day of Jupiter, the thirteenth month of the earth's new calendar, had drawn to a close. In a few hours the year of 1999 would end—at midnight, to be exact.

Far below the towers stretched well lighted canyons teeming with humanity. At an upper level where once the elevated trains had roared and rumbled in an antiquated period long past, an orderly mass of workers and shoppers was borne at an incredible speed from lower Manhattan to towering apartments that stretched northward to Peekskill. The northbound traffic was heaviest at this hour and the moving sidewalk bands were jammed to their capacity.

Street cars, now obsolete, had vanished from the streets under the new order of things as had also passenger cars, taxis and trucks. Speed

predominated. Noise had practically been eliminated. Except for the gentle throb of giant motors far underground, the city was cloaked in silence.

At regular intervals along the four-speed moving bands that formed the transportation of the great metropolis, huge circular shafts of steel mounted upward beyond the roofs of the tallest buildings. Within these shafts, swift elevators carried passengers who lived in the outlying districts to the level of the station platforms of the interstate operating transport planes.

Close to the entrance of one of the steel shafts stood a young man a little above medium height. His deep-sunken eyes were those of a dreamer, a searcher. They were the eyes of a man who had seen strange and startling things. At present they were staring into the pulsing wave of humanity flowing northward on the endless steel bands beyond the platform.

Quite suddenly they lighted with pleasure as a man and a girl detached themselves from the swift moving river of people and hurried to the spot where he

stood.

"Think we were never coming?" Karl Danzig's eyes were much like those of Aaron Carruthers. Just now they sparkled with suppressed excitement.

Aaron Carruthers smiled in turn. "No, Karl. Any man but you. I couldn't imagine you being late." He turned his attention to the slim, dark haired girl. "Nanette," he murmured, extending his hand, "I didn't think you'd come."

Dazzling white teeth caught the glow of the blue-white incandescents along the platform, and became under the bow of her red lips a string of priceless pearls.

"I had to come, Aaron. Karl has done nothing but talk of your amazing discovery. The experiment fairly frightens me at times especially when I recall the sad fate of your friend, the missing Professor Dahlgren. I wish you boys would give up the idea—"

"Nan, be still," broke in Karl, with brotherly rudeness.

Turning to Carruthers. "Everything all ready, Aaron?" he asked.

Carruthers nodded. "As far as humanly possible. The element of error is always present. I've checked and re-checked my calculations. I've augmented the vacuum tubes by installing three super-dimensional inverse power tubes." He clasped the girl's arm. "The street is no place to talk. Let's go to the laboratory."

They crossed the moving bands by an overhead bridge and cut down a narrow canyon to the entrance of a crosstown series of bands. They stepped onto the first band. The speed was moderate. From there they moved over to the second. Carruthers was in a hurry. He guided the girl and her brother across the third to the fourth band of moving steel.

Buildings slid past them like wraiths in the electric light. They felt no winter chill, for the streets and platforms were heated by a constant flow of warm air from slots ingeniously arranged in the band of swift moving metal upon which they stood. Within a few minutes they had arrived at their destination. Quickly

they reversed their path across the moving bands until they reached the disembarking platform. A short distance from the station they came to the entrance of a huge tower building.

Carruthers nodded to the doorman and they were admitted into a marble hallway. A silent, unattended lift bore them swiftly to the seventy-fifth floor. Down a deep carpeted hallway they moved. Carruthers touched his door. It opened. He stood to one side as the other two entered.

Nanette cried with delight at the luxurious splendor of the place. "Why, Aaron, I never dreamed the night view could be quite so delightful! I do believe that if the horrid government had not taken down that little Statue of Liberty and substituted the Shaft Triumph in its place, that I could easily see her fingers clasping the torch she was reputed to hold.

"Progress, dear girl," shrugged Carruthers, holding out his hands for her cape. "By the way, have you folks eaten?"

"Not in a week," said Karl.

"Von Sternberger's food tablets," informed the girl.

Carruthers nodded. His deep-set eyes regarded them appraisingly. "Any ill effects?"

"None whatever," spoke Danzig. "Neither of us have the slightest craving for food."

"Good. Did you bring any with you?"

"A whole carton."

"Then I guess we're already to make the experiment. You're sure. Nanette, that you're not afraid of...."

"Don't be silly, Aaron. I haven't grown up with Karl for nothing. He's always used me for the disagreeable end of his crazy experiments. And besides," she smiled on both men. "I have a woman's curiosity for the unknown."

"Very well," said Carruthers gravely. From his

waistcoat pocket he took a ring of keys and inserted one of them into the lock of an immense steel door. "Our laboratory," he announced, swinging the door wide.

Nanette's eyes opened wide at the paneled whiteness of the room. Most of the far side was taken up with electrical machines, dynamos, generators and glass enclosed motors of an advanced type. Overhead, concealed lights made the room as light as day. A heavy glass railing shielded a square spot in the exact center of the room.

"What's that for?" asked the girl.

Danzig and Carruthers both regarded it with troubled eyes. It was Carruthers who spoke.

"That railing marks the spot where Professor Dahlgren stood when the rays of our atomic machine struck him."

"You mean," breathed the girl, "that he never moved from that spot after the rays touched his body? What

happened?"

Karl had already divested himself of his coat and was checking the copper cables leading into a strange machine.

"It was rather curious," remarked Carruthers. "The moment the ray touched him his body began to dwindle. But evidently he suffered no pain. As a matter of fact his mind remained quite clear."

"How did you know?"

"As he dwindled in size," continued Carruthers, "he shouted warningly that the rays had become confused and for us to cut the switch. But the warning came a fraction of a second too late. Even as my fingers opened the contact, his body dwindled to a mere speck and disappeared entirely from sight."

Nanette gazed with staring eyes at the ill-fated spot. Her face had grown steadily paler. "Oh, Aaron! It's awful! What do you suppose happened?"

Carruthers eyes glowed strangely. "I didn't exactly know at the time, Nanette. I'm not sure that I know even now. But I've got a theory and Karl has helped me to build a second machine to flash a restoring ray on the square spot. What will take place I cannot even conjecture."

"Let's get on with the experiment," interrupted Karl.
"Nanette can be shown later what she is to do."

Carruthers turned to Danzig. "All right. Karl. Draw up a chair to your machine. And you, Nanette, sit close to this switch. It's off now. To turn it on, simply push it forward until the copper plates slide into each other. To turn the current off, you pull sharply out. However, we aren't quite ready."

He shifted his position until he stood before a third machine slightly smaller than the other two. His fingers clicked a switch. The dial of the instrument glowed whitely.

"It's important," continued Carruthers, "that we first locate our interference. We have here, Nanette, a

common television receiving apparatus capable of picking up news and pictures from any corner of the globe. Ready, Karl?"

Danzig clicked on the switch before his own machine and turned one of the many dials mounted on the panel in front of him. A faint hum filled the room as the generator settled to its task.

Carruthers reached up and dimmed the overhead lights. A screen of what looked like frosted glass set in the wall glowed luminously. The interior of a famous broadcasting studio became mirrored in the glass screen. Into it stepped the master of ceremonies. He spoke briefly of the New Year's activities that would soon take place when the twenty-eighth day of Jupiter ended at midnight.

"Boston," said Carruthers. "Too near."

"Try Frisco," suggested Karl. "The tubes ought to be sufficiently heated by this time."

The dial whirled beneath Carruthers slender fingers.

The pictures framed in the frosted panel faded. Another took its place. San Francisco—an afternoon concert. Carruthers saw and listened for a moment, then moved thousands of miles out to sea.

Shanghai drifted into the panel, announcing in sing-song accents the weather reports. Following this came reports of various uprisings along the Manchurian border.

While yet the three listeners and watchers bent their heads toward the panel in the wall, a strange thing occurred. The silver frostiness of the screen became violently agitated with what looked like tiny sparks darting in and about each other like miniature solar systems. Shanghai faded from the picture. All that remained visible now was the jumbled mass of needle-pointed sparks of luminosity.

"Careful," warned Carruthers. "Slow up the speed of your reflector, Karl. There, that's better. Watch the meter reading. I'm going to step up the power of the dimensional tubes. Steady!"

From an invisible reproducer came a sharp, metallic crackling like machine-gun bullets rattling on a tin roof. The sparks on the screen became violently agitated, pushing around in erratic circles and ellipses. They glowed constantly in shades of bright green through the blues into the deep violets of the color scale.

"What do you read?" asked Carruthers.

"Point seven six nine," answered Karl.

"Shift it back towards the blue, about two points lower on the scale."

Danzig twisted two dials at the same time with minute exactness. "Point seven six eleven," he intoned.

"Hold it," ordered Carruthers. "Blue should predominate." He turned his eyes on the dancing sparks on the screen. They glowed now a deep indigo blue. "Lock your dials against accidental turning. We're tuned to the vanishing point."

Danzig rose to his feet. "What will we use?"

Carruthers looked hastily around the room. "Most anything will do." His eyes rested on a glass test tube. Quickly he rose to his feet and removed it from the wall rack. Then bending over the glass railing that enclosed the mysterious square he placed it on the floor. He turned now to the girl.

"Quiet, now, Nanette, and don't under any condition leave the chair. The path of the ray should pass within two feet of you, having a wide margin of safety. All right, Karl. Set the dials of the inverse dimensional tubes at point seven six eleven, and switch the power to the Roentgen tube."

Through the dimly lighted laboratory came a spurt of bluish flame that twisted and squirmed with slow undulations around the cathode electrode.

"Fine," enthused Carruthers, "The cathode emanations coincide exactly with the interference chart. Watch your meter gauges, Karl, while I switch to the atomic ray."

His fingers closed over a switch. The indigo points of flame bathing the electrode gathered themselves into a ring and began to revolve around an invisible nucleus located near the electrode. Carruthers studied the revolving flame for a moment, then switched off the television machine. It was no longer needed.

Carefully, for the atomic ray was still a mysterious force to Carruthers, he opened a small door in the panel and drew out the focusing machine. It was shaped very much like a camera except that the lens protruded several inches beyond the machine proper.

With infinite patience he made the final adjustments and moved away from the front of the lens. "Ready?"

Danzig nodded and threw on the full power of the inverse dimensional tubes. A low clear hum filled the quiet room of the laboratory. From the lens of the focusing machine shot a pale, amber beam. It struck the glass test tube squarely in the center and glowed against its smooth sides.

Carruthers reached across his own machine and turned the final switch. The amber beam emanating from the lens increased in intensity. And as it increased it took on a deep violet color.

Nanette cried out in muffled alarm. But even as Vincent raised his voice to quiet her fears the test tube suddenly shrunk to nothingness and vanished into the ether.

"Aaron!" whispered the girl, awesomely. "It ... it's gone!"

Carruthers nodded. Beads of sweat stood out upon his forehead. Would the returning ray work? He had made the test tube follow the same route as that taken by Professor Dahlgren. Both were gone. He clicked off the switch and the beam faded.

With a deliberate calmness that in no way matched the inner tumult brought on by the experiment, he turned the dials of the machine he and Danzig had worked out together. A second switch clicked under his fingers. From the lense of the focusing machine

shot the reverse atomic beam. As it struck the center of the square it turned a bright vermilion. For several seconds it played upon empty space, then the miracle unfolded before their eyes.

Something like a glass sliver reflected the beam. It grew and enlarged under their startled eyes until it had achieved its former size, then the power that had brought it back switched itself off automatically.

Together both men examined the test tube. It appeared in no way harmed, nor did it feel either warm or cold from its trip through the elements.

"It works!" marveled Danzig. "Let's try it again with something larger."

"I've got a better idea," said Carruthers, rising to his feet. He crossed the laboratory and went to another part of his rooms. Presently he returned holding a small pink rat in his hands. The rodent was young, having been born only a week before. "Now we'll see what happens."

"Oh, it's torture to the poor thing," burst out Nanette.

"It won't hurt it," growled Karl. "Aaron knows what he's doing."

Carruthers placed the little rat in the center of the square. It lay there, very quiet and unblinking. Again the switches clicked as the contacts were closed.

Came once more the beam of amber colored light followed closely by the violet. The rat dwindled to the size of an insect, then disappeared into space. The three watchers held their breaths. Carruthers' hand trembled the least bit as he threw on the switch controlling the animal's return to the world.

A vermilion shaft of light pierced the semi-darkened rooms. The animal had been gone from sight not more than a minute. Abruptly something grayish white unfolded in the reflector's beam. It rapidly expanded under three pairs of bulging eyes—not the small, pinkish rat that had disappeared but sixty seconds previous, but a full grown rat, scarred and tailless as if from innumerable battles with other rats.

As the current clicked off Aaron Carruthers bent forward. Too late. The rat scurried from the laboratory with a squeal of alarm. Carruthers returned to his seat before the atomic machine and sat down. His face was worried. Dark thoughts stormed his reason. The rat he had placed within the atomic ray had aged nearly two years during the minute it was out of mortal sight. Two years!

He pulled a pad from his pocket and calculated the time that had elapsed since Professor Dahlgren had vanished from that same spot. Nearly forty hours. That would mean....

Nanette stirred in her chair. "What happened to the little rat, Aaron?"

Carruthers, busy making calculations, did not hear the question.

She turned to her brother. "Karl, what's the meaning of this? The second experiment didn't turn out like the first one. What became of that little rat?"

"I don't know what happened, Nan," spoke Karl. "Now don't bother me with your silly questions. You saw the same thing I did."

Carruthers raised his head and spoke quietly. "That rat you saw materialize under the atomic rays was the same rat you saw me place within the square."

"But it couldn't be," protested the girl.

"Nevertheless," shrugged Carruthers. "It was the same animal—only it had aged nearly two years during the brief time interval it was off from our planet."

"It's preposterous," cried the girl.

"Nothing is preposterous nowadays, Nanette."

"That's the woman of it," spoke Karl. "Always doubting."

"You boys are playing tricks on me," retorted the girl sharply. "I shouldn't have come to your old laboratory."

Just because I'm a girl...."

"Don't," pleaded Carruthers, looking up from his pad of figures. "We're trying to solve the mystery underlying the forces which we have created." He replaced the test tube within the center of the square and returned to the atomic machine.

Through the twilight shadows of the room glowed the strange new ray. Faintly the generator hummed. Lights sparkled and twisted around the cathode in serpentine swirls.

"You needn't trouble to explain your silly experiment again," finished Nanette, rising abruptly to her feet. "I'm going home and dress for the New Year's party."

"Watch your switch like I asked you to," spoke Carruthers.

"Sit down," added Karl. "Don't put the rest of us in danger!"

"Oh-h-h!" gasped the girl as she inadvertently stepped

squarely into the atomic ray of amber-colored light.

Carruthers leaped impatiently to his feet. An inarticulate cry of horror froze upon his lips. Forgetful that he himself was directly in line of the atomic ray he lunged forward, his mind centering on a single act—to drag the protesting and now thoroughly frightened girl out of the path of the penetrating ray.

But even as he started forward Nanette tripped over the glass railing around the square. Carruthers moved quickly. Yet his movements were slow and ungainly as compared to the speed of the light ray. He saw the figure of Nanette decrease in size before his eyes, heard the muffled expression of alarm and fear in Danzig's voice; then the room suddenly began to extend itself upward with the speed of a meteor.

What once had been walls and bare furniture resolved themselves into a range of hills, then mountains. The twilight gloom of the room became a dark void of empty space that seemed to rush past his ears like a

moaning wind.

He had the sensation of falling through infinite space as if he had been propelled from the world and hurled out into the vastness of interplanetary space.

Something brushed against him—something soft and fluttering. He grasped it like a drowning man would clutch a straw. "Nanette!"

The name echoed and re-echoed through his mind yet never seemed to get beyond his tightly clenched lips.

He felt something cool close over his hand.

Instinctively he grasped it. Her hand. Together they clung to each other as they felt themselves being hurled through endless space.

The twilight changed swiftly to black night that rushed past the two clinging figures and enveloped them in a wall of silence. Then out of the mysterious fastness came the dull glow of what looked like a distant planet. It grew and enlarged till it reached the size of a silver dollar. Little pin-points of light soon began to appear on all sides of it, very much like stars.

Carruthers attempted to reassure Nanette that all was well, and they were out on the streets of the great metropolis. But even as he wrenched his tightly locked lips apart he saw that the shining disc far out into space was not what he had first thought it was—the earth's moon.

He shook his head to clear it of the perplexing cobwebs. What was the matter with his mind? He couldn't think or reason. All he knew was that he had erred. This strange planet looming in the sky held nothing familiar in markings nor in respect to its relations to the stars beyond it.

While yet he groped in the darkness for something tangible, his mind reverted to the girl at his side. She was clinging to him like a frightened child. He could feel the pressure of her body against his and it thrilled him immeasurably. No longer was he the cold, calculating young man of science.

How long they remained in state of suspension while strange worlds and planets flashed into a new sky before their startled eyes, Aaron Carruthers didn't

know. At times it seemed like hours, years, ages. And when he thought of the tender nearness of the girl he held so tightly within his arms, it seemed like a few minutes.

Gradually the sensation of speed and space falling began to wear off, as if they were nearing earth or some solid substance once more. The air about them grew heavier. Then all movement through space ceased.

Carruthers was surprised to find what felt like earth beneath his feet. For long minutes he stood there, unmoving, still holding possessively to the girl.

"Aaron!" The name came out of the void like a faint caress.

"Nanette."

Reassured of each other's presence they stood perfectly still, lost in the vast silence of their isolation.

Presently the girl spoke. "Oh, Aaron, I'm frightened!"

"There's nothing to be alarmed at, dearest." The endearing term came for the first time from the man's lips. As long as he had known Nanette Danzig, love had never been mentioned between them. If it had ever existed, the feeling had not been expressed.

"You shouldn't call me that, Aaron."

His voice sounded curiously far-off when he answered. "I couldn't help it, Nan. Our nearness, the strange darkness, and the fact that we are alone together brought strange emotions to my heart. At this moment you are the dearest—"

Bump, thump! Bump, thump!

"What's that noise?" breathed Nanette.

Carruthers turned his head to listen. To his ears came the pound of some heavy object striking the ground at well-regulated intervals.

Nanette, who had started to free herself from Carruthers violent embrace, suddenly ceased to

struggle. "Oh, what is it? What is it?" she whispered fearfully.

Carruthers sniffed the night air. A musky odor assailed his nostrils, strange and unfamiliar. "It's beyond me, Nanette. Let's move away from this spot. Perhaps we can find shelter for the rest of the night."

But the Stygian blackness successfully hid any form of shelter. Tired from their search they sat down.

"We might build a fire," suggested Carruthers, "only there doesn't seem to be any wood around. Nothing but bare rock."

"Perhaps it's just as well," spoke the girl. "The flames might attract prowlers."

"Maybe you're right," agreed Carruthers.

A silence fell between them. After a long time Nanette spoke.

"I don't suppose, Aaron, that anything I can do or say

will help matters any. I know that our being where we are is my own fault. I'm sorry. Truly I am."

"The harm is done," said Carruthers. "Don't say anything more about it."

Nanette pointed at the disc of light shining high in the heavens. "These stars are as strange to me, Aaron, as if I had never seen them before. Saturn is the evening star at this time of year. It isn't visible. Even the familiar craters and mountains of the moon look different. And it glows strangely."

"I'd rather not talk about it, Nan."

Nanette placed a hand upon his arm. "I'm not a child, Aaron. I'm a grown woman. Fear comes through not knowing. Tell me the truth."

"Let's sit down."

They sat upon the ground and both stared out at the night heavens that arched into infinity above them. Presently Carruthers took the girl's hand from his

arm and held it gently between his own. "You've guessed rightly, Nan. The orb shining upon us is not our moon. I'll try and make it clear."

The girl smiled reassuringly in the darkness. "I'm waiting."

"Strange as it must seem," began Carruthers, "you and I are still within the room of my laboratory. But we might as well be a million miles away for all the good it does us. Karl sits in his chair in the same position as when we disappeared in the violet glow of the atomic ray. His eyes are bulging with fear and horror. For days and days he'll continue to sit on that chair, his mind not yet attuned to what actually took place. What has happened? He doesn't know yet, Nan."

"Oh, it's incredible," sobbed Nanette.

"I know, but it's so obviously true that I won't even trouble to check my calculations." He pointed at the silver disc hanging low in the strange sky. "That, Nan, is not our moon. It is nothing more than a planetary

electron very much like the one we are on at the present moment. The firmament is filled with them. From where we sit we can see but the half nearest to us. The glowing portion is illuminated from distant light rays shot off from the nucleus of the atom itself. That atom is going to be our light and heat for weeks, months, perhaps years to come. We're prisoners on an electron, and as such we are destined to rush through infinite space for the remainder of our lives unless...."

"Unless what?"

Aaron Carruthers hesitated for a bare fraction of a second. "Karl!" he whispered. "Our lives depend on him. Time flies fast for us, Nan. Already it is growing light. But not on our earth. Karl still sits upon his chair staring incredulously at the miracle of our disappearing bodies. It will take weeks of time, as it affects us, for the initial shock to travel along his nerves to the center of his brain."

His voice shook with emotion quite contrary to his usual calm nature. "Oh, I know it's hard to understand, Nan. I was a fool to meddle with laws of

which I know so little compared to what there is yet to know."

"Then it's all true, Aaron. The little rat that came out from under the ray as an old rat was one and the same animal."

Carruthers nodded. "Time has changed in proportion to our size. We're moving so much faster than the earth that we must of necessity be bound to the universe of which we are now an integral part."

For a long time they remained silent, each immersed in dark, troubled thoughts. Nanette broke the silence.

"You don't suppose, Aaron, by any chance that Professor Dahlgren is still alive and on our planet?"

Carruthers shook his head negatively. "It's beyond human reason, Nan. He was lost in the ray for over forty hours. Translated into minutes he's been gone twenty-four hundred minutes. Since the mouse we placed within the light ray aged approximately two years in the space of one minute, Professor Dahlgren

would, if he were alive, be about four thousand, eight hundred years old."

Nanette rose abruptly to her feet. "Oh bother the figures. My head's swimming with them. It's getting light now, and I'm hungry."

"Eat one of your food tablets," suggested Carruthers.

"Please don't get funny," said Nanette. "Karl has them in his coat pocket."

"Hum-m-m!" coughed Carruthers, following her example by rising to his feet. "Looks as though we'd have to rustle our food. I've got nothing on my person but a knife, a pencil, a fountain pen and some pieces of paper. Nothing very promising in any of them."

At that moment the sky became fused with reddish light. Over the horizon appeared a shining orb. Far-away hills and valleys leaped into sight. Then for the first time Carruthers noted the high plateau upon which he had spent the night. Had they ventured a hundred yards farther during the night they would

have plunged into the rocky floor of a canyon a thousand feet below.

"Let's see if we can find a way down to the valley," he suggested. "If we get anything to eat it will have to come from trees. This plateau is barren of any form of vegetable matter."

They found a winding descent leading downward. It looked like a path that had been worn by the passage of many feet.

"Someone's been here before us," he exclaimed. "The ground is too well worn to be accidental."

"Look! Look!" pointed Nanette. Her face had become pale from the excitement of her discovery. "What is it, Aaron?"

Carruthers bent forward to examine the strange footprint. It was nearly two feet across and divided in the center, as if the animal that made it had but two toes.

"From the size of the tracks and the length of the animal's stride, I should say it was some form of an amphibious dinosaur long extinct in our own world."

"Are they dangerous?"

"It all depends upon the species. Some of them are pure vegetarians; others are carnivorous. The heavy tramping we heard during the night evidently came from the beast who left these footprints."

They had come upon the footprints where the path made a turn, leading into a dense growth of trees and underbrush. And as Carruthers knelt beside the path he heard a rustle as of something moving directly behind him. Wonderingly, he turned his head to trace the disturbance. But the woods seemed empty.

"Strange," he murmured. "Did you hear something moving in back of us, Nan?"

Nan shook her head. "You don't think we're in any danger from these beasts, do you?"

Carruthers said nothing for the moment. Instead, he

looked sharply in all directions and saw nothing.

"Let's push on till we come to some kind of a shelter. Perhaps we'll find people much like ourselves."

Down the path they hurried, glancing curiously right and left at unknown flowers and trees. A bird with brilliant feathers skimmed above their heads, uttering shrill cries. Other voices from the birds and animals in the woods took up the cry. The woods grew denser as they pushed into the unknown.

In the woods at their right a rodent squeaked as some larger animal pounced upon it. Presently they came to a pool of water roughly seventy feet across. While they knelt to quench their thirst they saw two young deer eyeing them from the far side. Soft feet pattered behind the kneeling couple. Carruthers half whirled as he rose to his feet and peered into the jungle behind him.

A blur of reddish brown vanished behind a tree. Man or animal Carruthers couldn't determine. He grasped Nanette by the arm and pulled her back to the path.

"Quick!" he whispered. "There's someone or something following us. I'm sure of it now."

Nanette's voice trembled slightly. "What is it, Aaron?"

"I don't know." He turned his head again. This time he saw the thing that was following. A low ejaculation of alarm escaped his lips. A gigantic ape! The mouth of the creature sagged grotesquely, revealing two rows of yellow fangs. And its orange colored eyes were burning coals set close together. Carruthers sucked in a deep breath.

"Run, Nan," he gritted. "I'll try and scare him away."

Simultaneously with the scream of fright from the startled girl, a huge mountain of grayish flesh and bones blocked the downward slope of the path. Carruthers paled as he turned and faced the new menace.

Coming directly toward them he saw an immense animal so great in size that it seemed to shut out the light. A prehistoric dinosaur! It came slowly and

leisurely, swinging its great red mouth from side to side. Other denizens in the woods, sensing the presence of the huge killer, fled in a panic of alarm. Their shrill cries increased the terror that froze the hearts of the two earth people.

Nanette clung to her companion in abject terror, unable to move. Her fear stricken eyes were wild and staring as the mountain of flesh pushed towards them.

The animal's long neck arched far in front of its body, and its long, pointed tail remained out of sight within the trees.

Carruthers backed off the path into the underbrush, dragging the girl after him. The jaws of the huge animal opened wide with anticipation. Lumberingly he turned from the path and followed. Trees crashed before its gigantic bulk. The woods became a bedlam of snapping branches.

The horrified scream of the girl ended in a gurgling sigh. She toppled to the ground in a dead faint.

Carruthers flung himself beside her crumpled body and gathered it into his arms. A quick glance he threw at the spot where he had last seen the gigantic ape. The animal was no longer there. It had disappeared.

The man's lips became a hard, straight line. Even as he straightened to his feet the leaves and branches of an overturned tree whipped his face. The red mouthed dinosaur was perilously near. So close that Carruthers could smell its great, glistening body. The odor was musky and foul.

Stumbling blindly he attempted to widen the distance between himself and his pursuer. But the hungry dinosaur pounded steadily on its course. There was no getting away from it. Its beady eyes sought out its prey and its keen smell told it exactly where the earth beings were.

On and on staggered Carruthers. The extra burden of the girl hampered his movements. Unseen roots tripped him time and time again. Each time he scrambled to his feet and picked up the unconscious

girl. Briars tore at his clothing and stung his hands.

The underbrush was thickening. A warm, dank smell clung to the vegetation now almost tropical in nature. Beads of sweat rolled down the man's forehead and into his eyes. But the horrible fear of those red, dripping jaws spurred him to renewed efforts.

He doubled to the left, hoping to throw the animal off his tracks. The undergrowth seemed to thin out at this point. Renewed hope flowed through the young scientist's blood. He stumbled on blindly, scarce watching where his feet were taking him. A sigh of relief came to his lips. Ahead of him he saw a clearing. His stride lengthened and he broke into a shambling run.

Then it was he saw, towering walls rising up on both sides of him—steep walls that he could never scale, even if alone. He tried to change his course, but the huge bulk of the pursuing dinosaur effectively blocked his path. There was no alternative but to push on and pray for an opening in the rugged cliffs.

Abruptly a sigh of despair escaped his lips. The walls of the canyon narrowed suddenly, and across it stretched a wall of bare rock. He realized too late that he had returned to the base of the plateau where he had spent the night. The grim, towering walls hemmed him in completely from three sides. At the fourth side bulked the dinosaur, coming slowly, ponderously.

Beady eyes peered down cunningly at the helpless man and woman. Confident now that its prey couldn't escape, it extended its huge bulk across the narrow canyon for a leisurely killing.

Carruthers glared at the monster with fear-distended eyes. In his heart he realized that there was no escape. He had no means of defense, no way to combat the huge monster but flight. And even that was now denied him.

Closer and closer inched the killer until its great, red mouth appeared like the fire box of a huge boiler. Hot breath fanned the man's cheek. The nauseous odor of the beast made his stomach wrench. He dropped to

his knees close to the inert figure of the girl and glared vengefully into the beady eyes.

The gaping mouth at the end of a long, supple neck jerked forward. Carruthers dragged the girl away just in time to escape the gnashing teeth. The dinosaur stamped angrily.

Once again Carruthers felt its hot breath beating upon his face. He cringed at the thought of this kind of death. No one would ever know how it happened. Not even his closest friend, Karl Danzig! What a mess things were. Why didn't the red mouth of the mighty dinosaur close over him and crush out life? Why must he kneel in torture?

From near at hand a piercing scream rang through the air. A harsh scream. A terrifying scream!

Carruthers raised his head. The dinosaur had twisted around to glare hatefully at the disturber of its meal. Other screams splintered the forest air. And as the kneeling man watched he saw the great red ape who had been dodging his footsteps a short time before,

slouch between the dinosaur's hulking body and the wall of the cliff. Behind it came others—black mammals with curving arms that dragged along the ground.

Their fangs were bared. They were in an ugly mood. Arriving in front of the dinosaur and less than four feet from the earth man and woman, the leader silenced its followers with a low growl and turned in concentrated fury upon the dinosaur. Its long arms drummed a throbbing tattoo upon its hairy chest.

The dinosaur bellowed protestingly against the attitude of the apes and gorillas. The ape leader protested with equal violence. The dinosaur shifted uneasily, wagging its heavy head from side to side. On all sides came deep growls from the mammals.

Carruthers watched all this display torn between doubt and fear. Which side would win? How could the apes and gorillas, huge as they were, hope to force the dinosaur away? But the apes were masters. This much was apparent. Inch by inch the dinosaur backed away, glaring vengefully. And having reached a spot

where it could turn around it did so. Presently the ground trembled as it made off through the steaming jungle. The leader of the mammals turned and faced the earth people. Long, searching minutes passed. Its close set eyes seemed to be studying them.

Nanette stirred and opened her eyes. The sight of the anthropoids caused her to recoil.

"Steady, Nan," spoke Carruthers softly.

Other apes and gorillas gathered around the giant red animal. They displayed no hostility, only an intense interest. One by one they squatted before the earth people until they formed a half circle, reaching from the one wall of the rocky plateau to the other.

While they sat there it began to grow dark.

Carruthers removed his watch and ventured a glance at it. Daylight had lasted less than three hours. An hour for twilight, then it would be dark. Evidently the cycle around the nucleus of the atom took approximately ten hours.

Nanette sat up. "Aaron!"

He answered without removing his eyes from the red ape less than four feet away. "Don't look at me, Nan. Concentrate on the big, red fellow. He's evidently in control. If we act the least bit frightened they might decide to destroy us."

"What are they waiting for? Why don't they go away?"

"We'll know before long. I imagine they're trying to figure out who we are and what we are doing on their tiny planet."

Darkness descended rapidly. Overhead, a small moon rose majestically in the heavens and started its journey through the night. Its faint light revealed the fact that the apes showed no intentions of leaving. They still squatted before the earth people, in a half circle of staring brown eyes.

Whatever fear Carruthers had felt towards the animals died away. "They're harmless," he told Nanette. "Get some sleep if you can."

Long after the tired girl had drifted into slumber Carruthers sat with his back against the wall, mentally trying to figure the whole thing out. The dinosaur was real enough. Yet the apemen had frightened it away, in fact had compelled it to go without actually engaging in combat. No question about it. The anthropoids were in control. But who controlled them?

Quite suddenly his eyes snapped open. Daylight had come again. He must have fallen asleep. The shrill chatter of the apeman came to his ears. The red ape leader shuffled to his feet and looked from the earth people to the spot in the jungle whence came the chatter. Abruptly he opened his mouth and emitted a flood of gibberish sounds.

The gorillas and apes at his side flattened their bodies against the rocky walls in attitudes of expectant waiting.

"What's happening?" gasped the girl.

"There's no telling," whispered Aaron. "It must be

someone or something of importance. Note the expressions of awe and reverence on the faces of the apemen. My God, Nanette, look!"

Out of the depths of the jungle emerged seven white beings—human or animal it was impossible to tell. They were huge creatures with the bodies of men. Erect of carriage, almost human in looks, they contrasted strangely with the red apes and the black gorillas. Six of them appeared to act as bodyguard for the seventh.

As they reached the space in front of the two earth people, the bodyguard stepped aside. The seventh white one came to a dead stop. Long and intently he stared at the man and girl crouched against the wall. And the scrutiny seemed to please him, for he smiled.

Carruthers eyed the figure uneasily. He saw what seemed to be a man dressed in a long, fibrous garment. With white hair and beard, it was a strange figure indeed for an apeman. He saw also that the eyes were well spaced, a mark of intelligence. The forehead was high and broad. And as Carruthers

mentally studied the creature, strange and bizarre thoughts crossed his mind.

The mouth of the white apeman twitched as if he were going to speak. The heavy lips parted. A single word came to Carruthers' ear—"Man?"

Carruthers nodded. "We are from the earth."

The lips of the apeman moved painfully as if speech came with the utmost of difficulty. "The prophecy of the Great One has been fulfilled even as it has been written."

The red apes and black gorillas allowed their eyes to wander from their white leader to the two earth people. And their faces reflected the supernatural awe with which they regarded the earth people.

"It's uncanny that an animal can speak our language," breathed Nanette.

As if he hadn't heard her, Carruthers spoke again.

"We are from the earth," he repeated. "We have been

on your world many hours, and we are both hungry and thirsty."

"Words come hard," came from the lips of the white bearded one. "I have not used them for years."

"And who are you?" asked Carruthers.

The white bearded one paused as if to recall some distant echo from the past. "I am the last of the tribe of Esau. But come! This is no place for speech. Long have I and my followers waited for this hour."

Without another word he swung around. The six guards enclosed his aged body in a hollow square and the procession moved away. They came after a short journey to a natural opening leading to the heart of the plateau. The apes and gorillas, with the exception of the red leader, remained outside. The remainder of the party pushed through a tortuous tunnel until they reached a cavernous opening directly beneath the plateau. Vertical openings in the walls furnished light and air. The white chieftain spoke in a strange tongue to his followers, and they instantly prepared three

couches in a far corner of the cavern.

As the earth people seated themselves on the skins that made up the couch they were both conscious of a far-away rumbling like peals of thunder. Not having seen any signs of a storm outside Carruthers turned inquiringly on the aged chieftain.

The old man's eyes were shadowed with grim foreboding. "I have ordered something to refresh you and your companion," he said. "Eat first, my friends. We will talk later."

The six body-guards left the main cavern. Presently they returned with large trays made of fanlike leaves resembling the palmetto. Fresh fruits and uncooked vegetables formed the bulk of the meal. In silence they ate. After the litter had been cleared away the guards withdrew with the exception of the giant red ape, who crouched near the opening to the tunnel.

"I am glad you have come," began the old chieftain, "but sorry, too. Our planet, or rather the higher forms of life upon it, are doomed."

Again there came to the ears of the earth people that far-off beat of sound that seemed to shake the ground. They looked to the white bearded leader for explanation.

"Ah, you hear it too," murmured the other. "For centuries, we of the great tribe of Esau have fought for the supremacy of our little world—ever since the Great One appeared in our midst and instructed us in world knowledge."

"And this Great One, as you call him," spoke Carruthers. "Who was he?"

"He was from your world. I never saw him. He comes to me as a legend. For years he toiled among us, teaching and instructing until we mastered his language. He called himself Dahlgren. Later he ruled all the tribes. We of the Esau line he made into leaders because of our higher intelligence. The tribes of Zaku were trained for war. Perhaps you have noticed the chief of all the Zakus. He is crouching now beside the entrance to our inner walls. He is Marbo, and his followers live in the jungles."

"And does he talk as you do?"

The white chieftain shook his head. "No. Only we of the Esau tribe have mastered speech. Not counting the women of our tribe that comprise our numbers we are only seven in all."

"I owe Marbo my life as does also my companion," said Carruthers.

"Marbo looks upon you earth people as gods," spoke the old chieftain. "He and his followers will protect you with their lives."

"And who rules over and beyond?" questioned Carruthers, waving his arm to cover the remaining portion of the electron.

"There is no rule beyond except that of force. The Great One called them by name, Morosaurus, Diplodocus, the Horned Ceratosaurus, and many others whose names I have long forgotten. They are our enemies whom we cannot destroy. And their numbers increase from year to year and are slowly

backing us upon our last stronghold."

"Isn't there anything we can do?" asked Carruthers, feeling a quiver of apprehension along his spine.

Slowly, the old chieftain shook his head. "Nothing whatever. Marbo and his followers can control one or two, but when the herds begin to push on into our territory, we are doomed. Even now their rumblings and bellowings come through the jungles. Their thirst and hunger for flesh is enormous."

Carruthers turned upon the girl. "The old chief's words explain everything, Nan. Professor Dahlgren has been here and gone. He lived a lifetime in the span of a few hours earth-time. Now it looks as if we were destined to follow in his footsteps."

"I'm not afraid," said the girl. "Nothing can be worse than what we have already passed through." And her eyes softened as she placed her small hands within those of Carruthers. "We have each other, Aaron."

He smiled reassuringly and turned to the old

chieftain. "I am Carruthers, a friend and assistant to Dahlgren. The girl here is Nanette."

The chieftain smiled gravely. "And I am Zark. Welcome to my kingdom, Carruthers and Nanette. We need you here. Now tell me of your world, for long have I waited for a follower of the great Dahlgren to appear before my people."

Throughout the remainder of the day Carruthers talked. The shafts of light paled at the end of the short day. Night came, bringing with it a sense of security against the increasing hordes that thundered and trumpeted beyond the borders of the jungle.

In the morning Zark instructed Marbo to remain close to Carruthers at all times. So the young scientist left the cavern and ascended the path leading to the top of the plateau. He looked at his watch and compared the second hand with the nucleus atom sailing across the heavens to estimate its speed.

Days passed as he made his observations. Meanwhile he had searched and found the exact spot wherein he

and Nanette had first stepped foot onto the electron. This spot he carefully marked off with a ring of huge boulders carried up by the followers of Marbo. Then he began to calculate upon his pad. There must be no mistakes. He and Nanette must be within the magic circle at the estimated time.

Between times he helped Nanette construct their living quarters in the cavern. Zark had furnished them with skins and furs with which to cover the walls. Carruthers made a fireplace of stones and restored the lost art of fire to Zark, Marbo and their followers.

Days slipped by like minutes. Short days filled with excursions into the jungles. Carruthers' face soon bristled with a stubble of beard. This lengthened with time. Sharp thorns tore their clothes to ribbons. Nanette, womanlike, cried many times during the nights because of the lack of a mirror and a comb for her untidy hair.

But other and more important events soon claimed the attention of the earth people. Day by day the

herds of dinosaurs and other monsters of like breed edged closer and closer to the tiny civilization around the plateau. It worried Carruthers so much that he sought out Zark and had him bring the other six members of his tribe together for a council of war.

"A complete defensive system, Zark," he told them. "We must make a fortress of the plateau and fill the caverns with food."

Zark shook his head. "No. It is quite useless. Followers of Marbo have recently returned from over the beyond and report strange things. I have hesitated to speak of them for fear of alarming you. Our planet is breaking up. Violent eruptions have caused fires of stone and mud. The rumblings you have heard were not made entirely by our enemies. They came from the ground.

"An earthquake," murmured Carruthers, momentarily stunned by the news. "But they are always of short duration, Zark. We have them on our own planet."

"Ah, but these are different. They cover the whole of

our globe. The great Dahlgren noted them while he was with us. He wrote many words and figures on paper concerning them. Only yesterday I unearthed these records. The life of our planet was doomed to destruction during the present year. What matter if the herds of dinosaurs overrun us and destroy lives? In the end they, too, will be destroyed. It is fate. We can do nothing."

Even as the old chieftain spoke a gigantic rumbling, greater in intensity than any heretofore, shook the electron. Above the deep rolling disturbance underground rose the shrill cries of the apemen.

Carruthers leaped to his feet and raced through the tunnel. A herd of dinosaurs choked the path leading to the outside entrance. Marbo brushed past him, shrilling in great excitement.

"Drive them away!" ordered Carruthers. "Like this!" He hurled a rock at the eye of the nearest animal.

The dinosaur bellowed and backed away. The apes, and gorillas, used to fighting only with their long

arms, caught on to the stunt with surprising quickness. Their powerful arms reached out. Stones and boulders began to hurtle from the mouth of the tunnel. They thudded against the heads of the great monsters like hailstones.

Subdued and frightened by this sudden display of force, the monsters withdrew down the path. But the apemen had discovered a new method of warfare. They found a childish delight in hurling stones. Within a few minutes the slope was barren of rocks. The animals followed up their momentary advantage and ran screaming down the path. The dinosaurs fled in panic.

As soon as the enemy had been driven away, Carruthers pointed out to Marbo the advantage of gathering the stones up from the ground and returning them to the space around the mouth of the tunnel so that he and his followers would be ready for a second repulse.

Zark appeared at this moment and helped with the explanation. His crafty old eyes turned with new

respect upon the earthman.

Carruthers toiled with them every day from then on, building and fortifying the plateau against further incursions of the monsters. Security and peace reigned for several weeks then hostilities broke out afresh.

The rumblings of the electron had increased with each passing week. Volcanic eruptions poured fresh discharges of molten lava and fiery sparks along the edges of the jungles.

"I don't want to needlessly alarm you, Nan," he told her that night, "but the fires have started. Zark was right. Unless we have rain before to-morrow morning the heat and smoke will drive us out into the open."

"But we can go to the top of the plateau," suggested the girl. "There aren't any trees—"

A concentrated bellowing cut off the rest of her words. Driven towards higher ground by the heat of the flames, the dinosaurs were trampling up the path

leading to the tunnel.

Once again Carruthers rallied his army of apemen around him and attempted to drive the mammals away. As they reached the end of the tunnel a cloud of dense smoke stung their eyes. The apemen shrilled in a sudden panic and forgot all their previous training in driving off the dinosaurs. Like scurrying rats they scattered.

Flames from the conflagration broke through the smoke—flames that leaped and twisted skyward.

Carruthers flung off the fear that held him spellbound and started along up the path leading to the top of the plateau. A disheveled figure appeared suddenly at his side—Nanette!

"Come," he whispered, hoarsely. "We've got to get out of this or we'll choke to death."

"But Zark," breathed the girl, "He and his followers are still in the cavern. We can't leave them."

Like one demented of reason, Carruthers raced back along the tunnel to the cavern. "Zark!" he shouted.

The sound of his voice was drowned in the welter of screaming bedlam coming up from below as the dinosaurs and apes fought for the supremacy of life. But of Zark and his six followers he found absolutely no sign. Quickly he hurried back to where he had left Nanette.

Even as he reached the spot he had a sudden premonition of danger. A gorilla, huge and black, brushed past him on the path, carrying a limp burden under his shaggy arm.

"Stop!" commanded Carruthers, hurrying after the animal.

A huge arm knocked him sprawling. Spitting blood Carruthers staggered to his feet. Up to this time he had felt no fear of the gorillas. They had been orderly and well behaved. Fearful that harm would come to the girl he ran after the dark figure ahead. The red glow of flames swept nearer. The gorilla came to a

stop and faced its pursuer. Lust shone from its close-set eyes—lust and passion.

Carruthers stopped dead in his tracks. "Drop her!" he demanded.

The animal snarled hoarsely. There came the sound of ripping cloth. Nanette screamed—a terrifying scream that echoed and re-echoed through the electron night.

It was then that the thin cloak of civilization dropped from Aaron Carruthers' back. He became in a single moment an animal fighting for his mate. With a snarl equally vicious as that of the gorilla pawing at the helpless girl, he lunged forward.

Mouthing his rage, the gorilla flung the earth man to the ground. Carruthers came up frothing at the mouth. With grim intensity he fastened himself to the animal's free arm. The raging mammal staggered helplessly under the extra burden and dropped the girl to concentrate his fury on the man. It raised a hairy arm aloft for the smashing blow. Instinctively Carruthers released his hold.

At that very moment the electron lurched sickeningly, causing them both to lose their footing. The violent upheaval sent Carruthers one way and the gorilla the other. While the man stumbled to his feet to resume battle he saw the infuriated monster stagger over the edge of the plateau wall into a sheer drop of a thousand feet.

Starkly through the night came the growling roars of the giant beasts from the jungles below. Nanette fluttered to his side. Her dress was torn and dragged on the ground. For all her disheveled appearance she was still beautiful to look upon. Forgetful of the danger on all sides of him, the animal in Carruthers saw in her pitifully half-clad body the same thing that the beast had desired. His head whirled hotly.

"Aaron!" she pleaded as his arm reached out to clutch her.

Hungrily he drew her to him. The pale light of the electron moon mingled with the roaring blast of the flames. Madness inflamed his heart and pounded his blood.

"Don't, Aaron," protested the girl, trying to free herself.

Something in the quality of the girl's frightened tones brought the man back to normal. He fought against the overwhelming desire to possess with all the force of his nature. And the better half triumphed. No longer was he an animal, but a reasoning human being. With a faint sigh he released her and wiped a hand across his dripping forehead.

"I'm sorry, Nan," he murmured. "That great brute drove me mad for an instant. I'm all right now."

Together they stood in the electron night and watched death creep closer and closer. The plateau was entirely surrounded with flames now and the heat was increasing with each passing moment. As it increased they backed towards the center.

From under their feet came the choking cries of the apemen. They had returned to the cavern only to be overcome by smoke fumes. While yet the earth people stood there waiting and watching the red death creep

nearer, the path leading downward into the jungle became a mass of moving shadows.

"The dinosaurs!" cried Nanette. "Oh, Aaron! We are lost!"

"Steady, girl," soothed the man. "If we stand still they might not see us in the dark. The smoke will destroy our scent."

But as the minutes passed the herd of monsters increased. They crowded along the path and spread out over the top of the plateau. Once again the smell of their glistening bodies fouled the nostrils of the earth people.

Slowly Carruthers guided Nanette back towards the ring of rocks—perhaps the barrier would serve to keep the animals away. He scrambled across one of the boulders and pulled the girl after him. As he did so, a violent subterranean action shook the electron from one end to the other.

Carruthers braced his feet against the ring of rocks to

keep from pitching headlong to the ground. Nanette clung to him wordlessly. All around them the giant forces of nature raged sullenly. Twisting seams appeared in the rocky floor of the plateau from which oozed gaseous vapors.

"Courage," soothed Carruthers as he held the quivering body of the frightened girl close to his own. "This can't last."

But the ground continued to lurch and heave on its axis. Vivid lights crossed and criss-crossed the atomic heavens. The fissures in the ground appeared now as black canals. The lower part of the circle of boulders disappeared. Off to the right came despairing screams. White bodies glowed for an instant against the background of flames.

"Zark!" shouted Carruthers, as he saw the leader of the tribe of Esau and his followers making their way along the plateau top.

Zark must have heard the earth-man's voice, for he started forward at a run. Simultaneously there

appeared a herd of the greatest of all the prehistoric monsters—the Brontosaurus. They balked enormously against the flame-licked skies. Zark and his followers attempted to avoid them. But fear of the scorching flames drove the monsters forward. There followed a maddening moment of unutterable pain for the remaining ones of the tribe of Esau, then the herd trampled them underfoot and rumbled towards the half circle of rocks where the two earth people were crouched.

The leader of the Brontosaurus herd trumpeted madly and barged for the higher ground of safety. Too late did instinct warn it of the widening fissure underfoot. Before it could stop the pressure of the herd drove it into the crevice.

Carruthers drew back to the extreme inside edge of the boulders trying to still his ears against their insane bellowings. A cloud of heavy, choking smoke enveloped him for a moment then passed away. Then it was that he saw a new star in the atomic heavens,—a star that seemed to burn with the brilliance of a meteor. Even as he watched he was conscious of it

drawing closer.

The planet was now in a continuous uproar. The ground was heaving and trembling as if from some inward strain. This was the end. Carruthers realized it with a sinking heart. In another minute the electron would disintegrate into a flaming mass of matter and fling itself from its orbit around the atom.

And then the light from the approaching star struck them in a blinding radiance of vermilion flames. Carruthers held his breath. Some invisible force seemed to take possession of his body and that of the girl at his side. The rocky plateau, now a boiling mass of rocks, dropped from under their feet. Clear, cold air enveloped their bodies. Then with the speed of light their bodies were hurled through planetary space, up, up, up into the vast reaches of the higher ether.

Darkness assailed them. The flames from the jungle fire vanished into nothingness. The electron moon paled to the size of a pin point, then went out.

Carruthers had the feeling of expansion and growth. It was as if his body was taking on the size of the whole world. It seemed to last for hours, days, ages. But all the while he clung fast to the slender, quivering body of Nanette.

Mountains and hills suddenly blazed before his eyes. Straight up and down mountains. He tried to stir his sluggish mind into action. What did they mean? Where had he seen them before? And while yet his mind struggled with the problem the mountains dwindled like melting snow. The pressure around his body relaxed. A blinding glare of steady light played upon his face. Then all was quietness and peace.

"Nan! Aaron!" The voice was Karl's.

Dazedly they looked around. What had once been mountains were now desks and chairs. They were back again in the laboratory. Several agonizing minutes passed before either could grasp the startling change in things. The horror of the electronic disaster still filled their minds to overflowing.

Carruthers recovered first. He stepped from the railed inclosure marking the spot where the atomic beam had restored them after their space flight, and guided the girl to a chair. Karl's face was drawn and white as his eyes rested on the two pitiful figures that had materialized out of the ether.

"Don't ask us any questions yet," spoke Carruthers in a tired voice. "We've passed through too many horrors. What was the matter, Karl? Couldn't you get the rays to work sooner?"

"Sooner?" Danzig's eyes were wide with wonder. He glanced at his watch. "It was a little difficult to control both machines all alone, but I switched off the ray from the inverse dimensional tubes and turned on the other immediately. All in all it must have taken me fifteen seconds."

"Fifteen seconds," repeated Carruthers, dazedly. "It's unbelievable." He dropped wearily into a chair and rested his forehead in the palms of his hands. "How long have we been gone, Nan?"

Nanette pulled the ragged remnants of a dress around her knees and attempted a smile. "Almost four months, according to the passage of time on the electron."

"Impossible!" whispered Danzig, shutting his eyes to the truth.

Aaron Carruthers pointed to his clothes, now ragged and torn. "Look, Karl! Everything I have on is worn out completely. Observe my hair and beard, and the soles of my shoes. Human reason to the contrary, Nanette and I have lived like two animals for four months, and all in the space of fifteen seconds earth time. How can you account for it? We figured it out on paper. And we've proved it with our bodies. What it will mean to future civilization I can't foretell. It's beyond imagination."

And the laboratory became silent as a tomb as the three people tried with all the strength of their minds to grasp the miracle of the strange and unfathomable atomic rays.

#54 An Extra Man, By Jackson Gee:

Sealed and vigilantly guarded was "Drayle's invention, 1932"—for it was a scientific achievement beyond which man dared not go.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:



Harry turns into a thick smoke, and gets sucked into a

big hole in the machine."

- - -

Sealed and vigilantly guarded was "Drayle's Invention, 1932"—for it was a scientific achievement beyond which man dared not go.

- - -

Rays of the August mid-day sun pouring through the museum's glass roof beat upon the eight soldiers surrounding the central exhibit, which for thirty years has been under constant guard. Even the present sweltering heat failed to lessen the men's careful observation of the visitors who, from time to time, strolled listlessly about the room.

The object of all this solicitude scarcely seemed to require it. A great up-ended rectangle of polished steel some six feet square by ten or a dozen feet in height, standing in the center of Machinery Hall, it suggested nothing sinister or priceless. Two peculiarities, however, marked it as unusual—the concealment of its mechanism and the brevity of its

title. For while the remainder of the exhibits located around it varied in the simplicity or complexity of their design, they were alike in the openness of their construction and detailed explanation of plan and purpose. The great steel box, however, bore merely two words and a date: "Drayle's Invention, 1932."

It was, nevertheless, toward this exhibit that a pleasant appearing white-haired old gentleman and a small boy were slowly walking when a change of guard occurred. The new men took their posts without words while the relieved detail turned down a long corridor that for a moment echoed with the clatter of hobnailed boots on stone. Then all was surprisingly still. Even the boy was impressed into reluctant silence as he viewed the uniformed men, though not for long.

"What's that, what's that, what's that?" he demanded presently with shrill imperiousness. "Grandfather, what's that?" An excited arm indicated the exhibit with its soldier guard.

"If you can keep still long enough," replied the old

gentleman patiently, "I'll tell you."

And with due regard for rheumatic limbs he slowly settled himself on a bench and folded his hands over the top of an ebony cane preparatory to answering the youngster's question. His inquisitor, however, was, at the moment, being hauled from beneath a brass railing by the sergeant of the watch.

"You'll have to keep an eye on him, sir," said the man reproachfully. "He was going to try his knife on the wood-work when I caught him."

"Thank you, Sergeant. I'll do my best—but the younger generation, you know."

"Sit still, if possible!" he directed the squirming boy. "If not, we'll start home now."

The non-com took a new post within easy reaching distance of the disturber and attempted to glare impressively.

"Go on, grandfather, tell me. What's D-r-a-y-l-e?"

What's in the box? Can't they open it? What are the soldiers for? Must they stay here? Why?"

"Drayle," said the old man, breaking through the barrage of questions, "was a close friend of mine a good many years ago."

"How many, grandfather? Fifty? As much as fifty? Did father know him? Is father fifty?"

"Forty; no; yes; no," said the harassed relative; and then with amazing ignorance inquired: "Do you really care to hear or do you just ask questions to exercise your tongue?"

"I want to hear the story, grandpa. Tell me the story. Is it a nice story? Has it got bears in it? Polar bears? I saw a polar bear yesterday. He was white. Are polar bears always white? Tell me the story, grandpa."

The old man turned appealing eyes toward the sergeant. Tacitly a sympathetic understanding was established. The warrior also was a father, and off the field of battle he had known defeat.

"Leave me handle him, sir," he suggested. "I've the like of him at home."

"I'd be very much indebted to you if you would."

Thus encouraged, the soldier produced from an inner pocket and offered one of those childhood sweets known as an "all day sucker."

"See if you can choke yourself on that," he challenged.

The clamor ceased immediately.

"It always works, sir," explained the man of resource. "The missus says as how it'll ruin their indigestions, but I'm all for peace even if I am in the army."

Now that his vocal organs were temporarily plugged, the child waved a demanding arm in the direction of the main exhibit to indicate a desire for the resumption of the narrative. But the ancient was not anxious to disturb so soon the benign and acceptable silence. In fact it was not until he observed the

sergeant's look of inquiry that he began once more.

"That box," he said slowly, "is both a monument and a milestone on the road to mankind's progress in mechanical invention. It marks the point beyond which Drayle's contemporaries believed it was unsafe to go: for they felt that inventions such as his would add to the complexities of life, and that if a halt were not made our own machines would ultimately destroy us.

"I did not, still do not, believe it. And I know Drayle's spirit broke when the authorities sealed his last work in that box and released him upon parole to abandon his experiments."

As the speaker sighed in regretful reminiscence, the sergeant glanced at his men. Apparently all was well: the only visible menace lolled within easy arm's reach, swinging his short legs and sucking noisily on his candy. Nevertheless the non-com shifted to a slightly better tactical position as he awaited the continuance of the tale.

"Christopher Drayle," said the elderly gentleman, "was the greatest man I have ever known, as well as the finest. Forty years or more ago we were close friends. Our homes on Long Island adjoined and I handled most of his legal affairs. He was about forty-five or six then, but already famous.

"His rediscovery of the ancient process of tempering copper had made him one of the wealthiest men in the land and enabled him to devote his time to scientific research. Electricity and chemistry were his specialties, and at the period of which I speak he was deeply engrossed in problems of radio transmission.

"But he had many interests and not infrequently visited our local country club for an afternoon of golf. Sometimes I played around the course with him and afterward, over a drink, we would talk. His favorite topic was the contribution of science to human welfare. And even though I could not always follow him when he grew enthusiastic about some new theory I was always puzzled.

"It was at such a time, when we had been discussing

the new and first successful attempt to send moving pictures by radio, that I mentioned the prophecy of Jackson Gee. Gee was the writer of fantastic, pseudo-scientific tales who had said: 'We shall soon be able to resolve human beings into their constituent elements, transmit them by radio to any desired point and reassemble them at the other end. We shall do this by means of vibrations. We are just beginning to learn that vibrations are the key to the fundamental process of all life.'

"I laughed as I quoted this to Drayle, for it seemed to me the ravings of a lunatic. But Drayle did not smile. 'Jackson Gee,' he said, 'is nearer to the truth than he imagines. We already know the elements that make the human body, and we can put them together in their proper proportions and arrangements: but we have not been able to introduce the vitalizing spark, the key vibrations to start it going. We can reproduce the human machine, but we can not make it move. We can destroy life in the laboratory, and we can prolong it, but so far we have not been able to create it. Yet I tell you in all seriousness that that time will come;

that time will come.'

"I was surprised at his earnestness and would have questioned him further. But a boy appeared just then with a message that Drayle was wanted at the telephone.

"Something important, sir," he said. Drayle went off to answer the summons and later he sent word that he had been called away and would not be able to return.

"It was the last I heard from Drayle for months. He shut himself in his laboratory and saw no one but his assistants, Ward of Boston, and Buchannon of Washington. He even slept in the workshop and had his food sent in.

"Ordinarily I would not have been excluded, for I had his confidence to an unusual degree and I had often watched him work. I admired the deft movements of his hands. He had the certain touch and style of a master. But during that period he admitted only his aids.

“Consequently I felt little hope of reaching him one morning when it was necessary to have his signature to some legal documents. Yet the urgency of the case led me to go to his home on the chance that I might be able to get him long enough for the business that concerned us. Luck was with me, for he sent out word that he would see me in a few minutes. I remember seating myself in the office that opened off his laboratory and wondering what was beyond the door that separated us. I had witnessed some incredible performances in the adjoining room.

"At last Drayle came in. He looked worried and careworn. There were new lines in his face and blue half-circles of fatigue beneath his eyes. It was evident that it was long since he had slept. He apologized for having kept me waiting and then, without examining the papers I offered, he signed his name nervously in the proper spaces. When I gathered the sheets together he turned abruptly toward the laboratory, but at the door he paused and smiled.

"Give my respects to Jackson Gee," he said."

"Who's Jackson Gee? Does father know him? Has he any polar bears? Aren't you going to tell me about that?"

The tidal wave of questions almost overwhelmed the historian and his auditor. But the military, fortunately, was equal to the emergency. With a tactical turn of his hand he thrust the remnant of the lollypop between the chattering jaws and spoke with sharp rapidity.

"Listen," he commanded, "that there, what you got, is a magic candy, and if you go on exposing it to the air after it is once in your mouth it's likely to disappear, just like that." And the speed of the translation was illustrated by a smart snapping of the fingers.

Doubt shone in the juvenile terror's eyes and the earlier generations waited fearfully while skepticism and greed waged their recurrent conflict. For a time it seemed as if the veteran had blundered; but finally greed triumphed and a temporary peace ensued.

"Where was I?" inquired the interrupted narrator

when the issue of battle was settled.

"You was talking about Jackson Gee," answered the guardsman in a cautiously low tone.

"So I was, so I was," the old gentleman agreed somewhat vaguely, nodding his head. He gazed at the sergeant with mingled awe and admiration. "I suppose it's quite useless to mention it," he said rather wistfully, "but if you ever get out of the army and should want a job.... You could name your own salary, you know?" The question ended on an appealing note.

Evidently the soldier understood the digression, for he replied in a tone that would brook no dispute. "No, sir, I couldn't consider it."

"I was afraid so," said the other regretfully, and added, with apparent irrelevance, "I have to live with him, you see."

"Tough luck," commiserated the listener.

Reluctantly summoning his thoughts from the pleasant contemplation of what had seemed to offer a new era of peace, the bard turned to his story.

A few hours later," he continued, "I had a telephone call from Drayle's wife, and I realized from the fright in her voice that something dreadful had happened. She asked me to come to the house at once. Chris had been hurt. But she disconnected before I could ask for details. I started immediately and I wondered as I drove what disaster had overtaken him. Anything, it seemed to me, might have befallen in that room of miracles. But I was not prepared to find that Drayle had been shot and wounded.

"The police were before me and already questioning the assailant, Mrs. Farrel, a fiery tempered young Irish-woman. When I entered the room she was repeating half-hysterically her explanation that Drayle had killed her husband in the laboratory that morning.

"'Right before my eyes, I seen it,' she shouted. 'Harry was standing on a sort of platform looking at a big

machine like, and so help me he didn't have a stitch of clothes on, and I started to say something, but all at once there came a terrible sort of screech and a flash like lightnin' kinda, in front of him. Then Harry turns into a sort of thick smoke and I can see right through him like he was a ghost; and then the smoke gets sucked into a big hole in the machine and I know Harry's dead. And here's this man what done it, just a standin' there, grinnin' horrid. So something comes over me all at once and I points Harry's gun at him and pulls the trigger!'

"Even before the woman had finished I recalled what I seen one afternoon in Drayle's laboratory many months before. I had been there for some time watching him when he placed a small tumbler on a work table and asked me if I had ever seen glass shattered by the vibrations of a violin. I told him that I had, but he went through the demonstration as if to satisfy himself. Of course when he drew a bow across the instrument's strings and produced the proper pitch the goblet cracked into pieces exactly as might have been expected. And I wondered why Drayle

concerned himself with so childish an experiment before I noticed that he appeared to have forgotten me completely.

"I endeavored then not to disturb him, and I remember trying to draw myself out of his way and feeling that something momentous was about to take place. Yet actually I believe it would have required a considerable commotion to have distracted his attention, for his ability to concentrate was one of the characteristics of his genius.

"I saw him place another glass on the table and I noticed then that it stood directly in front of a complicated mechanism. At first this gave out a low humming sound, but it soon rose to an unearthly whining shriek. I shrank from it involuntarily and a second later I was amazed at the sight of the glass, seemingly reduced to a thin vapor, being drawn into a funnel-like opening near the top of the device. I was too startled to speak and could only watch as Drayle started the contrivance again. Once more its noise cut through me with physical pain. I cried out. But my voice was overwhelmed by the terrific din of the

mysterious machine.

"Then Drayle strode down the long room to another intricate mass of wire coils and plates and lamps. And I saw a dim glow appear in two of the bulbs and heard a noise like the crackling of paper. Drayle made some adjustments, and presently I observed a peculiar shimmering of the air above a horizontal metal grid. It reminded me of heat waves rising from a summer street, until I saw the vibrations were taking a definite pattern; and that the pattern was that of the glass I had seen dissolved into air. At first the image made me think of a picture formed by a series of horizontal lines close together but broken at various points in such fashion as to create the appearance of a line by the very continuity of the fractures. But as I watched, the plasma became substance. The air ceased to quiver and I was appalled to see Drayle pick up the tumbler and carry it to a scale on which he weighed it with infinite exactness. If he had approached me with it at that moment I would have fled in terror.

"Next, Drayle filled the goblet with some liquid which

immediately afterward he measured in a beaker. The result seemed to please him, for he smiled happily. At the same instant he became aware of my presence. He looked surprised and then a trifle disconcerted. I could see that he was embarrassed by the knowledge that I had witnessed so much, and after a second or two he asked my silence. I agreed at once, not only because he requested it but because I couldn't believe the evidence myself. He let me out then and locked the door.

"It was this recollection that made me credit the woman's story. But I was sick with dread, for in spite of my faith in Drayle's genius I feared he had gone mad.

"Mrs. Drayle had listened to Mrs. Farrel's account calmly enough, but I could see the fear in her eyes when she signaled a wish to speak to me alone. I followed her into an adjoining room, leaving Mrs. Farrel with the two policemen and the doctor, who was trying to quiet her.

"As soon as the door closed after us Mrs. Drayle

seized my hands.

"Tim,' she whispered, 'I'm horribly afraid that what the woman says is true. Chris has told me of some wonderful things he was planning to do, but I never expected he would experiment on human beings. Can they send him to prison?'

"Of course I said what I could to comfort her and tried to make my voice sound convincing. At the time the legal aspect of the matter did not worry me so much as the fear that the attack on Drayle might prove fatal. For even if it should develop that he was not dangerously hurt, I imagined that the interruption of the experiment at a critical moment might easily have ruined whatever slim chance there had been of success. For us the nerve-wracking part was that we could do nothing until the surgeon who was attending Drayle could tell us how badly he was injured.

"At last word came that the bullet had only grazed Drayle's head and stunned him, but that he might remain unconscious for some time. Mrs. Drayle went in and sat at her husband's side, while I returned to

the laboratory and found the police greatly bewildered as to whether they ought to arrest Drayle.

"They had discovered in a closet an outfit of men's clothing that Mrs. Farrel identified as her husband's, and, although they saw no other trace of the missing man, they had a desire to lock up somebody as an evidence of their activity. It took considerable persuasion to prevail upon them to withhold their hands. There was no such difficulty about restraining them in the laboratory. They were afraid to touch any apparatus, and they gave the invention a ludicrously wide berth.

"I never knew exactly how long it was that I paced about the lower floor of Drayle's home before the doctor summoned me and announced that the patient wanted me, but that I must be careful not to excite him. I have often wondered how many physicians would have to abandon their profession if they were deprived of that phrase. 'You must not excite the patient.'

"Drayle was already excited when I entered. In fact,

he was furious at the doctor's efforts to restrain him. But I realized that my fear for his reason was groundless. His remarks were lucid and forceful as he raged at the interference with his work. As soon as he saw me he appealed for assistance.

"'Make them let me alone. Tim,' he begged, as his wife and the doctor, partly by force and partly by persuasion, endeavored to hold him in bed. 'I must get back to the laboratory. That woman believes that I've killed her husband, and my assistant will think that we've failed.'

"I was about to argue with him when suddenly he managed to thrust the doctor aside and start toward the door. His seriousness impressed me so that I gave him a supporting arm and together we headed down the hall, with Mrs. Drayle and the doctor following anxiously in the rear. The laboratory was deserted and locked when we arrived. The police evidently felt it was too uncanny an atmosphere for a prolonged wait. Drayle opened the door, went directly to his machine, and examined it minutely.

"'Thank the Lord that woman hit only me!' he said, and sank into a chair. Then he asked for some brandy. Mrs. Drayle rushed off and reappeared in a minute with a decanter and glass. Drayle helped himself to a swallow that brought color to his cheeks and new strength to his limbs. Immediately after he turned again to the machine. I dragged up a chair, assisted him into it, and seated myself close by.

"I knew little enough about mechanics, but I was fascinated by the numerous gauges that faced me on the gleaming instrument board. There were dials with needlelike hands that registered various numbers; spots of color appeared in narrow slots close to a solar spectrum: a stream of graph-paper tape flowed slowly beneath a tracing-pen point and carried away a jiggly thin line of purple ink. In a moment Drayle was oblivious of everything but his records. I watched him copy the indicated figures, surround them with formulas, and solve mysterious problems with a slide-rule.

"His calculations covered a large sheet before he had finished. At last he underscored three intricate

combinations of letters and figures and carried the answers to his private radio apparatus. This operated on a wave length far outside the range of all others and insured him against interference. With it he was able to speak at any time with his assistants in Washington or Boston or with both at once. He threw the switch that sent his call into the air. An answer came instantly, and Drayle began to talk to his distant lieutenants.

"We've been interrupted, gentlemen," he said, "but I think we may continue now. We'll reassemble in the Boston laboratory. Have you arranged the elements? The coefficients are...." And he gave a succession of decimals.

"A voice replied that all was ready. Drayle said 'Excellent,' went back to his invention and twisted a black knob on the board before him.

"With this trifling movement all hell seemed to crash about us. The ghastly cacophony that I had experienced in the same room some months previously was as nothing. These stupendous waves of

sound pounded us until it seemed as if we must disintegrate beneath them. Wails and screams engulfed us. Mrs. Drayle dropped to her knees beside her husband. The doctor seized my arm and I saw the knuckles of his hand turn white with the pressure of his grip, yet I felt nothing but the awful vibrations that drummed like riveting machines upon and through my nerves and body. It was not an attack upon the ears alone; it crashed upon the heart, beat upon the chest so that breathing seemed impossible. My brain throbbed under the terrific pulsations. For a while I imagined the human system could not endure the ordeal and that all of us must be annihilated.

"Except for his slow turning of the dials Drayle was motionless before the machine. Below the bandage about his forehead I could see his features drawn with anxiety. He had wagered a human life to test his theory and I think the enormity of it had not struck him until that moment.

"What I knew and hoped enabled me to imagine what was taking place in the Boston laboratory. I seemed to see man's elementary dust and vapors whirled from

great containers upward into a stratum of shimmering air and gradually assume the outlines of a human form that became first opaque, then solid, and then a sentient being. At the same instant I was conscious that the appalling pandemonium had ceased and that the voice of Drayle's Boston assistant was on the radio.

"Congratulations, Chief! His reassemblage is perfect. There's not a flaw anywhere." "Splendid," Drayle answered. "Bring him here by plane right away; his wife is worried about him."

"Then Drayle turned to me.

"You see," he said, "Jackson Gee was right. We have resolved man into his constituent elements, transmitted his key vibrations by radio, and reassembled him from a supply of identical elements at the other end. And now, if you will assure that woman that her husband is safe, I will get some sleep. You will have the proof before you in less than three hours."

"I can't vouch for the doctor's feelings, but as Drayle left us I was satisfied that everything was as it should be, and that I had just witnessed the greatest scientific achievement of all time. I did not foresee, nor did Drayle, the results of an error or deliberate disobedience on the part of one of his assistants.

"We waited, the doctor and I, for the arrival of the man who, we were convinced, had been transported some three hundred miles in a manner that defied belief. The evidence would come, Drayle had said, in a few hours. Long before they had elapsed we were starting at the sound of every passing motor, for we knew that a plane must land some distance from the house and that the travelers would make the last mile or so by car.

"Mrs. Drayle endeavored to convince the imagined widow that her husband was safe and was returning speedily. Later she rejoined us, full of questions that we answered in a comforting blind faith. The time limit was drawing to a close when the sound of an automobile horn was quickly followed by a sharp knock on the laboratory door. At a sign from Mrs.

Drayle one of the policemen opened it and we saw two men before us. One, a scholarly appearing, bespectacled youth, I recognized as Drayle's Boston assistant, Ward; the other, a rather burly individual, was a stranger to me. But there was no doubt he was the man we awaited so eagerly, for Mrs. Farrel screamed 'Harry! Harry!' and sped across the room towards him.

"At first she ran her fingers rather timidly over his face, and then pinched his huge shoulders, as if to assure herself of his reality. The sense of touch must have satisfied her, for abruptly she kissed him, flung her arms about him, clung to him, and crooned little endearments. The big man, in turn, patted her cheeks awkwardly and mumbled in a convincingly natural voice, "Sall right, Mary, old kid! There ain't nothin' to it. Yeah! Sure it's me!"

"Then I was conscious of Drayle's presence. A brown silk dressing gown fell shapelessly about his spare frame and smoke from his cigarette rose in a quivering blue-white stream. Ward spied him at the same moment and stepped forward with quick

outstretched hands. I remember the flame of adoring zeal in the youngster's eyes as he tried to speak. At length he managed to stammer some congratulatory phrases while Drayle clapped him affectionately on the back.

"Then Drayle turned to Farrel to ask him how he enjoyed the trip. Farrel grinned and said, 'Fine! It was like a dream, sir! First I'm in one place and then I'm in another and I don't know nothing about how I got there. But I could do with a drink, sir. I ain't used to them airyplanes much.'

"Drayle accepted the hint and suggested that we all celebrate. He gave instructions over a desk telephone and almost immediately a man entered with a small service wagon containing a wide assortment of liquors and glasses. When we had all been served, Ward asked somewhat hesitantly if he might propose a toast. 'To Dr. Drayle, the greatest scientist of all time!'

"We were of course, already somewhat drunk with excitement as we lifted our glasses. But Drayle would

not have it.

"Let me amend that,' he said. 'Let us drink to the future of science.'

"Sure!' said Farrel, very promptly. I think he was somewhat uncertain about 'toast,' but he clung hopefully to the word 'drink.'

"We had raised our glasses again when Drayle, who was facing the door, dropped his. It struck the floor with a little crash and the liquor spattered my ankles. Drayle whispered 'Great God!' I saw in the doorway another Farrel. He was grimy, disheveled, his clothing was torn, and his expression ugly; but his identity with 'Harry' was unescapable. For an instant I suspected Drayle of trickery, of perpetrating some fiendishly elaborate hoax. And then I heard Mrs. Farrel scream, heard the newcomer cry, 'Mary,' and saw two men staring at each other in bewilderment.

"The explanation burst upon me with a horrible suddenness. Farrel had been reconstructed in each of Drayle's distant laboratories, and there stood before

us two identities each equally authentic, each the legal husband of the woman who, a few hours previously, had imagined herself a widow. The situation was fantastic, nightmarish, unbelievable and undeniable. My head reeled with the fearful possibilities.

"Drayle was the first to recover his poise. He opened a door leading into an adjoining room and motioned for us all to enter. That is, all but the police. He left them wisely with their liquor. 'Finish it,' he advised them. 'You see no one has been killed.'

"They were not quite satisfied, but neither were they certain what they ought to do, and for once displayed common sense by doing nothing. When the door closed after us I saw that Buchannon, the Washington laboratory assistant, was with us. He must have arrived with the second Farrel, although I had not observed him during the confusion attending the former's unexpected appearance. But Drayle had noted him and now seized his shoulders. 'Explain!' he demanded.

"Buchannon's face went white and he shrank under the clutch of Drayle's fingers. Beyond them I saw the two twinlike men standing beside Mrs. Farrel, surveying each other with incredulous recognition and distaste.

"'Explain!' roared Drayle, and tightened his grasp.

"'I thought you said Washington, Chief.' His voice was not convincing. I didn't believe him, nor did Drayle.

"'You lie!' he raged, and floored the man with his fist.

"In a way I couldn't help feeling sorry for the chap. It must have been a frightful temptation to participate in the experiment and I suppose he had not foreseen the consequences. But I began to have a glimmering of the magnificent possibilities of the invention for purposes far beyond Drayle's intent. For, I asked myself, why, if such a machine could produce two human identities, why not a score, a hundred, a thousand? The best of the race could be multiplied indefinitely and man could make man at last, literally out of the dust of the earth. The virtue of

instantaneous transmission which had been Drayle's aim sank into insignificance beside it. I fancied a race of supermen thus created. And I still believe, Sergeant, that the chance for the world's greatest happiness is sealed within that box you guard. But its first fruits were tragic."

The historian shifted his position on the bench so as to escape the sun that was now reflected dazzlingly by the polished steel casket.

"Drayle did not glance again at his disobedient lieutenant. He was concerned with the problem of the extra man, or, I should say, an extra man, for both were equal. Never before in the history of the world had two men been absolutely identical. They were, of course, one in thought, possessions and rights, physical attributes and appearance. Mrs. Farrel, as they were beginning to realize, was the wife of both. And I have an unworthy suspicion that the red-headed young woman, after she recovered from the shock, was not entirely displeased. The two men, however, finding that each had an arm about her waist, were regarding each other in a way that foretold trouble.

Both spoke at the same time and in the same words.

"Take your hands off my wife!"

"And I think they would have attacked each other then if Drayle hadn't intervened. He said, 'Sit down! All of you!' in so peremptory a voice that we obeyed him.

"Now," he went on, 'pay attention to me. I think you realize the situation. The question is, what we shall do about it?' He pointed an accusing finger at the Farrel from Washington. 'You were not authorized to exist; properly we should retransmit you, and without reassembling you would simply cease to be.'

"The man addressed looked terrified. 'It would be murder!' he protested.

"Would it?' Drayle inquired of me.

"I told him that it could not be proved inasmuch as there would be no *corpus delicti* and hence nothing on which to base a charge.

"But the Washington Farrel seemed to have more than an academic interest in the question and grew obstinate.

"'Nothing doing!' he announced emphatically. 'Here I am and here I stay. I started from this place this morning and now I'm back, and as for that big ape over there I don't know nothing about him—except he'll be dead damn soon if he don't keep away from my wife.'

"The other Drayle-made man leaped up at this, and again I expected violence. But Buchannon flung himself between, and they subsided, muttering.

"'Very well, then,' Drayle continued, when the room was quiet, 'here is another solution. We can, as you realize, duplicate Mrs. Farrel, and I will double your present possessions.'

"This time it was Mrs. Farrel who was dissatisfied. 'You ain't talking to me,' she informed Drayle. 'Me stand naked in front of all them lamps and get turned into smoke? Not me!' A smile spread over her face

and her eyes twinkled with deviltry. 'I didn't never think I'd be in one of them triangles like in the movies, and with my own husbands, but seein' I am, I'm all for keeping them both. Then I might know where one of them was some of the time.'

"But neither of the men took to this idea and the problem appeared increasingly complex. I proposed that the survivor be determined by lot, but this suggestion won no support from anyone. Again the two men spoke at the same instant and in the same words. It was like a carefully rehearsed chorus. 'I know my rights, and I ain't going to be gypped out of them!'

"It was at this point that Drayle attempted bribery. He offered fifty thousand dollars to the man who would abandon Mrs. Farrel. But this scheme fell through because both men sought the opportunity and Mrs. Farrel objected volubly.

"So in the end Drayle promised each of them the same amount as a price for silence and left the matter of their relationships to their own settlement.

"I was skeptical of the success of the plan but could offer nothing better. So I drew up a release as legally binding as I knew how to make it in a case without precedent. I remember thinking that if the matter ever came into court the judge would be as much at a loss as I was.

"Our troubles, though, didn't spring from that source. Each of the three parties accepted the arrangement eagerly and Drayle dismissed them with a handshake, a wish for luck and a check for fifty thousand dollars each. It's very nice to be wealthy, you know.

"Afterward, we went out and paid off the police. Perhaps that's stating it too bluntly. I mean that Drayle thanked them for their zealous attention to his interests, regretted that they had been unnecessarily inconvenienced and treated that they would not take amiss a small token of his appreciation of their devotion to duty. Then he shook hands with them both and I believe I saw a yellow bill transferred on each occasion. At any rate the officers saluted smartly and left.

"Of course I was impatient to question Drayle, but I could see that he was desperately fatigued. So I departed.

"Next morning I found my worst fears exceeded by the events of the night. The three Farrels who had left us in apparently amiable spirits had proceeded to the home of Mrs. and the original Mr. Farrel. There the argument of who was to leave had been resumed. Both men were, of course, of the same mind. Whether both desired to stay or flee I would not presume to say. But an acrimonious dispute led to physical hostilities, and while Mrs. Farrel, according to accounts, cheered them on, they literally fought to the death. Being equally capable, there was naturally, barring interruption, no other possible outcome. I can well believe they employed the same tactics, swung the same blows, and died at the same instant.

"Mrs. Farrel, after carefully retrieving both of her husbands' checks, told a great deal of the story. As might be expected, nobody believed the yarn except our profound federal law makers. They welcomed an opportunity to investigate an outsider for a change

and had all of us before a committee.

"Finally the Congress of these United States of America, plus the sagacious Supreme Court, decided that my client wasn't guilty of anything, but that he mustn't do it again. At least that was the gist of it. I recollect that I offered a defense of psycopathic neuroticism.

"As a result of the *obiter dictum* and a resolution by both Houses Assembled Drayle's invention was sealed, dated and placed under guard. That's its history, Sergeant."

The white-haired old gentleman picked up the high silk hat that added a final touch of distinction to his tall figure, and looked about him as if trying to recall something. At last the idea came.

"By the way," he inquired suddenly, "didn't I have an extraordinarily obnoxious grandson with me when I came?"

The attentive auditor was vastly startled. He surveyed

the great hall rapidly, but reflected before he answered.

"No, sir—I mean he ain't no more'n average! But I reckon we'd better find him, anyhow."

His glance had satisfied the sergeant that at least the object of his charge was safe and his men still vigilant. "I'll be back in a minute," he informed them. "Don't let nothin' happen."

"Bring us something more'n a breath," pleaded the corporal, disrespectfully.

The sergeant had already set off at a brisk pace with the story teller. For several minutes as they rushed from room to room the hunt was unrewarded.

"I think, sir," said the sergeant, "we'd better look in the natural history division. There is stuffed animals in there that the kids is fond of."

"You're probably right," the patriarch gasped as he struggled to maintain the gait set by the younger

man. "I might have known he didn't really want to hear the story."

"They never do," answered the other over his shoulder. "I'll bet that's him down there on the next floor."

The two searchers had emerged upon a wide gallery that commanded a clear view of the main entrance where various specimens of American fauna were mounted in intriguing replicas of their native habitat.

The guard pointed an accusing finger at one of these groups and sprang toward the stairs.

The old gentleman's breath and strength were gone. He could only gaze in the direction that had been indicated by the madly running guard; but he had no doubts. A small boy was certainly digging vigorously at the head of a specimen of *Ursus Polaris* that the curator had represented in the dramatic pose of killing a seal. A protesting wail arose from below as the young naturalist was withdrawn from his field by a capable hand on the slack of his trousers. And

presently, chagrined with failure, the culprit was before his grandsire.

"Gee!" he complained, "I was only looking at the polar bear. Are polar bears always white? Are—"

"You'd better take him away, sir," interrupted the sergeant. "He was trying to pry out one of the bear's eyes with the stick of the lollypop I give him. Take him."

The old gentleman extended both hands. His left found a grip in his grandson's coat collar; his right, partly concealing a government engraving, met the guard's with a clasp of gratitude.

"Sergeant," he remarked in a voice tense with feeling, "a half-hour ago I expressed some ridiculous regrets that Drayle's invention had been kept from the world. Now I realize its horrid menace. I shudder to think it might have been responsible for two like him!"

The object of disapproval was shaken indicatively.

"Guard the secret well, Sergeant! Guard it well! The world's peace depends upon you!" The old gentleman's words trembled with conviction.

Then alternately shaking his head and his grandson he marched down the hallway, ebony cane tapping angrily upon the stone.

As the exhausted but happy warrior retraced his steps a high-pitched voice floated after him.

"Grandpa, are polar bears *always* white?"

November 1930

#55 The Wall Of Death, By Victor Rousseau Emanuel:

Out of the Antarctic it came—a wall of viscid, grey, half-human jelly, absorbing and destroying all life that it encountered.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

hewing madly with



- - -

This news," said Cliff Hynes, pointing to the newspaper, "means the end of homo Americanus."

- - -

Out of the Antarctic it came—a wall of viscid, grey, half-human jelly, absorbing and destroying all life that it encountered.

The newspaper in question was the hour-sheet of the

International Broadcast Association, just delivered by pneumatic tube at the laboratory. It was stamped 1961, Month 13, Day 7, Horometer 3, and the headlines on the front page confirmed the news of the decisive defeat of the American military and naval forces at the hands of the Chinese Republic.

A gallant fight for days against hopeless odds; failure of the army dynamos; airships cut off from ground guidance; battleships ripped to pieces by the Chinese disintegrators; and, finally, the great wave of black death that had wiped out two hundred thousand men.

Kay Bevan—to use the old-fashioned names which still persisted, despite the official numerical nomenclature—glanced through the account. He threw the sheet away. "We deserved it, Cliff," he said.

Cliff nodded. "You saw that bit about the new Chinese disintegrator? If the Government had seriously considered our Crumbler—"

Kay glanced at the huge, humming top that filled the center of the laboratory. It spun so fast that it

appeared as nothing but a spherical shadow, through which one could see the sparse furnishings, the table, the apparatus ranged upon it, and the window overlooking the upper streets of New York.

"Yes—*if!*" he answered bitterly. "And I'm willing to bet the Chinese have an inferior machine, built upon the plans that Chinese servant stole from us last year."

"We deserved it, Cliff," said Kay again. "For ten years we've harried and enslaved the yellow man, and taken a hundred thousand of his men and women to sacrifice to the Earth Giants. What would we have done, if conditions had been reversed?"

"Self-preservation," Cliff suggested.

"Exactly. The law of the survival of the fittest. They thought that they were fitter to survive. I tell you they had right on their side, Cliff, and that's what's beaten us. Now—a hundred thousand of our *own* boys and girls must be fed into the maw of these monsters every year. God, suppose it were Ruth!"

"Or you or I," said Cliff. "If only we could perfect the Crumbler!"

"What use would that be against the Earth Giants? There's nothing organic about them, not even bones. Pure protoplasm!"

"We could have used it against the Chinese," said Cliff. "Now—" He shrugged his shoulders hopelessly.

And if explorers had been content to leave the vast unknown Antarctic Continent alone, they would never have taught the imprisoned Giants to cross the great ice barrier. But that crossing had taken place fifteen years ago, and already the mind of man had become accustomed to the grim facts.

Who could have dreamed that the supposed table-land was merely a rim of ice-mountains, surrounding a valley twice the size of Europe, so far below sea-level that it was warmed to tropic heat by Earth's interior fires? Or that this valley was peopled with what could best be described as organized protoplasm?

Enormous, half-transparent, gelatinous organism, attaining a height of about a hundred feet, and crudely organized into forms not unlike those of men?

Half the members of the Rawlins Expedition, which had first entered this valley, had fallen victims to the monsters. Most of the rest had gone raving mad. And the stories of the two who returned, sane, to Buenos Aires, were discredited and scoffed at as those of madmen.

But of a second expedition none had survived, and it was the solitary survivor of the third who had confirmed the amazing story. The giant monsters, actuated by some flickering human intelligence, had found their way out of the central valley, where they had subsisted by enfolding their vegetable and small animal prey with pseudopods, that is to say, temporary projections of arms from the gelatinous bulk of their substance.

They had floated across the shallow seas between the tip of the Antarctic Continent and Cape Horn, as toy balloons float on water. Then they had spread

northward, extending in a wall that reached from the Atlantic to the Andes. And, as they moved, they had devoured all vegetables and animal life in their path. Behind them lay one great bare, absolutely lifeless area.

How many of them were there? That was the hideous fact that had to be faced. Their numbers could not be counted because, after attaining a height of about a hundred feet, they reproduced by budding!

And within a few weeks these buds, in turn, attained their full development.

The Argentine Government had sent a force of twenty thousand men against them, armed with cannon, machine-guns, tanks, airplanes, poison gas, and the new death-ray. And in the night, when it was bivouacking, after what it had thought was glorious victory, it had been overwhelmed *and eaten!*

Proof against the poison gas, the hideous monsters were, and invulnerable to shot and shell. Divided and sub-divided, slashed into ribbons, blown to fragments

by bombs, each of the pieces simply became the nucleus of a new organism, able, within a few hours, to assume the outlines of a dwarf man, and to seize and devour its prey.

But the Argentine expedition had done worse than it at first dreamed of. *It had given the monsters a taste for human flesh!*

After that, the wave of devastation had obliterated life in every city clear up to the Amazonian forests. And then it had been discovered that, by feeding these devils human flesh, they could be rendered torpid and their advance stayed—so long as the periodical meals continued!

At first criminals had been supplied them, then natives, then Chinese, obtained by periodical war raids. What would you have? The savage regions of the earth had already been depopulated, and a frenzy of fear had taken possession of the whole world.

Now the Chinese had defeated the annual American invasion, and the Earth Giants were budding and

swarming through the heart of Brazil.

"Man," said the Theosophists, "is the fifth of the great root-races that have inhabited this planet. The fourth were the Atlanteans. The third were the Lemurians, half-human beings of whom the Australian aborigines are the survivors. The second race was not fully organized into human form. Of the first, nothing is known.

"These are the second race, surviving in the Antarctic valleys. Half-human objects, groping toward that perfection of humanity of which we ourselves fall very far short. As the Kabbala says, man, before Adam, reached from heaven to earth."

Kay Bevan and Cliff Hynes had been working feverishly to perfect their Crumbler for use in the Chinese wars. Convinced, as were all fair-minded men, that these annual raids were unjustified, they yielded to the logic of the facts. Should America sacrifice a hundred thousand of her boys and girls each year, when human life was cheap in China? *Boys and girls!*

It had been discovered that the Earth Giants required the flesh of women as well as of men. Some subtle chemical constituent then produced the state of torpidity during which the advance and the budding of the monsters was stayed. During the ten past years their northward advance had been almost inappreciable. Brazil had even sent another army against them.

But the deadliest gases had failed to destroy the tenacious life of these protoplasmic creatures, and the tanks, which had driven through and through them, had become entangled and blocked in the gelatinous exudations, and their occupants eaten.

All over the world scientists were striving to invent some way of removing this menace to the world. Moreover, airplanes sent to the polar continent had reported fresh masses mobilizing for the advance northward. A second wave would probably burst through the Amazon forest barrier and sweep over the Isthmus and overrun North America.

Five days after the news of the Chinese disaster was

confirmed, Cliff Hynes came back from the capital of the American Confederation, Washington.

"It's no use, Kay," he said. "The Government won't even look at the Crumbler. I told them it would disintegrate every inorganic substance to powder, and they laughed at me. And it's true, Kay: they've given up the attempt to enslave China. Henceforward a hundred thousand of our own citizens are to be sacrificed each year. Eaten alive, Kay! God, if only the Crumbler would destroy organic forms as well!"

The first year's quota of fifty thousand boys and fifty thousand girls, thrown to the maw of the monsters to save humanity, nearly disrupted the Confederation. Despite the utmost secrecy, despite the penalty of death for publishing news of the sacrifice, despite the fact that those who drew the fatal lots were snatched from their homes at dead of night, everything became known.

On the vast pampas in the extreme north of the Argentine Republic, where Bolivia, the Argentine, Paraguay and Brazil unite, was the place of sacrifice.

Thousands of acres, white with the bones of those whom the monsters had engulfed. Brainless, devoid of intelligence, sightless, because even the sense had not become differentiated in them, yet by some infernal instinct the Earth Giants had become aware that this was their feasting ground.

By some tacit compact, the guards who had annually brought their victims to be devoured had been unmolested, the vast wall of semi-human shapes withdrawing into the shelter of the surrounding forests while the Chinese were staked out in rows. Death, which would have been a mercy, had been denied them. It was living flesh that the Earth Giants craved. And here, on the spot known as Golgotha, the hideous sacrifice had been annually repeated.

That first year, when the chosen victims were transported to the fatal spot, all America went mad. Frenzied parents attacked the offices of the Federation in every city. The cry was raised that Spanish Americans had been selected in preference to those of more northern blood. Civil war loomed imminent.

And year after year these scenes must be repeated. Boys and girls, from fifteen to twenty years of age, the flower of the Federation, a hundred thousand of them, must die a hideous death to save humanity. Now the choice of the second year's victims was at hand.

In their laboratory, removed to the heart of the Adirondacks wilderness, Cliff and Kay were working frantically.

"It's the last chance, Kay," said Cliff. "If I've not solved the secret this time, it means another year's delay. The secret of dissolving organic forms as well as inorganic ones! What is this mysterious power that enables organic forms to withstand the terrific bombardment of the W-ray?"

The W-ray was the Millikan cosmic ray, imprisoned and adapted for human use. It was a million times more powerful than the highest known voltage of electricity. Beneath it, even the diamond, the hardest substance known, dissolved into a puff of dust; and yet the most fragile plant growth remained unaffected.

The laboratory in the Adirondacks was open at one end. Here, against a background of big forest trees, a curious medley of substances had been assembled: old chairs, a couple of broken-down airplanes, a large disused dynamo, a heap of discarded clothing, a miscellany of kitchen utensils on a table, a gas stove, and a heap of metal junk of all kinds. The place looked, in fact, like a junk heap.

The great top was set in a socket in a heavy bar of craolite, the new metal that combined the utmost tensile strength with complete infusibility, even in the electric furnace. About six feet in height, it looked like nothing but what it was, a gyroscope in gimbals, with a long and extremely narrow slit extending all around the central bulge, but closed on the operator's side by a sliding cover of the same craolite.

Within this top, which, by its motion, generated a field of electrical force between the arms of an interior magnet, the W-rays were generated in accordance with a secret formula; the speed of gyration, exceeding anything known on earth, multiplied their force a billionfold, converting them to wave-lengths

shorter than the shortest known to physical science. Like all great inventions, the top was of the simplest construction.

"Well," said Cliff, "you'd better bring out Susie."

Kay left the laboratory and went to the cabin beside the lake that the two men occupied. From her box in front of the stove a lady porcupine looked up lazily and grunted. Kay raised the porcupine; in the box, of course. Susie was constitutionally indolent, but one does not handle porcupines, however smooth their quills may lie.

Kay brought her to the heap of junk and placed the box on top of it. He went inside the laboratory. "I may as well tell you, Cliff. I wouldn't have brought Susie if I'd thought the experiment had the least chance of success," he said.

Cliff said nothing. He was bending over the wheel, adjusting a micrometer. "All ready, Kay?" he asked.

Kay nodded and stepped back. He swallowed hard.

He hated sacrificing Susie to the cause of science; he almost hoped the experiment would fail.

Cliff pressed a lever, and slowly the ponderous top began to revolve upon its axis. Faster, faster, till it was nothing but a blur. Faster yet, until only its outlines were visible. Cliff pressed a lever on the other side.

Nothing happened apparently, except for a cloudy appearance of the air at the open end of the laboratory. Cliff touched a foot lever. The top began to grow visible, its rotations could be seen; it ran slower, began to come to a stop.

The cloud was gone. Where the airplanes and other junk had been, was nothing but a heap of grayish dust. It was this that had made the cloud.

Nothing remained, except that impalpable powder against the background of the trees.

Kay caught Cliff's arm. "Look out!" he shouted, pointing to the heap. "Something's moving in there!"

Something was. A very angry lady porcupine was scrambling out, a *quillless* porcupine, with a white skin, looking like nothing so much as a large, hairless rat. Cliff turned to Kay.

"We've failed," he said briefly. "Too late for this year now."

"But—the quills?"

"Inorganic material. But even the bones remain intact because there's circulation in the marrow, you see. And the Earth Giants haven't even bones. They're safe—this year!"

He flung himself down under a tree, staring up at the sky in abject despair.

"Look, Kay, I've got my number!" Ruth Meade smiled as she handed Kay the ticket issued by the Government announcing the lottery number provided for each citizen.

One hundred thousand young people between the

ages of fifteen and twenty would be drawn for the sacrifice, and Ruth, being nineteen, had come within the limits, but this would be her last year. In a few weeks the Government would announce the numbers—drawn by a second lottery—of those who were condemned.

Then, before these had been made public, the victims would already have been seized and hurried to the airship depots in a hundred places, for conveyance to the hideous Golgotha of the pampas.

The chance that any individual would be among the fated ones was reasonably small. It was the fashion to make a jest of the whole business. Ruth smiled as she showed her ticket.

Kay stared at it. "Ruth, if—if anything happened to you I'd go insane. I'd—"

"Why this sudden ardor, Kay?"

Kay took Ruth's small hand in his. "Ruth, you mustn't play with me any more. You know I love you. And the

sight of that thing makes me almost insane. You do care, don't you?" And, as Ruth remained silent, "Ruth, it isn't Cliff Hymes, is it? I know you two are old friends. I'd rather it were Cliff than anybody else, if it had to be some one, but—tell me, Ruth!"

"It isn't Cliff," said Ruth slowly.

"Is it—some one else?"

"It's you, dear," answered Ruth. "It's always been you. It might have been Cliff if you hadn't come along. But he knows now it can never be he."

"Does he know it's me?" asked Kay, greatly relieved.

Ruth inclined her head. "He took it very finely," she said. "He said just what you've said about him. Oh, Kay, if only your experiment had succeeded, and the world could be free of this nightmare! What happened? Why couldn't you and Cliff make it destroy life?"

"I don't know, dear," answered Kay. "Iron and steel

melt into powder at the least impact of the rays. They are so powerful that there was even a leakage through the rubber and anelektron container. Even the craolite socket was partly fused, and that is supposed to be an impossibility. And there was a hole in the ground seven feet deep where the very mineral water in the earth had been dissolved. But against organic substances the W-ray is powerless.

"Next year, dear—next year we'll have solved our problem, and then we'll free the world of this menace, this nightmare. Ruth—don't let's talk about that now. I love you!"

They kissed. The Earth Giants faded out of their consciousness even while Ruth held that ominous ticket in her hand.

Kay said nothing to Cliff about it, but Cliff knew. Perhaps he had put his fate to the test with Ruth and learned the truth from her. Ruth made no reference to the matter when she saw Kay. But between the two men, friends for years, a coolness was inexorably developing.

They had gone to work on the new machine. They were hopeful. When they were working, they forgot their rivalry.

"You see, Kay," said Cliff, "we mustn't forget that the Millikan rays have been bombarding Earth since Earth became a planet, out of the depths of space. It is their very nature not to injure organic life, otherwise all life on Earth would have been destroyed long ago. Now, our process is only an adaptation of these cosmic rays. We haven't changed their nature."

"No," agreed Kay. "What we want is a death-ray strong enough to obliterate these monsters, without simply disintegrating them and creating new fragments to bud into the complete being. Why do you suppose they are so tenacious of life, Cliff?"

"They represent primeval man, life itself, striving to organize itself, and nothing is more tenacious than the life principle," answered Cliff.

Meanwhile the fatal weeks were passing. A few days after the tickets had been distributed, a Government

notice was broadcasted and published, ordaining that, in view of former dissensions, no substitutes for the condemned persons would be permitted. Rich or poor, each of the victims chosen by lot must meet his fate.

And the monsters were growing active. There had been an extension of their activities. Tongues had been creeping up the rivers that ran into the Amazon. Suddenly a dense mass of the devils had appeared on the north coast, near Georgetown. They had overleaped the Amazon; they were overrunning British Guiana, eating up everything on their way. Georgetown was abandoned; the monsters were in complete control.

"They will be cut off from the main herd," the optimistic reports announced. "We shall deal with the main herd first. This year the sacrifice will have to be made, but it will be the last. Scientists have at last hit upon an infallible toxin which will utterly destroy this menace within a few months."

Nobody believed that story, for everything had been tried and failed. In their laboratory Cliff and Kay were

working frantically. And now the coldness that had developed between them was affecting their collaboration too. Cliff was keeping something back from Kay.

Kay knew it. Cliff had made some discovery that he was not sharing with his partner. Often Kay, entering the laboratory, would find Cliff furtively attempting to conceal some operation that he was in the midst of. Kay said nothing, but a brooding anger began to fill his heart. So Cliff was trying to get all the credit for the result of their years of work together!

And always, in the back of his mind, there was a vision of the little Government ticket in Ruth's hand, with the numbers in staring black type. They had burned into his brain. He could never forget them. Often at night, after a hard day's work, he would suddenly awaken out of a hideous nightmare, in which he saw Ruth taken away by the agents of the Government, to be thrown as a sacrifice to the monsters.

And Cliff was hiding something! That made the

situation unbearable.

The coolness between the two men was rapidly changing into open animosity. And then one day, quite by chance, in Cliff's absence, Kay came upon evidence of Cliff's activities.

Cliff was no longer experimenting with the W-ray! He was using a new type of ray altogether, the next series, the psenium electron emanation discovered only a few years before, which had the peculiar property of non-alternation, even when the psenium electron changed its orbit around the central nucleus of the psenium atom.

Instead of discontinuity, the psenium electron had been found to emit radiation steadily, and this had upset the classic theories of matter for the ninth time in the past fifteen years.

And Kay's wrath broke loose in a storm of reproaches when Cliff came into the laboratory.

"You've been deliberately keeping me in the dark!" he

shouted. "You're a nice sort of partner to have! Here's where we split up the combination, Hynes!"

"I've been thinking that for a long time," sneered Cliff. "The fact is, Kay, you're a little too elementary in your ideas to suit me. It's due to you that I kept hammering away on the wrong tack for years. The sooner we part, the better."

"No time like now," said Kay. "Keep your laboratory. You put most of the money into it, anyway. I'll build me another—where I can work without being hampered by a partner who's out for himself all the time. Good luck to you in your researches, and I hope you'll get all the credit when you find a way of annihilating the Earth Giants."

And he stormed out of the laboratory, jumped into his plane, and winged his way southward toward his apartment in New York.

Crowds in the streets of every town on the way. In villages and hamlets, swarming like ants, and hurrying along the highways! Kay, who flew one of the

slow, old-fashioned planes, averaging little more than a hundred miles an hour, winged his way methodically overhead, too much absorbed in his anger against Cliff to pay much attention to this phenomenon at first. But gradually it was borne in upon him that something was wrong.

He flew lower, and now he was passing over a substantial town, and he could hear the shouts of anger that came up to him. The whole town was in a ferment, gathered in the town square.

Suddenly the reason came home to Kay. He saw the adjoining airport, and dropped like a plummet, hovering down until his wheels touched the ground. Without waiting to taxi into one of the public hangars, he leaped out and ran through the deserted grounds into the square.

Groans, yells, shrieks of derision rent the air. The whole crowd had gone maniacal. And it was as Kay had thought. Upon a white background high up on the town ball building, the numbers of the local boys and girls who had been picked for sacrifices were being

shown.

Eight boys and fifteen girls, already on their way into the wastes of South America, to meet a hideous death.

"They took my Sally," screamed a wizened woman, the tears raining down her checks. "Kidnapped her at the street corner after dark. I didn't know why she hadn't come home last night. God, my Sally, my little girl, gone—gone—"

"People, you must be patient," boomed the Government announcer. "The President feels with you in your affliction. But by next year a means will have been devised of destroying these monsters. Your children will have their sacrifice recorded in the Hall of Fame. They are true soldiers who—"

"To hell with the Government!" roared a man. "Stop that damn talk machine! Break her, fellows! Then we'll hang President Bogart from the top of the Capitol!"

Yells answered him, and the crowd surged forward toward the building.

"Stand back!" shrieked the announcer. "It's death to set foot on the step. We are now electrified. Last warning!"

The first ranks of the mob recoiled as a charge of electricity at a voltage just short of that required to take life coursed through their bodies. Shrieks of agony rang out. Files of writhing forms covered the ground.

Kay rushed to the automatic clerk at the window beside the metal steps, taking care to avoid contact with them. Within six feet, the temperature of his body brought the thermostatic control into action; the window slid upward and the dummy appeared. He turned the dial to Albany.

"I want New York Division, Sub-station F, Loyalist Registration," he called. "Give me Z numbers of the lottery, please."

"No numbers will be given out until Horometer 13," the dummy boomed.

"But I tell you I must know immediately!" Kay pleaded frantically.

"Stand away, please!"

"I've got to know, I tell you!"

"We are now electrified. Last warning!"

"Listen to me. My name's Kay Bevan. I—"

A mighty buffet in the chest hurled Kay ten feet backward upon the ground. He rose, came within the electric zone, felt his arms twisted in a giant's grasp, staggered back again and sat down gasping. The window went down noiselessly, the dummy swung back into place. Kay got upon his feet again, choking with impotent rage.

All about him men and women were milling in a frantic mob. He broke through them, went back to

where his plane was standing. A minute later he was driving madly toward the district airport in New York within three blocks of Ruth's apartment.

He dropped into a vacant landing place, checked hastily, and rushed into the elevator. Once in the upper street, he bounded to the middle platform, and, not satisfied to let it convey him at eight miles an hour, strode on through the indignant throng until he reached his destination. Hurling the crowds right and left he gained the exit, and a half-minute later was on the upper level of the apartment block.

He pushed past the janitor and raced along the corridor to Ruth's apartment. She would be in if all was well; she worked for the Broadcast Association, correcting the proofs that came from the district headquarters by pneumatic tube. He stopped outside the door. The little dial of white light showed him that the apartment was unoccupied.

As he stood there in a daze, hoping against hope, he saw a thread hanging from the crevice between door and frame. He pulled at it, and drew out a tiny strip of

scandium, the new compressible metal that had become fashionable for engagement rings. Plastic, all but invisible, it could be compressed to the thickness of a sheet of paper: it was the token of secret lovers, and Kay had given Ruth a ring of it.

It was the signal, the dreaded signal that Ruth had been on the lottery list—the only signal that she had been able to convey, since stringent precautions were taken to prevent the victims becoming known until all possibility of rescue was removed.

No chance of rescuing her! From a hundred airports the great Government airships had long since sailed into the skies, carrying those selected by the wheel at Washington for sacrifice to the Earth Giants. Only one chance remained. If Cliff had discovered the secret that had so long eluded them, surely he would reveal it to him now!

Their quarrel was forgotten. Kay only knew that the woman he loved was even then speeding southward to be thrown to the maw of the vile monsters that held the world in terror. Surely Cliff would bend every

effort to save her!

Only a few hours had passed since Kay had stormed out of the laboratory in the Adirondacks in a rage when he was back on their little private landing field. He leaped from the plane and ran up the trail beside the lake between the trees. The cabin was dark; and, when Kay reached the laboratory he found it dark too.

"Cliff! Cliff!" he shouted.

No answer came, and with a sinking heart he snapped the button at the door. It failed to throw the expected flood of light through the interior. With shaking hand Kay pulled the little electron torch from his pocket, and its bright beam showed that the door was padlocked. He moved round to the window. The glass was unbreakable, but the ray from the torch showed that the interior of the laboratory had been dismantled, and the great top was gone.

In those few hours Cliff, for reasons best known to himself, had removed the top, Kay's one hope of saving Ruth. And he was gone.

In that moment Kay went insane. He raved and cursed, calling down vengeance upon Cliff's head. Cliff's very motive was incredible. That he had deliberately removed the top in order that Ruth should die was not, of course, conceivable. But in that first outburst of fury Kay did not consider that.

Presently Kay's madness burned itself out. There was still one thing that he could do. His plane, slow though it was, would carry him to the pampas. He could get fresh fuel at numerous bootleg petrol stations, even though the regulations against intersectional flight were rigid. With luck he could reach the pampas, perhaps before the sluggish monsters had fallen upon their prey. It was said that the victims sometimes waited for days!

Something was rubbing against his leg, pricking it through his anklets. Kay looked down. A lady porcupine, with tiny new quills, was showing recognition, even affection, if such a spiny beast could be said to possess that quality.

Somehow the presence of the beast restored Kay's

mind to normal.

"Well, he's left us both in the lurch, Susie," he said.

"Good luck to you, beastie, and may you find a secure hiding place until your quills have grown."

Drowning men catch at straws. Kay snatched out his watch, and the illuminated dial showed that it was already two quintets past horometer 13. He darted back to the cabin. The door was unfastened, and his torch showed him that, though Cliff had evidently departed, and taken his things, the interior was much as it had been. When Kay picked up the telephotophone, the oblong dial flashed out. The instrument was in working order.

He turned the crank, and swiftly a succession of scenes flashed over the dial. On this little patch of glassite, Kay was actually making the spatial journey to Albany, each minutest movement of the crank representing a distance covered. The building of the New York Division appeared, and its appearance signified that Kay was telephonically connected. But there was no automatic voice attachment, an expense

that Kay and Cliff had decided would be unjustified. He had to rely upon the old-fashioned telephone, such as was still widely in use in rural districts. He took up the receiver.

"Sub-Station F, Loyalist Registration, please," he called.

"Speaking," said a girl's voice presently.

"I want the Z numbers. All from Z5 to ZA," said Kay.

And thus, in the dark hut, he listened to the doom pronounced, miles away, by a more or less indifferent operator. When the fatal number was read out, he thanked her and hung up. He released the crank, which moved back to its position, putting out the light on the dial.

For a moment or two he stood there motionless, in a sort of daze, though actually he was gathering all his reserves of resolution for the task confronting him. Simply to find Ruth among the hundred thousand victims, and die with her. A task stupendous in itself,

and yet Kay had no doubt that he would succeed, that he would be holding her in his arms when the tide of hell flowed over them.

He knew the manner of that death. The irresistible onset of the giant masses of protoplasm, the extrusion of temporary arms, or feelers, that would grasp them, drag them into the heart of the yielding substance, and slowly smother them to death while the life was drained from their bodies. It had been said the death was painless, but that was Government propaganda. But he would be holding Ruth in his arms. He'd find her: he had no doubt of that at all.

And, strangely enough, now that Kay knew the worst, now that not the slightest doubt remained, he was conscious of an elevation of spirits, a sort of mad recklessness that was perfectly indefinable.

Kay turned his torch into a corner of the kitchen. Yes, there was the thing subconsciousness had prompted him to seek. A long-shafted, heavy woodsman's ax, a formidable weapon at close quarters. Because it is the instinct of *homo Americanus* to die with a weapon in

his hands, rather than let himself be butchered helplessly, Kay snatched it up. He ran back to his plane. The gas tank was nearly empty, but there was petrol in the ice house beside the lake.

Kay wheeled the machine up to it, and filled up with gas and oil. All ready now! He leaped in, pressed the starter, soared vertically, helicopter wings fluttering like a soaring hawk's. Up to the passenger air lane at nine thousand: higher to twelve, the track of the international and supply ships; higher still, to the fourteen thousand ceiling of the antiquated machine. He banked, turned southward.

It was freezing cold up there, and Kay had no flying suit on him, but, between the passenger lane and the lane of the heliospheres, at thirty thousand, there was no air police. And he could afford to take no chances. The Government police would be on the lookout for a score such desperate men as he, bent on a similar mission. He drove the plane toward the Atlantic till a red glow began to diffuse itself beneath him, an area of conflagration covering square miles of territory.

Swooping lower, Kay could hear the sound of detonations, the roar of old-fashioned guns, while through the pall of lurid smoke came the long, violet flashes of atomic guns, cleaving lanes of devastation. New York was burning.

The frenzied populace had broken into revolt, seized the guns stored in the arsenals, and attacked the great Bronx fortress that stood like a mighty sentinel to protect the port.

A swarm of airships came into view, swirling in savage fight. Kay zoomed. It was not his battle.

Now New York lay behind him, and he was winging southward over the Atlantic. All night he flew. At dawn he came down in a coast hamlet for bootleg petrol and oil.

"You come from New York?" asked the Georgian.

"Hear there's war broke out up there."

"My war's down in Brazil," muttered Kay.

"Say, if them Giants comes up here yuh know what us folks is going to do? We're going to set the hounds on 'em. Yes, sirree, we've got a pack of bloodhounds, raised for jest that purpose. I guess that's something them wisecrackers at Washington ain't thought of. They took two little fellers from Hopetown, but they won't take nobody from here."

Kay fuelled up and resumed his flight southward.

After that it was a nightmare. The sun rose and set, alternating with the staring moon and stars. Kay crossed the Caribbean, sighted the South American coast, swept southward over the jungles of Brazil. He drank, but no food passed his lips. He had become a mechanism, set for on special purpose—self-immolation.

It was in a wide savannah among the jungles that he first caught sight of the monsters. At first he thought it was the rising dawn mist; then he began to distinguish a certain horrible resemblance to human forms, and swooped down, banking round and round the opening in the jungle until he could see clearly.

There were perhaps a score of them, an advance guard that had pushed forward from one of the main divisions. Men? Anthropoids, rather, for their sex was indistinguishable! Human forms ranging from a few feet to a hundred, composed apparently of a grayish jelly, propelling themselves clumsily on two feet, but floating rather than walking. Translucent, semi-transparent. Most horrible of all, these shadowy, spheroid creatures exhibited here and there buds of various sizes, which were taking on the similitude of fresh forms. And among them were the young, the buds that had fallen from the parent stems, fully formed humans of perhaps five or six feet, bouncing with a horrible playfulness among their sires.

As Kay soared some three hundred feet overhead, a young tapir came leaping out of the jungle and ran, apparently unconscious of their presence, right toward the monsters. Suddenly it stopped, and Kay saw that it was already encircled by coils of protoplasm, resembling arms, which had shot forth from the bodies of the devils.

Swiftly, despite its struggles and bleatings, the tapir

was drawn into the substance of the monsters, which seemed to fuse together and form a solid wall of protoplasm in all respects like the agglutination of bacteria under certain conditions.

Then the beast vanished in the wall, whose agitated churnings alone gave proof of its existence.

For perhaps ten minutes longer Kay remained hovering above the clearing. Then the bodies divided, resuming their separate shapes. And the white bones of the tapir lay in a huddled mass in the open.

Kay went mad. Deliberately he set down his plane, and, hatchet in hand, advanced upon the sluggish monsters. Shouting wildly, he leaped into their midst.

The fight that followed was like a nightmare fight. He lopped off the slow tentacles that sought to envelop him, he slashed the devils into long ribbons of writhing jelly, slashed until the substance blunted the ax; wiped it clean and leaped into their midst again, hewing until he could no longer raise his arm. Then he drew back and surveyed the scene before him.

It was dreadful enough to drive the last remnants of sanity from his brain. For every piece that he had cut from the monsters, every protoplasmic ribbon was reorganizing before his eyes into the semblance of a new creature. Where there had been a score, there were now five hundred!

Kay ran back to his plane, leaped in, and soared southward. His face was a grotesque mask of madness, and his cries rang out through the ether.

The victims were no longer chained to stakes. The Federation, which always acted with complete secrecy, had gone one better. It had engaged electrical engineers, kept them housed in secret places, transported them to Golgotha; and there a vast electrified field had been established, an open space whose boundaries were marked out by pillars of electron steel.

Between these pillars ran lines of electric force. To attempt to pass them meant—not death, for dead boys and girls were spurned by the devils—but a violent shock that hurled one backward.

On this great plain the hundred thousand victims sat huddled in the open. Food they had none, for no purpose was to be served by mitigating their last agonies. No shelter either, for the sight of buildings might delay the final phase. But high above the doomed there floated the flag of the Federation, on a lofty pole, a touch of ironic sentimentality that had commended itself to some mind at Washington.

Over a square mile of territory, ringed with jungle the victims lay. The majority of them ringed this terrain; that is to say, attempting to escape, they had been hurled back by the electrical charge, and, having no strength or will remaining, they had dropped where they had been hurled, and lay in apathetic resignation.

There had been screams and cries for mercy, and piteous scenes when the Government airships had deposited them there and flown away, but now an intense silence had descended upon the doomed. Resigned to their fate, they sat or lay in little silent groups, all eyes turned toward the gloomy jungle.

And everywhere within this jungle a wraith-like mist was forming at this dawn hour. From a thousand miles around, the devils were mustering for their prey, agglutinating, in order that the meal of one might become the meal of all.

Wisps of protoplasmic fog were stealing out through the trees, changing shape every instant, but always advancing: now presenting the appearance of an aligned regiment of huge, shadowy men, now nothing but a wall of semi-solid vapor. And still, with eyeballs straining in their sockets, the victims watched.

Suddenly all were seized with the same spasm of mad terror. Again they hurled themselves against the electrified lines, and again they were hurled back, masses of boys and girls tumbling against one another, and screaming in one wail that, could it have been heard in Washington, would have driven all insane. Again and again, till they fell back, panting and helpless. And solidly the wall of devils was creeping up from every side.

Ruth Deane, one of the few who had themselves in

control, lay some distance back from the electrified field. From the moment when she was surprised in her apartment by the Government representatives, she had known that there was no hope of escape.

She had slipped the ring off her finger, snapped the plastic metal, and attached it to a thread torn from her dress. She had managed to insert it in the door, hoping that Kay would find it. It would serve as a last message of love to him.

Every removal of a selected victim was in the nature of a kidnapping. At dead of night her apartment had been opened. She had been ordered to dress. Nothing could be written, no arrangements made. She was already considered as one dead.

She had been hurried out of the upper entrance to the monorail, which conveyed her in a special car to the landing station. A few minutes later she had been on her way to join the camp of other victims, a hundred miles away. Within two hours she was on her way southward.

Stunned by the tragedy, none of the victims had made much of an outcry. They had been given water by the airship police. No food for boys and girls already dead. Days and nights had passed, and now she was here, faint from exhaustion, and wondering at the despair shown by those others. What difference would it make in half an hour? Besides, that Government pamphlet had insisted that this death was painless!

But an immense longing to see Kay once more came over her. There had been a time when she thought she loved Cliff; then Kay had come into her life, and she had known that other affair was folly. She had never told Kay of the bitter scene between Cliff and herself, how he had raved against Kay and sworn to win her in the end.

Cliff had calmed down and apologized, and Ruth had never seen him again. She wished he had not taken it like that. But above all she wanted to see Kay, just to say good-by.

And she tried to send out her whole heart to him in an unspoken message of love that would surely somehow

convey itself to him.

The wall of devils was creeping up on every side, slowly, lethargically. The monsters took their time, because they knew they were invincible. The sobs and shrieks had died away. Collected into a mass almost as rigid as that of the Earth Giants, the victims waited, palsied as a rabbit that awaits the approach of the serpent.

A humming overhead. An airplane shooting down from the sky. Rescue? No. Only a solitary pilot, armed with a woodsman's ax.

Kay drifted down, touched ground, leaped to his feet. Chance had brought him within five hundred yards of where Ruth was standing. But Ruth had known who that lone flyer must be. She broke through the throng; she rushed to meet him. Her arms were around him.

"Kay, darling Kay!"

"Ruth, dearest!"

"I knew you'd come."

"I've come to die beside you!"

It was perhaps odd that it did not enter the head of either as a possibility that Kay should simply place Ruth in the plane and fly away with her to safety. Had the thought occurred to Kay, he might have been tempted. But such black treachery was something inconceivable by either. So long as the Federation remained, so long as man moved in an organized society, he was bound to his fellows, to fight, suffer, and die with them.

"Stand by me, Ruth. We're going down fighting."

They moved back toward the throng, which, momentarily stirred to hope by Kay's appearance, had fallen into the former apathy of despair. And now the monsters were beginning to enter the electrified zone at one point. As they passed the line of posts, the high tension current made their bodies luminous, but it had no appreciable effect upon them. They moved on, inevitably.

A score or so of semi-human forms, agglutinated into a mass, and yet individually discernible. They bore down slowly upon the crowd of victims, who pressed backward as they advanced. On the other sides, though they almost encircled the field of death, the monsters were making no maneuvers to entrap their prey. Their sluggish minds were incapable of conceiving anything of the kind. But for the electrified zone, the great majority of the victims could have effected their escape. The monsters were simply pressing forward to their meal; they did not interpret its capture in terms of strategy at all.

A new frenzy of horror seized the crowd. They fled, struggling back until the foremost in flight reached the other side of Golgotha, to be repulsed by the electrified zone there. They fell in tumbled heaps. Appalling shrieks rang through the air.

Another line of the monsters was seeping forward, converging toward the first. As the two lines met, they coalesced into a wall of protoplasm, a thousand feet in length by a hundred high. A wall out of which leered phantasmal faces, like those in a frieze.

Kay stood alone, his arm around Ruth. To follow the flying mob would but prolong the agony. He raised the ax. He looked into the girl's eyes. She understood, and nodded.

One last embrace, one kiss, and Kay placed her behind him. He sprang forward, shouting, and plunged into the very heart of the wall.

And Ruth, watching with eyes dilated with horror, saw it yield with a sucking sound, and saw Kay disappear within it.

She saw the hideous mass fold itself upon him, and a hundred extruded tentacles wave in the air as they blindly grappled for him. And then Kay had broken through, and was hewing madly with great sweeps of the ax that slashed great streamers of the amorphous tissue from the wall of protoplasm.

It recoiled and then folded once more, and Kay's mighty sweeps were slashing phantom limbs from phantom bodies; and lopping off tentacles that curled and coiled, and put forth caricatures of hands and

fingers, and then, uniting with other slashed off tentacles, began to mould themselves into the likeness of dwarf monsters. Kay's struggle was like that of a man fighting a fog, for again and again he broke through the wall, and always it reunited.

And behind it another wall of protoplasm was pressing forward, and on another side a wall was drifting up. As Kay stopped, panting, and momentarily free, Ruth saw that they were almost encircled.

She saw the nature of that fight. Inevitably that wall would close about them; and, though the bones of last year's victims had been gathered up and carried away by the Federation, she guessed what would occur.

She ran to Kay and dragged him back through the closing gap. It met behind them, and again they stood face to face with the devils. Only this time, instead of a wall of protoplasm, it was a veritable mountain that confronted them, and there could be no more breaking through.

Kay thought afterward that the one touch of absolute

horror was that the reforming monsters, the young ones growing visibly before his eyes, had the gamboling instinct of young lambs or other creatures. They were much more lively than the parent creatures.

By this time perhaps a third of the space within the electrified lines had been occupied by the devils. The wall was slowly and sluggishly advancing, and a fresh infiltration was drifting in on another side. As the victims were pressed closer and closer together in their flight, half of them seemed to go insane. They raced to and fro, laughing and screaming, flinging their arms aloft in extravagant gestures. One young fellow, rushing across the ground, hurled himself like a bolt from a catapult into the heart of the grisly mass, which opened and received him.

There was a struggle, a convulsion; then the mass moved on.

Kay wiped his ax. He stood beside Ruth, gathering strength and breath to fight again. What else was there to do?

Suddenly a humming sound came to his ears. Still some little distance from the monsters, he glanced back. The victims were shouting, staring upward. Over the tops of the jungle trees Kay saw a second airplane flying toward them, a larger one than the plane which he had flown.

It opened its helicopter wings and drifted downward. Kay saw a single pilot, and, in the baggage compartment something that at first he did not recognize. Then he recognized both this object and the aviator.

"It's Cliff," he whispered hoarsely. "He's brought the top!"

The crowd was milling about Cliff as he stepped out of the plane. Kay broke through their midst, shouting to them to clear a space, that it was their chance, their only chance. They heard him and obeyed. And Cliff and Kay clasped hands, and there was Ruth beside them.

The two men carried the top out of the baggage

compartment and set it up.

"Thank God I came in time," Cliff hissed. "How long have we got, Kay?"

"Five minutes, I think," Kay answered, glancing at the oncoming wall. "They're slow. Will it work, Cliff? God, when I found you'd gone last night—"

Cliff did not answer. Ignoring Kay's offer of assistance, he fitted the top tightly into its socket of craolite, much heavier than the former one. Beneath this, three heavy craolite legs formed a sort of tripod.

"I looked forward to this possibility, Kay," said Cliff, as he adjusted the top and turned the clamps that held it in position. "Sorry I had to deceive you, but you we're so set on the cosmic rays, and I knew the psenium emanations wouldn't appeal to you. You wouldn't have believed. I had a hunch Ruth would draw one of those numbers.... *How long?*"

The swaying masses of gray jelly were very near them. Cliff worked feverishly at the top.

"Let me help. Cliff!"

"No! I'm through! Stand back!" shouted Cliff.

Even then—he regretted it afterward, and knew that he would regret it to his dying day—even then the thought flashed through Kay's mind that Cliff wanted all the glory. Behind him the milling, screaming crowd was huddling, as if for protection. Slowly a wisp-like tentacle protruded from the advancing wall. Kay swung his ax and lopped it from the phantom body. But the wall was almost upon them, and from the other side it was advancing rapidly.

"I'm ready! Stand back!" Cliff turned upon Kay, his face white, his voice hoarse. "I've one request to make, Kay. Keep everybody back, including you and Ruth. Nobody is to come within twenty-five yards of this machine!"

"That shall be done," said Kay, a little bitterness in his tone.

"Ruth, I think I'm going to save you all." Cliff looked

into the girl's face for a moment. "Please stand back twenty-five yards," he repeated.

Kay took Ruth by the arm and drew her back. The crowd moved back, their pressure moving back the vast multitudes behind them. The vast mob was almost packed into the quarter of the Golgotha; there was scarcely room to move.

Kay saw Cliff press the lever.

Slowly the giant top began to whirl. Faster ... faster.... Now it was revolving so fast that it had become totally invisible. But Cliff was almost surrounded by the wall of jelly. Only his back could be seen, and then space was narrowing fast.

Kay gripped Ruth's arm tightly. He held his breath. The crowd, of whom only a small part knew what was taking place, was screaming with terror as the mass of jelly on the other side pressed them inexorably backward. And Cliff had almost vanished. Would the machine work? Was it possible that the psenium emanations would succeed where the Millikan rays,

the W-ray had failed?

Then of a sudden the air grew dark as night. Kay began to sneeze. He gasped for air. He was choking. He could see nothing, and he strained Ruth to him convulsively, while the terrified multitudes behind him set up a last wail of despair.

He could see nothing, and he stood with the ax ready for the onset of the monsters, more terrible now, in their invisibility, than before. Then of a sudden there sounded subterranean rumblings. The ground seemed to open almost under Kay's feet.

He leaped back, dragging Ruth with him. Slowly the dust was settling, the darkness lessening. A faint, luminous glow overhead revealed the sun. Kay was aware that Cliff had swung the top, so that the psenium rays were being brought to bear upon the second mass of the monsters on the other side.

The sun vanished in appalling blackness. Again the dust-choked air was almost unbreathable. The shrieks of the crowd died away in wheezing gasps; and then a

wilder clamor began.

"The earthquake! The earthquake!" a girl was shrilling. "God help us all!"

Kay stood still, clutching Ruth tightly in his arms. He dared not stir, for all the world seemed to be dissolving into chaos.

Slowly the dust began to settle again. Perhaps five minutes passed before the sunbeams began to struggle through. A cloud of grey dust still obscured everything. But the wall of protoplasm was gone!

Cliff's voice came moaning out of the murk, calling Kay's name.

Kay moved forward cautiously, still holding Ruth. He seemed to be skirting the edge of a vast crater. At the edge of it he found the top, revolving slowly. And Cliff's voice came from beside the top.

"Kay, we've won. Don't look at me. Don't let Ruth see me! Look down!"

Kay looked down into the bottomless pit, extending clear across the plain to the distant jungle. An enormous canyon cloven in the earth, filled with the slowly settling cloud of dust.

"They're there, Kay. Don't look this way!"

But Kay looked—and could see nothing except a pile of debris, from the bottom of which Cliff's voice issued.

"Cliff, you're not hurt?"

"A—a little. You must listen while I tell you how to clean up the monsters. It's the psenium emanation. It has the same effect when our method is applied to it. It disintegrates everything inorganic—not organic.

"I thought, if I couldn't get them, I'd crumble the earth away—bury them. They're underneath the debris, Kay, a mile deep, buried, beneath the impalpable powder that represented the inorganic salts and minerals of the earth. They'll never get out of that. Protoplasm needs oxygen. They'll trouble us

no more.

"You must take the top, Kay. Use our old method. You'll find its application to the psenium emanation written in a book fastened beneath the hood. Wipe out the rest of them. If any more come, you'll know how to deal with them."

"Cliff, you're not badly hurt?" Kay asked again.

"Don't look, I tell you! Keep Ruth away!"

But the dust was settling fast, and suddenly Ruth uttered a scream of fear.

And a strangled cry broke from Kay's throat as he looked down at what had been Cliff Hynes.

The man seemed to have become resolved into the same sort of protoplasm as the Earth Giants. He lay, a little heap, incredibly small, incredibly distorted. Flesh without bones, shapeless lumps of flesh where arms and legs and body frame should have been.

Cliff's voice came faintly. "You remember the leakage through the rubber and analektron container, Kay. The W-rays even fused the craolite socket. The psenium rays are stronger. They destroy even bone. They're fatal to the man who operates the machine, unless he follows the directions. I've written them out for you, but I had—no time—to apply them."

His voice broke off. Then, "Good luck to you and—Ruth, Kay," he whispered, absent inaudibly. "Don't let—her—look at me."

Kay led Ruth gently away. "Did you hear that?" she whispered, sobbing. "He died to save us Kay."

It was like a return from the grave for the amazed boys and girls who—since the onset of the monsters had destroyed the electric lines—poured out of the plain of Golgotha to life and freedom.

Many of them had gone mad, a few had died of fright, but the rest would come back to normal, and the world was saved.

Hunger was their greatest problem, for, despite Kay's hurried flight to the nearest occupied post, it was difficult to convince the Federation officials that the devils were really gone, buried beneath a mile of crumbled earth. And Kay had to be back to mop up other, smaller bands that had spread through the forests.

It was six months before the last of the monsters had been obliterated, and then Kay, now one of the highest officials in the Federation's service, was granted a lunarian's leave of absence pending his taking command of an Antarctic expedition for the purpose of destroying the remaining monsters in their lair.

He took this opportunity to be married to Ruth, in the church in his native town, which was *en fête* for the occasion.

"Thinking of Cliff?" Kay asked his bride, as she settled in his plane preparatory to their starting for the honeymoon in the Adirondacks. "I think he would be happy if he knew. He saved the world, dear; he gave

his best. And that was all he wanted."

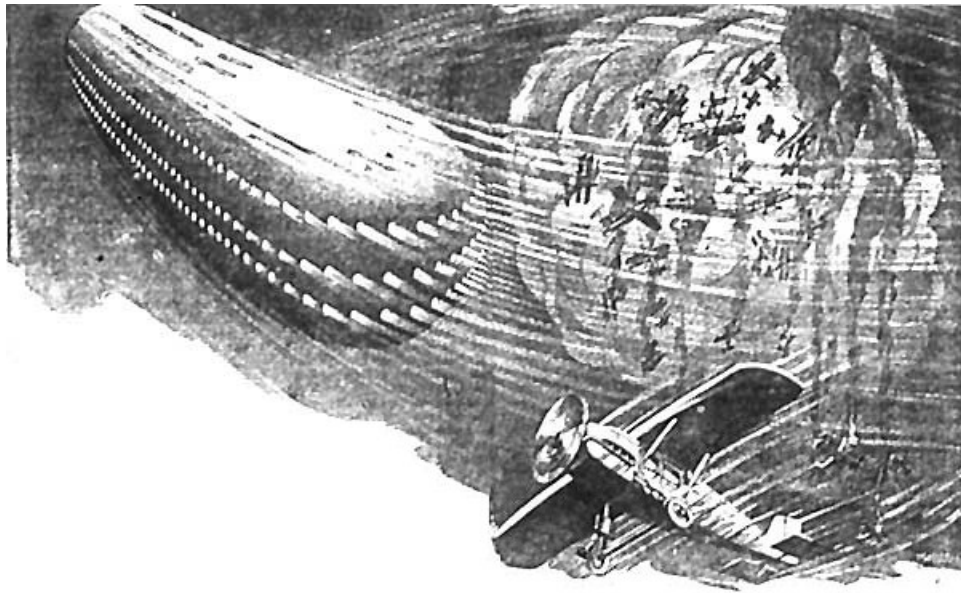
#56 The Pirate Planet, By Charles Willard Diffin:

A strange light blinks on Venus, and over old Earth hovers a mysterious visitant—dread harbinger of interplanetary war.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

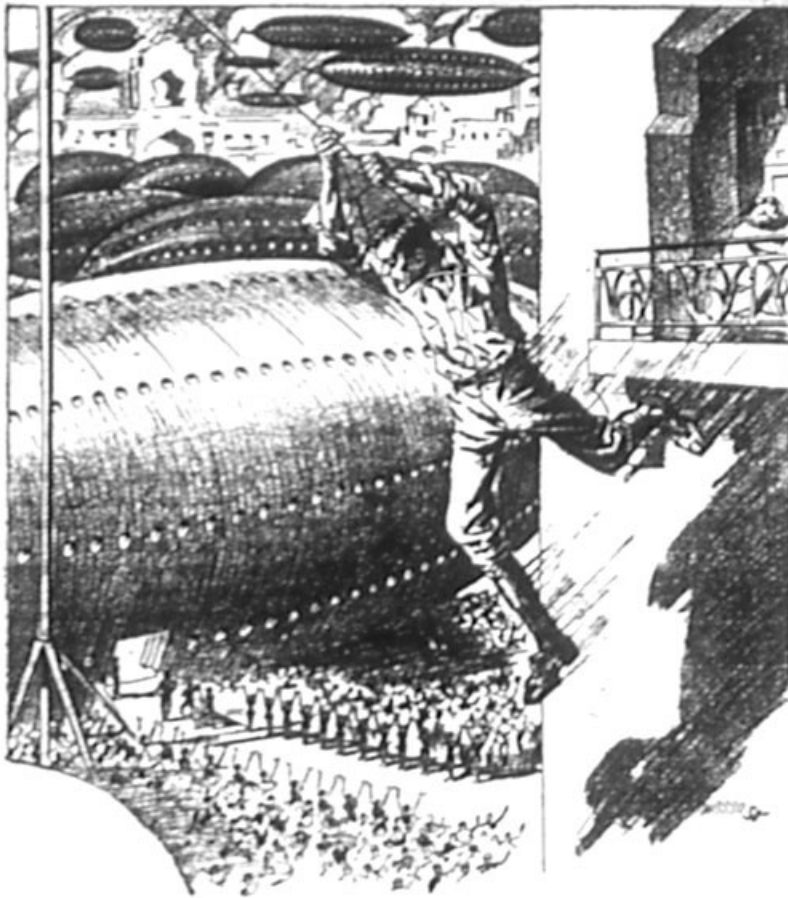
Warnings:





Like rats in a cage, the planes of the 91st Squadron
were darting and whirling.

Feet first



- - -

Chapter 1

Lieutenant McGuire threw open his coat with its winged insignia of the air force and leaned back in his chair to read more comfortably the newspaper article.

A strange light blinks on Venus, and over old Earth hovers a mysterious visitant—dread harbinger of interplanetary war.

He glanced at Captain Blake across the table. The captain was deep in a game of solitaire, but he looked up at McGuire's audible chuckle.

"Gay old girl!" said Lieutenant McGuire and smoothed the paper across his knees. "She's getting flirtatious."

The captain swore softly as he gathered up his cards. "Not interested," he announced; "too hot to-night. Keep her away."

"Oh, she's far enough away," McGuire responded; "about seventy million miles. Don't get excited."

"What are you talking about?" The captain shuffled his cards irritably.

"Venus. She's winking at us, the old reprobate. One of these star-gazers up on Mount Lawson saw the flashes a week or so ago. If you'll cut out your solitaire and listen, I'll read you something to improve your mind." He ignored the other's disrespectful remark and held the paper closer to see the paragraphs.

"Is Venus Signalling?" inquired the caption which Lieutenant McGuire read. "Professor Sykes of Mt. Lawson Observatory Reports Flashes.

"The planet Venus, now a brilliant spectacle in the evening sky, is behaving strangely according to a report from the local observatory on Mount Lawson. This sister star, most like Earth of all the planets, is now at its eastern elongation, showing like a half-moon in the big telescopes on Mt. Lawson. Shrouded in impenetrable clouds, its surface has never been seen, but something is happening there. Professor Sykes reports seeing a distinct flash of light upon the terminator, or margin of light. It lasted for several seconds and was not repeated.

"No explanation of the phenomenon is offered by scientists, as conditions on the planet's surface are unknown. Is there life there? Are the people of Venus trying to communicate? One guess is as good as another. But it is interesting to recall that our scientists recently proposed to send a similar signal from Earth to Mars by firing a tremendous flare of magnesium.

"Venus is now approaching the earth; she comes the nearest of all planets. Have the Venusians penetrated their cloak of cloud masses with a visible light? The planet will be watched with increased interest as it swings toward us in space, in hope of there being a repetition of the unexplained flash."

"There," said Lieutenant McGuire,"—doesn't that elevate your mind? Take it off this infernally hot night? Carry you out through the cool reaches of interplanetary space? If there is anything else you want to know, just ask me."

"Yes," Captain Blake agree, "there is. I want to know how the game came out back in New York—and you don't know that. Let's go over and ask the radio man. He probably has the dope."

"Good idea," said McGuire; "maybe he has picked up a message from Venus; we'll make a date." He looked vainly for the brilliant star as they walked out into the night. There were clouds of fog from the nearby Pacific drifting high overhead. Here and there stars showed momentarily, then were blotted from sight.

The operator in the radio room handed the captain a paper with the day's scores from the eastern games. But Lieutenant McGuire, despite his ready amusement at the idea, found his thoughts clinging to the words he had read. "Was the planet communicating?" he pictured the great globe—another Earth—slipping silently through space, coming nearer and nearer.

Did they have radio? he wondered. Would they send recognizable signals—words—or some mathematical sequence to prove their reality? He turned to the radio operator on duty.

"Have you picked up anything peculiar," he asked, and laughed inwardly at himself for the asking. "Any new dots and dashes? The scientists say that Venus is calling. You'll have to be learning a new code."

The man glanced at him strangely and looked quickly away.

"No, sir," he said. And added after a pause: "No new dots and dashes."

"Don't take that stuff too seriously, Mac," the captain remonstrated. "The day of miracles is past; we don't want to commit you to the psychopathic ward. Now here is something real: the Giants won, and I had ten dollars on them. How shall we celebrate?"

The radio man was listening intently as they started to leave. His voice was hesitating as he stopped them; he seemed reluctant to put his thoughts into words.

"Just a minute, sir," he said to Captain Blake.

"Well?" the captain asked. And again the man waited before he replied. Then—

"Lieutenant McGuire asked me," he began, "if I had heard any strange dots and dashes. I have not; but ... well, the fact is, sir, that I have been getting some mighty queer sounds for the past few nights. They've got me guessing.

"If you wouldn't mind waiting. Captain; they're about due now—" He listened again to some signal inaudible to the others, then hooked up two extra head-sets for

the officers.

"It's on now," he said. "If you don't mind—"

McGuire grinned at the captain as they took up the ear-phones. "Power of suggestion," he whispered, but the smile was erased from his lips as he listened. For in his ear was sounding a weird and wailing note.

No dots or dashes, as the operator had said, but the signal was strong. It rose and fell and wavered into shrill tremolos, a ghostly, unearthly sound, and it kept on and on in a shrill despairing wail. Abruptly it stopped.

The captain would have removed the receiver from his ear, but the operator stopped him. "Listen," he said, "to the answer."

There was silence, broken only by an occasional hiss and crackle of some far distant mountain storm. Then, faint as a whisper, came an answering, whistling breath.

It, too, trembled and quavered. It went up—up—to the limit of hearing; then slid down the scale to catch and tremble and again ascend in endless unvarying ups and downs of sound. It was another unbroken, unceasing, but always changing vibration.

"What in thunder is that?" Captain Blake demanded.

"Communication of some sort, I should say," McGuire said slowly, and he caught the operator's eyes upon him in silent agreement.

"No letters," Blake objected; "no breaks; just that screech." He listened again. "Darned if it doesn't almost seem to say something," he admitted.

"When did you first hear this?" he demanded of the radio man.

"Night before last, sir. I did not report it. It seemed too—too—"

"Quite so," said Captain Blake in understanding, "but it is some form of broadcasting on a variable wave;

though how a thing like that can make sense—"

"They talk back and forth," said the operator; "all night, most. Notice the loud one and the faint one; two stations sending and answering."

Captain Blake waved him to silence. "Wait—wait!" he ordered. "It's growing louder!"

In the ears of the listening men the noise dropped to a loud grumble; rose to a piercing shriek; wavered and leaped rapidly from note to note. It was increasing; rushing upon them with unbearable sound. The sense of something approaching, driving toward them swiftly, was strong upon Lieutenant McGuire. He tore the head-phones from his ears and rushed to the door. The captain was beside him. Whoever—whatever—was sending that mysterious signal was coming near—but was that nearness a matter of miles or of thousands of miles?

They stared at the stormy night sky above. A moon was glowing faintly behind scudding clouds, and the gray-black of flying shadows formed an opening as

they watched, a wind-blown opening like a doorway to the infinity beyond, where, blocking out the stars, was a something that brought a breath-catching shout from the watching men.

Some five thousand feet up in the night was a gleaming ship. There were rows of portholes that shone twinkling against the black sky—portholes in multiple rows on the side. The craft was inconceivably huge. Formless and dim of outline in the darkness, its vast bulk was unmistakable.

And as they watched with staring, incredulous eyes, it seemed to take alarm as if it sensed the parting of its concealing cloud blanket. It shot with dizzy speed and the roar of a mighty meteor straight up into the night. The gleam of its twinkling lights merged to a distant star that dwindled, shrank and vanished in the heights.

The men were wordless and open-mouthed. They stared at each other in disbelief of what their eyes had registered.

"A liner!" gasped Captain Blake. "A—a—liner! Mac, there is no such thing."

McGuire pointed where the real cause of their visitor's departure appeared. A plane with engine wide open came tearing down through the clouds. It swung in a great spiral down over the field and dropped a white flare as it straightened away; then returned for the landing. It taxied at reckless speed toward the hangars and stopped a short distance from the men. The pilot threw himself out of the cockpit and raced drunkenly toward them.

"Did you see it?" he shouted, his voice a cracked scream. "Did you see it?"

"We saw it," said Captain Blake; "yes, we saw it. Big as—" He sought vainly for a proper comparison, then repeated his former words: "Big as an ocean liner!"

The pilot nodded; he was breathing heavily.

"Any markings?" asked his superior. "Anything to identify it?"

"Yes, there were markings, but I don't know what they mean. There was a circle painted on her bow and marks like clouds around it, but I didn't have time to see much. I came out of a cloud, and there the thing was. I was flying at five thousand, and they hung there dead ahead. I couldn't believe it; it was monstrous; tremendous. Then they sighted me, I guess, and they up-ended that ship in mid-air and shot straight up till they were out of sight."

It was the captain's turn to nod mutely.

"There's your miracle," said Lieutenant McGuire softly.

"Miracle is right," agreed Captain Blake; "nothing less! But it is no miracle of ours, and I am betting it doesn't mean any good to us. Some other country has got the jump on us."

To the pilot he ordered: "Say nothing of this—not a word—get that? Let me have a written report: full details, but concise as possible."

He went back to the radio room, and the operator there received the same instructions.

"What are you going to do?" the lieutenant questioned.

Captain Blake was reaching for a head-set. "Listen in," he said briefly; "try to link up that impossible ship with those messages, then report at once to the colonel and whoever he calls in. I'll want you along, Mac, to swear I am sober."

He had a head-set adjusted, and McGuire took up the other. Again the room was still, and again from the far reaches of space the dark night sent to them its quavering call.

The weird shrillness cried less loudly now, and the men listened in strained silence to the go and come of that variable shriek. Musical at times as it leaped from one clear note to another, again it would merge into discordant blendings of half-tones that sent shivers of nervous reaction up the listeners' spines.

"Listen," said McGuire abruptly. "Check me on this. There are two of them, one loud and one faint—right?"

"Right," said Captain Blake.

"Now notice the time intervals—there! The faint one stops, and the big boy cuts in immediately. No waiting; he answers quickly. He does it every time."

"Well?" the captain asked.

"Listen when he stops and see how long before the faint one answers. Call the loud one the ship and the faint one the station.... There! The ship is through!"

There was pause; some seconds elapsed before the answer that whispered so faintly in their ears came out of the night.

"You are right, sir," the operator said in corroboration of McGuire's remark. "There is that wait every time."

"The ship answers at once," said McGuire; "the

station only after a wait."

"Meaning—?" inquired the captain.

"Meaning, as I take it, that there is time required for the message to go from the ship to the station and for them to reply."

"An appreciable time like that," Captain Blake exclaimed, "—with radio! Why, a few seconds, even, would carry it around the world a score of times!"

Lieutenant McGuire hesitated a moment. "It happens every time," he reminded the captain: "it is no coincidence. And if that other station is out in space—another ship perhaps, relaying the messages to yet others between here and—Venus, let us say...."

He left the thought unfinished. Captain Blake was staring at him as one who beholds a fellow-man suddenly insane. But the look in his eyes changed slowly, and his lips that had been opened in remonstrance came gradually in a firm, straight line.

"Crazy!" he said, but it was apparent that he was speaking as much to himself as to McGuire. "Plumb, raving crazy!... Yet that ship *did* go straight up out of sight—an acceleration in the upper air beyond anything we know. It might be—" And he, too, stopped at the actual voicing of the wild surmise. He shook his head sharply as if to rid it of intruding, unwelcome thoughts.

"Forget that!" he told McGuire, and repeated it in a less commanding tone. "Forget it, Mac: we've got to render a report to sane men, you and I. What we know will be hard enough for them to believe without any wild guesses.

"That new craft is real. It has got it all over us for size and speed and potential offensive action. Who made it? Who mans it? Red Russia? Japan? That's what the brass hats will be wondering; that's what they will want to find out.

"Not a word!" he repeated to the radio man. "You will keep mum on this."

He took McGuire with him as he left to seek out his colonel. But it was a disturbed and shaken man, instead of the cool, methodical Captain Blake of ordinary days, who went in search of his commanding officer. And he clung to McGuire for corroboration of his impossible story.

There was a group of officers to whom Blake made his full report. Colonel Boynton had heard but little when he halted his subordinate curtly and reached for a phone. And his words over that instrument brought a quick conference of officers and a quiet man whom McGuire did not recognize. The "brass hats," as Blake had foreseen, were avid for details.

The pilot of the incoming plane was there, too, and the radio man. Their stories were told in a disconcerting silence, broken only by some officer's abrupt and skeptical question on one point and another.

"Now, for heaven's sake, shut up about Venus," McGuire had been told. But he did not need Captain Blake's warning to hold himself strictly to what he

had seen and let the others draw their own conclusions.

Lieutenant McGuire was the last one to speak. There was silence in the office of Colonel Boynton as he finished, a silence that almost echoed from the grim walls. And the faces of the men who gathered there were carefully masked from any expression that might betray their thoughts.

It was the quiet man in civilian attire who spoke first. He sat beside another whose insignia proclaimed him of general's rank, but he addressed himself to Colonel Boynton.

"I am very glad," he said quietly, "very glad. Colonel, that my unofficial visit came at just this time. I should like to ask some few questions."

Colonel Boynton shifted the responsibility with a gesture almost of relief. "It is in your hands. Mr. Secretary," he said. "You and General Clinton have dropped in opportunely. There is something here that will tax all our minds."

The man in civilian clothes nodded assent. He turned to Captain Blake.

"Captain," he said, "you saw this at first hand. You have told us what you saw. I should like greatly to know what you think. Will you give us your opinion, your impressions?"

The captain arose smartly, but his words came with less ease.

"My opinion," he stated, "will be of little value, but it is based upon these facts. I have seen to-night, sir, a new type of aircraft, with speed, climb and ceiling beyond anything we are capable of. I can only regard it as a menace. It may or may not have been armed, but it had the size to permit the armament of a cruiser; it had power to carry that weight. It hung stationary in the air, so it is independent of wing-lift, yet it turned and shot upward like a feather in a gale. That spells maneuverability.

"That combination, sir, can mean only that we are out-flown, out-maneuvered and out-fought in the air. It

means that the planes in our hangars are obsolete, our armament so much old iron.

"The menace is potential at present. Whether it is an actual threat or not is another matter. Who mans that ship—what country's insignia she carries—is something on which I can have no opinion. The power is there: who wields it I wish we knew."

The questioner nodded at the conclusion of Blake's words, and he exchanged quiet, grave glances with the general beside him. Then—

"I think we all would wish to know that, Captain Blake," he observed. And to the colonel: "You may be able to answer that soon. It would be my idea that this craft should be—ah—drawn out, if we can do it. We would not attack it, of course, until its mission is proved definitely unfriendly, but you will resist any offensive from them.

"And now," he added, "let us thank these officers for their able reports and excuse them. We have much to discuss...."

Captain Blake took McGuire's arm as they went out into the night. And he drew him away where they walked for silent minutes by themselves. The eyes of Lieutenant McGuire roamed upward to the scudding clouds and the glimpse of far, lonely stars; he stumbled occasionally as he walked. But for Captain Blake there was thought only of matters nearby.

"The old fox!" he exclaimed. "Didn't he 'sic us on' neatly? If we mix it with that stranger there will be no censure from the Secretary of War."

"I assumed that was who it was," said McGuire. "Well, they have something to think about, that bunch; something to study over.... Perhaps more than they know."

"And that's their job," he concluded after a silence. "I'm going to bed; but I would like a leave of absence to-morrow if that's O. K."

"Sure," said Captain Blake, "though I should think you would like to stick around. Perhaps we will see something. What's on your mind, Mac?"

"A little drive to the top of Mount Lawson," said Lieutenant McGuire. "I want to talk to a bird named Sykes."

Chapter 2

Lieutenant McGuire, U. S. A., was not given as a usual thing to vain conjectures, nor did his imagination carry him beyond the practical boundaries of accepted facts. Yet his mind, as he drove for hours through the orange-scented hills of California, reverted time and again to one persistent thought. And it was with him still, even when he was consciously concentrating on the hairpin turns of Mount Lawson's narrow road.

There was a picture there, printed indelibly in his mind—a picture of a monstrous craft, a liner of the air, that swung its glowing lights in a swift arc and, like a projectile from some huge gun, shot up and up and still up until it vanished in a jet-black sky. Its altitude when it passed from sight he could not even guess, but the sense of ever-increasing speed, of power that mocked at gravitation's puny force, had struck deep into his mind. And McGuire saw plainly this mystery ship going on and on far into the empty night where man had never been.

No lagging in that swift flight that he had seen; an acceleration that threw the ship faster and yet faster, regardless of the thin air and the lessened buoyancy in an ocean of atmosphere that held man-made machines so close to Earth. That constant acceleration, hour after hour, day after day—the speed would be almost unlimited; inconceivable!

He stopped his car where the mountain road held straight for a hundred feet, and he looked out over the coastal plain spread like a toy world far below.

"Now, how about it?" he asked himself. "Blake thinks I am making a fool of myself. Perhaps I am. I wonder. It's a long time since I fell for any fairy stories. But this thing has got me. A sort of hunch, I guess."

The sun was shining now from a vault of clear blue. It was lighting a world of reality, of houses where people lived their commonplace lives, tiny houses squared off in blocks a mile below. There was smoke here and there from factories; it spread in a haze, and it meant boilers and engines and sound practical machinery of a practical world to the watching man.

What had all this to do with Venus? he asked himself. This was the world he knew. It was real; space was impenetrable; there were no men or beings of any sort that could travel through space. Blake was right: he was on a fool's errand. They couldn't tell him anything up here at the observatory; they would laugh at him as he deserved....

Wondering vaguely if there was a place to turn around, he looked ahead and then up; his eyes passed from the gash of roadway on the mountainside to the deep blue beyond. And within the man some driving, insistent, mental force etched strongly before his eyes that picture and its problem unanswered. There was the ship—he saw it in memory—and it went up and still up; and he knew as surely as if he had guided the craft that the meteor-like flight could be endless.

Lieutenant McGuire could not reason it out—such power was beyond his imagining—but suddenly he dared to believe, and he knew it was true.

"Earthbound!" he said in contempt of his own human kind, and he looked again at the map spread below.

"Ants! Mites! That's what we are—swarming across the surface of the globe. And we think we're so damn clever if we lift ourselves up a few miles from the surface!

"Guess I'll see Sykes," he muttered aloud. "He and his kind at least dare to look out into space; take their eyes off the world; be impractical!"

He swung the car slowly around the curve ahead, eased noiselessly into second gear and went on with the climb.

There were domed observatories where he stopped: rounded structures that gleamed silvery in the air; and offices, laboratories: it was a place of busy men. And Professor Sykes, he found, was busy. But he spared a few minutes to answer courteously the questions of this slim young fellow in the khaki uniform of the air service.

"What can I do for you?" asked Professor Sykes.

"No dreamer, this man," thought McGuire as he

looked at the short, stocky figure of the scientist. Clear eyes glanced sharply from under shaggy brows; there were papers in his hand scrawled over with strange mathematical symbols.

"You can answer some fool questions," said Lieutenant McGuire abruptly, "if you don't mind."

The scientist smiled broadly. "We're used to that," he told the young officer; "you can't think of any worse ones than those we have heard. Have a chair."

McGuire drew a clipping from his pocket—it was the newspaper account he had read—and he handed it to Professor Sykes.

"I came to see you about this," he began.

The lips of Professor Sykes lost their genial curve; they straightened to a hard line. "Nothing for publication," he said curtly. "As usual they enlarged upon the report and made assumptions and inferences not warranted by facts."

"But you did see that flash?"

"By visual observation I saw a bright area formed on the terminator—yes! We have no photographic corroboration."

"I am wondering what it meant."

"That is your privilege—and mine," said the scientist coldly.

"But it said there," McGuire persisted, "that it might have been a signal of some sort."

"*I* did not say so: that is an inference only. I have told you, Lieutenant"—he glanced at the card in his hand—"—Lieutenant McGuire—all that I know. We deal in facts up here, and we leave the brilliant theorizing to the journalists."

The young officer felt distinctly disconcerted. He did not know exactly what he had expected from this man—what corroboration of his wild surmises—but he was getting nowhere, he admitted. And he resented

the cold aloofness of the scientist before him.

"I am not trying to pin you down on anything," he said, and his tone carried a hint of the nervous strain that had been his. "I am trying to learn something."

"Just what?" the other inquired.

"Could that flash have been a signal?"

"You may think so if you wish: I have told you all that I know. And now," he added, and rose from his chair, "I must ask to be excused; I have work to do."

McGuire came slowly to his feet. He had learned nothing; perhaps there was nothing to be learned. A fool's errand! Blake was right. But the inner urge for some definite knowledge drove him on. His eyes were serious and his face drawn to a scowl of earnestness as he turned once more to the waiting man.

"Professor Sykes," he demanded, "just one more question. Could that have been the flash of a—a rocket? Like the proposed experiments in Germany.

Could it have meant in any way the launching of a projectile—a ship—to travel Earthward through space?"

Professor Sykes knew what it was to be harassed by the curious mob, to avoid traps set by ingenious reporters, but he knew, too, when he was meeting with honest bewilderment and a longing for knowledge. His fists were placed firmly on the hips of his stocky figure as he stood looking at the persistent questioner, and his eyes passed from the intent face to the snug khaki coat and the spread wings that proclaimed the wearer's work. A ship out of space—a projectile—this young man had said.

"Lieutenant," he suggested quietly—and again the smile had returned to his lips as he spoke—"sit down. I'm not as busy as I pretend to be. Now tell me: what in the devil have you got in your mind?"

And McGuire told him. "Like some of your dope," he said, "this is not for publication. But I have not been instructed to hush it up, and I know you will keep it to yourself."

He told the clear-eyed, listening man of the previous night's events. Of the radio's weird call and the mystery ship.

"Hallucination," suggested the scientist. "You saw the stars very clearly, and they suggested a ship."

"Tell that to Jim Burgess," said McGuire: "he was the pilot of that plane." And the scientist nodded as if the answer were what he expected.

He asked again about the ship's flight. And he, too, bore down heavily upon the matter of acceleration in the thin upper air. He rose to lay a friendly hand on McGuire's shoulder.

"We can't know what it means," he said, "but we can form our own theories, you and I—and anything is possible.

"It is getting late," he added, "and you have had a long drive. Come over and eat; spend the night here. Perhaps you would like to have a look at our equipment—see Venus for yourself. I will be observing

her through the sixty-inch refractor to-night. Would you care to?"

"Would I?" McGuire demanded with enthusiasm. "Say, that will be great!"

The sun was dropping toward the horizon when the two men again came out into the cool mountain air.

"Just time for a quick look around," suggested Professor Sykes, "if you are interested."

He took the lieutenant first to an enormous dome that bulged high above the ground, and admitted him to the dark interior. They climbed a stairway and came out into a room that held a skeleton frame of steel. "This is the big boy," said Professor Sykes, "the one hundred-inch reflector."

There were other workers there, one a man standing upon a raised platform beside the steel frame, who arranged big holders for photographic plates. The slotted ceiling opened as McGuire watched, and the whole structure swung slowly around. It was still, and

the towering steel frame began to swing noiselessly when a man at a desk touched various controls. McGuire looked about him in bewilderment.

"Quite a shop," he admitted; "but where is the telescope?"

Professor Sykes pointed to the towering latticework of steel. "Right there," he said. "Like everyone else, you were expecting to see a big tube."

He explained in simple words the operation of the great instrument that brought in light rays from sources millions of light years away. He pointed out where the big mirror was placed—the one hundred-inch reflector—and he traced for the wondering man the pathway of light that finally converged upon a sensitized plate to catch and record what no eye had ever seen.

He checked the younger man's flow of questions and turned him back toward the stairs. "We will leave them to their work," he said; "they will be gathering light that has been traveling millions of years on its

ways. But you and I have something a great deal nearer to study."

Another building held the big refractor, and it was a matter of only a few seconds and some cryptic instructions from Sykes until the eye-piece showed the image of the brilliant planet.

"The moon!" McGuire exclaimed in disappointed tones when the professor motioned him to see for himself. His eyes saw a familiar half-circle of light.

"Venus," the professor informed him. "It has phases like the moon. The planet is approaching; the sun's light strikes it from the side." But McGuire hardly heard. He was gazing with all his faculties centered upon that distant world, so near to him now.

"Venus," he whispered half aloud. Then to the professor: "It's all hazy. There are no markings—"

"Clouds," said the other. "The goddess is veiled; Venus is blanketed in clouds. What lies underneath we may never know, but we do know that of all the planets

this is most like the earth; most probably is an inhabited world. Its size, its density, your weight if you were there—and the temperature under the sun's rays about double that of ours. Still, the cloud envelope would shield it."

McGuire was fascinated, and his thoughts raced wildly in speculation of what might be transpiring before his eyes. People, living in that tropical world; living and going through their daily routine under that cloud-filled sky where the sun was never seen. The margin of light that made the clear shape of a half-moon marked their daylight and dark; there was one small dot of light forming just beyond that margin. It penetrated the dark side. And it grew, as he watched, to a bright patch.

"What is that?" he inquired abstractedly—his thoughts were still filled with those beings of his imagination. "There is a light that extends into the dark part. It is spreading—"

He found himself thrust roughly aside as Professor Sykes applied a more understanding eye to the

instrument.

The professor whirled abruptly to his assistant. "Phone Professor Giles," he said sharply; "he is working on the reflector. Tell him to get a photograph of Venus at once; the cloud envelope is broken." He returned hurriedly to his observations. One hand sketched on a waiting pad.

"Markings!" he said exultantly. "If it would only hold!... There, it is closing ... gone...."

His hand was quiet now upon the paper, but where he had marked was a crude sketch of what might have been an island. It was "L" shaped; sharply bent.

"Whew!" breathed Professor Sykes and looked up for a moment. "Now that was interesting."

"You saw through?" asked McGuire eagerly.

"Glimpsed the surface?—an island?"

The scientist's face relaxed. "Don't jump to conclusions," he told the aviator: "we are not ready to

make a geography of Venus quite yet. But we shall know that mark if we ever see it again. I hardly think they had time to get a picture.

"And now there is only a matter of three hours for observation: I must watch every minute. Stay here if you wish. But," he added, "don't let your imagination run wild. Some eruption, perhaps, this we have seen—an ignition of gasses in the upper air—who knows? But don't connect this with your mysterious ship. If the ship is a menace, if it means war, that is your field of action, not mine. And you will be fighting with someone on Earth. It must be that some country has gained a big lead in aeronautics. Now I must get to work."

"I'll not wait," said McGuire. "I will start for the field; get there by daylight, if I can find my way down that road in the dark."

"Thanks a lot." He paused a moment before concluding slowly: "And in spite of what you say, Professor, I believe that we will have something to get together on again in this matter."

The scientist, he saw, had turned again to his instrument. McGuire picked his way carefully along the narrow path that led where he had parked his car. "Good scout, this Sykes!" he was thinking, and he stopped to look overhead in the quick-gathering dark at that laboratory of the heavens, where Sykes and his kind delved and probed, measured and weighed, and gathered painstakingly the messages from suns beyond counting, from universe out there in space that added their bit of enlightenment to the great story of the mystery of creation.

He was humbly aware of his own deep ignorance as he backed his car, slipped it into second, and began the long drive down the tortuous grade. He would have liked to talk more with Sykes. But he had no thought as he wound round the curves how soon that wish was to be gratified.

Part way down the mountainside he again checked his car where he had stopped on the upward climb and reasoned with himself about his errand. Once more he looked out over the level ground below, a vast glowing expanse of electric lights now, that stretched

to the ocean beyond. He was suddenly unthrilled by this man-made illumination, and he got out of his car to stare again at the blackness above and its myriad of stars that gathered and multiplied as he watched.

One brighter than the rest winked suddenly out. There was a constellation of twinkling lights that clustered nearby, and they too vanished. The eyes of the watcher strained themselves to see more clearly a dim-lit outline. There were no lights: it was a black shape, lost in the blackness of the mountain sky, that was blocking out the stars. But it was a shape, and from near the horizon the pale gleams of the rising moon picked it out in softest of outline; a vague ghost of a curve that reflected a silvery contour to the watching eyes below.

There had been a wider space in the road that McGuire had passed; he backed carefully till he could swing his car and turn it to head once more at desperate speed toward the mountain top. And it was less than an hour since he had left when he was racing back along the narrow footpath to slam open the door where Professor Sykes looked up in

amazement at his abrupt return.

The aviator's voice was hoarse with excitement as he shouted: "It's here—the ship! It's here! Where's your phone?—I must call the field! It's right overhead—descending slowly—no lights, but I saw it—I saw it!"

He was working with trembling fingers at the phone where Sykes had pointed. "Long distance!" he shouted. He gave a number to the operator. "Make it quick," he implored. "Quick!"

Chapter 3

Back at Maricopa Flying Field the daily routine had been disturbed. There were conferences of officers, instructions from Colonel Boynton, and a curiosity-provoking lack of explanations. Only with Captain Blake did the colonel indulge in any discussion.

"We'll keep this under our hats," he said, "and out of the newspapers as long as we can. You can imagine what the yellow journals would do with a scarehead like that. Why, they would have us all wiped off the map and the country devastated by imaginary fleets in the first three paragraphs."

Blake regarded his superior gravely. "I feel somewhat the same way, myself. Colonel," he admitted. "When I think what this can mean—some other country so far ahead of us in air force that we are back in the dark ages—well, it doesn't look any too good to me if they mean trouble."

"We will meet it when it comes," said Colonel Boynton. "But, between ourselves, I am in the same

state of mind.

"The whole occurrence is so damn mysterious. Washington hasn't a whisper of information of any such construction; the Secretary admitted that last night. It's a surprise, a complete surprise, to everyone.

"But, Blake, you get that new ship ready as quickly as you can. Prepare for an altitude test the same as we planned, but get into the air the first minute possible. She ought to show a better ceiling than anything we have here, and you may have to fly high to say 'Good morning' to that liner you saw. Put all the mechanics on it that can work to advantage. I think they have it pretty well along now."

"Engine's tested and installed, sir," was Blake's instant report. "I think I can take it up this afternoon."

He left immediately to hurry to the hangar where a new plane stood glistening in pristine freshness, and where hurrying mechanics grumbled under their breaths at the sudden rush for a ship that was

expected to take the air a week later.

An altitude test under full load! Well, what of it? they demanded one of another; wouldn't another day do as well as this one? And they worked as they growled, worked with swift sureness and skill, and the final instruments took their place in the ship that she might roll from the hangar complete under that day's sun.

Her supercharger was tested—the adjunct to a powerful engine that would feed the hungry cylinders with heavy air up in the heights where the air is thin; there were oxygen flasks to keep life in the pilot in the same thin air. And the hot southern sun made ludicrous that afternoon the bulky, heavily-wrapped figure of Captain Blake as he sat at the controls and listened approvingly to the roaring engine.

He waved good-by and smiled understandingly as he met the eyes of Colonel Boynton; then pulled on his helmet, settled himself in his seat and took off in a thunderous blast of sound to begin his long ascent.

He had long since cracked open the valve of his oxygen flask when the climb was ended, and his goggles were frosted in the arctic cold so that it was only with difficulty he could read his instrument board.

"That's the top," he thought in that mind so light and so curiously not his own. He throttled the engine and went into a long spiral that was to end within a rod of where he had started on the brown sun-baked field. The last rays of the sun were slanting over distant mountains as he climbed stiffly from the machine.

"Better than fifty thousand," exulted Colonel Boynton. "Of course your barograph will have to be calibrated and verified, but it looks like a record, Blake—and you had a full load.

"Ready to go up and give merry hell to that other ship if she shows up?" he asked. But Captain Blake shook a dubious head.

"Fifty thousand is just a start for that bird," he said. "You didn't see them shoot out of sight, Colonel. Lord

knows when they quit *their* climb—or where."

"Well, we'll just have a squadron ready in any event," the colonel assured him. "We will make him show his stuff or take a beating—if that is what he wants."

They were in the colonel's office. "You had better go and get warmed up," he told the flyer: "then come back here for instructions." But Blake was more anxious for information than for other comforts.

"I'm all right," he said: "just tired a bit. Let me stretch out here, Colonel, and give me the dope on what you expect of our visitor and what we will do."

He settled back comfortably in a big chair. The office was warm, and Blake knew now he had been doing a day's work.

"We will just take it as it comes," Colonel Boynton explained. "I can't for the life of me figure why the craft was spying around here. What are they looking for? We haven't any big secrets the whole world doesn't know."

"Of course he may not return. But if he does I want you to go up and give him the once over. I can trust you to note every significant detail.

"You saw no wings. If it is a dirigible, let's know something of their power and how they can throw themselves up into the air the way you described. Watch for anything that may serve to identify it and its probable place of manufacture—any peculiarity of marking or design or construction that may give us a lead. Then return and report."

Blake nodded his understanding of what was wanted, but his mind was on further contingencies: he wanted definite instructions.

"And," he asked; "if they attack—what then? Is their fire to be returned?"

"If they make one single false move," said Colonel Boynton savagely, "give them everything you've got. And the 91st Squadron will be off the ground to support you at the first sign of trouble. We don't want to start anything, nor appear to do so. But, by the

gods, Blake, this fellow means trouble eventually as sure as you're a flyer, and we won't wait for him to ask for it twice."

They sat in silence, while the field outside became shrouded in night. And they speculated, as best they could from the few facts they had, as to what this might mean to the world, to their country, to themselves. It was an hour before Blake was aware of the fact that he was hungry.

He rose to leave, but paused while Colonel Boynton answered the phone. The first startled exclamation held him rigid while he tried to piece together the officer's curt responses and guess at what was being told.

"Colonel Boynton speaking.... McGuire?... Yes, Lieutenant.... Over Mount Lawson?... Yes—yes, the same ship, I've no doubt."

His voice was even and cool in contrast to the excited tones that carried faintly to Blake standing by.

"Quite right!" he said shortly. "You will remain where you are: act as observer: hold this line open and keep me informed. Captain Blake will leave immediately for observation. A squadron will follow. Let me know promptly what you see."

He turned abruptly to the waiting man.

"It is back!" he said. "We're in luck! Over the observatories at Mount Lawson; descending, so Lieutenant McGuire says. Take the same ship you had up to-day. Look them over—get up close—good luck!" He turned again to the phone.

There were planes rolling from their hangars before Blake could reach his own ship. Their engines were thundering: men were rushing across the field, pulling on leather helmets and coats as they ran—all this while he warmed up his engine.

A mechanic thrust in a package of sandwiches and a thermos of coffee while he waited. And Captain Blake grinned cheerfully and gulped the last of his food as he waved to the mechanics to pull out the wheel

blocks. He opened the throttle and shot out into the dark.

He climbed and circled the field, saw the waving motion of lights in red and green that marked the take-off of the planes of the 91st, and he straightened out on a course that in less than two hours would bring him over the heights of Mount Lawson and the mystery that awaited him there. And he fingered the trigger grip that was part of the stick and nodded within his dark cockpit at the rattle of a machine gun that merged its staccato notes with the engine's roar.

But he felt, as he thought of that monster shape, as some primordial man might have felt, setting forth with a stone in his hand to wage war on a saurian beast.

Chapter 4

If Colonel Boynton could have stood with one of his lieutenants and Professor Sykes on a mountain top, he would have found, perhaps, the answer to his question. He had wondered in a puzzled fashion why the great ship had shown its mysterious presence over the flying field. He had questioned whether it was indeed the field that had been the object of their attention or whether in the cloudy murk they had merely wandered past. Could he have seen with the eyes of Lieutenant McGuire the descent of the great shape over Mount Lawson, he would have known beyond doubt that here was the magnet that drew the eyes of whatever crew was manning the big craft.

It was dark where the two men stood. Others had come running at their call, but their forms, too, were lost in the shadows of the towering pines. The light from an open door struck across an open space beyond which McGuire and Professor Sykes stood alone, stood silent and spellbound, their heads craned back at a neck-wrenching angle. They were oblivious to all discomforts; their eyes and their whole minds

were on the unbelievable thing in the sky.

Beyond the fact that no lights were showing along the hull, there was no effort at concealment. The moon was up now to illumine the scene, and it showed plainly the gleaming cylinder with its long body and blunt, shining ends, dropping, slowly, inexorably down.

"Like a dirigible," said McGuire huskily. "But the size, man—the size! And its shape is not right; it isn't streamlined correctly; the air—" He stopped his half-unconscious analysis abruptly. "The air!" What had this craft to do with the air? A thin layer of gas that hung close to the earth—the skin on an apple! And beyond—space! There was the ethereal ocean in which this great shape swam!

The reality of the big ship, the very substance of it, made the space ship idea the harder to grasp.

Lieutenant McGuire found that it was easier to see an imaginary craft taking off into space than to conceive of this monstrous shape, many hundreds of tons in weight, being thrown through vast emptiness. Yet he

knew; he knew!

And his mind was a chaos of grim threats and forebodings as he looked at the unbelievable reality and tried to picture what manner of men were watching, peering, from those rows of ports.

At last it was motionless. It hung soundless and silent except for a soft roar, a scant thousand feet in the air. And its huge bulk was dwarfing the giant pines, the rounded buildings; it threw the men's familiar surroundings into a new and smaller scale.

He had many times flown over these mountains, and Lieutenant McGuire had seen the silvery domes of the observatories shining among the trees. Like fortresses for aerial defense, he had thought, and the memory returned to him now. What did these newcomers think of them? Had they, too, found them suggestive of forts on the frontier of a world, defenses against invasion from out there? Or did they know them for what they were? Did they wish only to learn the extent of our knowledge, our culture? Were they friendly, perhaps?—half-timid and fearful of what they

might find?

A star moved in the sky, a pin-point of light that was plain in its message to the aviator. It was Blake, flying high, volplaning to make contact and learn from the air what this stranger might mean. The light of his plane slanted down in an easy descent; the flyer was gliding in on a long aerial toboggan slide. His motor was throttled; there was only the whistle of torn air on the monoplane's wings. McGuire was with the captain in his mind, and like him he was waiting for whatever the stranger might do.

Other lights were clustered where the one plane had been. The men of the 91st had their orders, and the fingers of the watching, silent man gripped an imaginary stick while he wished with his whole heart that he was up in the air. To be with Blake or the others! His thoughts whipped back to the mysterious stranger: the great shape was in motion: it rose sharply a thousand feet in the air.

The approaching plane showed clear in the moon's light. It swung and banked, and the vibrant song of its

engine came down to the men as Blake swept in a great circle about the big ship. He was looking it over, but he began his inspection at a distance, and the orbit of his plane made a tightening spiral as he edged for a closer look. He was still swinging in the monotonous round when the ship made its first forward move.

It leaped in the air: it swept faster and faster. And it was moving with terrific speed as it crashed silently through the path of the tiny plane. And Blake, as he leaned forward on the stick to throw his plane downward in a power dive, could have had a vision, not of a ship of the air, but only of a shining projectile as the great monster shrieked overhead.

McGuire trembled for the safety of those wings as he saw Blake pull his little ship out of the dive and shoot upward to a straight climb.

But—"That's dodging them!" he exulted: "that's flying! I wonder, did they mean to wipe him out or were they only scared off?"

His question was answered as, out of the night, a whistling shriek proclaimed the passage of the meteor ship that drove unmistakably at the lone plane. And again the pilot with superb skill waited until the last moment and threw himself out of the path of the oncoming mass, though his own plane was tossed and whirled like an autumn leaf in the vortex that the enemy created. Not a second was lost as Blake opened his throttle and forced his plane into a steep climb.

"Atta-boy!" said McGuire, as if words could span across to the man in the plane. "Altitude, Blake—get altitude!"

The meteor had turned in a tremendous circle; so swift its motion that it made an actual line of light as the moon marked its course. And the curved line straightened abruptly to a flashing mark that shot straight toward the struggling plane.

This time another sound came down to the listening ears of the two men. The plane tore head on to meet the onslaught, to swing at the last instant in a frantic

leap that ended as before in the maelstrom of air back of the ship. But the muffled roar was changed, punctured with a machine-gun's familiar rattle, and the stabbing flashes from Blake's ship before he threw it out of the other's path were a song of joy to the tense nerves of the men down below.

This deadly rush could only be construed as an attack, and Blake was fighting back. The very speed of the great projectile must hold it to its course; the faster it went the more difficult to swerve it from a line. This and much more was flashing sharply in McGuire's mind. But—Blake!—alone against this huge antagonist!... It was coming back. Another rush like a star through space....

And McGuire shouted aloud in a frenzy of emotion as a cluster of lights came falling from on high. No lone machine gun now that tore the air with this clattering bedlam of shots: the planes of the 91st Squadron were diving from the heights. They came on a steep slant that seemed marking them for crashing death against the huge cylinder flashing past. And their stabbing needles of machine-gun fire made a

drumming tattoo, till the planes, with the swiftness of hawks, swept aside, formed to groups, tore on down toward the ground and then curved in great circles of speed to climb back to the theater of action.

Lieutenant McGuire was rigid and quivering. He should go to the phone and report to the colonel, but the thought left him as quickly as it came. He was frozen in place, and his mind could hold only the scene that was being pictured before him.

The enemy ship had described its swift curve, and the planes of the defenders were climbing desperately for advantage. So slowly they moved as compared with the swiftness of the other!

But the great ship was slowing; it came on, but its wild speed was checked. The light of the full moon showed plainly now what McGuire had seen but dimly before—a great metal beak on the ship, pointed and shining, a ram whose touch must bring annihilation to anything it struck.

The squadron of planes made a group in the sky, and

Blake's monoplane, too, was with them. The huge enemy was approaching slowly: was it damaged? McGuire hardly dared hope ... yet that raking fire might well have been deadly: it might be that some bullets had torn and penetrated to the vitals of this ship's machinery and damaged some part.

It came back slowly, ominously, toward the circling planes. Then, throwing itself through the air, it leaped not directly toward them but off to one side.

Like a stone on the end of a cord it swung with inconceivable speed in a circle that enclosed the group of planes. Again and again it whipped around them, while the planes, by comparison, were motionless. Its orbit was flat with the ground: then tilting, more yet, it made a last circle that stood like a hoop in the air. And behind it as it circled it left a faint trace of vapor. Nebulous!—milky in the moonlight!—but the ship had built a sphere, a great globe of the gas, and within it, like rats in a cage, the planes of the 91st Squadron were darting and whirling.

"Gas!" groaned the watching man: "gas! What is it?"

Why don't they break through?"

The thin clouds of vapor were mingling now and expanding: they blossomed and mushroomed, and the light of the moon came in pale iridescence from their billowing folds.

"Break through!" McGuire had prayed—and he stood in voiceless horror as he saw the attempt.

The mist was touching here and there a plane: they were engulfed, yet he could see them plainly. And he saw with staring, fear-filled eyes the clumsy tumbling and fluttering of unguided wings as the great eagles of the 91st fell roaring to earth with no conscious minds guiding their flight.

The valleys were deep about the mountain, and their shadowed blackness opened to receive the maimed, stricken things that came fluttering or swooping wildly to that last embrace, where, in the concealing shadows, the deeper shadows of death awaited....

There was a room where a telephone waited: McGuire

sensed this but dumbly, and the way to that room was long to his stumbling feet. He was blinded: his mind would not function: he saw only those fluttering things, and the moonlight on their wings, and the shadows that took them so softly at the last.

One plane whistled close overhead. McGuire stopped where he stood to follow it with unbelieving eyes. That one man had lived, escaped the net—it was inconceivable! The plane returned: it was flying low, and it swerved erratically as it flew. It was a monoplane: a new ship.

Its motor was silenced: it stalled as he watched, to pancake and crash where the towering pines made a cradle of great branches to cushion its fall.

No thought now of the colonel waiting impatiently for a report; even the enemy, there in the sky was forgotten. It was Blake in that ship, and he was alive—or had been—for he had cut his motor. McGuire screamed out for Professor Sykes, and there were others, too, who came running at his call. He tore recklessly through the scrub and undergrowth and

gained at last the place where wreckage hung dangling from the trees. The fuselage of a plane, scarred and broken, was still held in the strong limbs.

Captain Blake was in the cockpit, half hanging from the side. He was motionless, quiet, and his face shone white and ghastly as they released him and drew him out. But one hand still clung with a grip like death itself to a hose that led from an oxygen tank. McGuire stared in wonder and slowly gathering comprehension.

"He was fixed for an altitude test," he said dazedly; "this ship was to be used, and he was to find her ceiling. He saw what the others were getting, and he flew himself through on a jet of pure oxygen—" He stopped in utter admiration of the quickness of thought that could outwit death in an instant like that.

They carried the limp body to the light. "No bones broken so far as I can see," said the voice of Professor Sykes. "Leave him here in the air. He must have got a whiff of their devilish mist in spite of his oxygen; he was flying mighty awkwardly when he came in here."

But he was alive!—and Lieutenant McGuire hastened with all speed now to the room where a telephone was ringing wildly and a colonel of the air force must be told of the annihilation of a crack squadron and of a threat that menaced all the world.

In that far room there were others waiting where Colonel Boynton sat with receiver to his ear. A general's uniform was gleaming in the light to make more sober by contrast the civilian clothing of that quiet, clear-eyed man who held the portfolio of the Secretary of War.

They stared silently at Colonel Boynton, and they saw the blood recede from his face, while his cool voice went on unmoved with its replies.

"... I understand," he said; "a washout, complete except for Captain Blake; his oxygen saved him.... It attacked with gas, you say?... And why did not our own planes escape?... Its speed!—yes, we'll have to imagine it, but it is unbelievable. One moment—" He turned to those who waited for his report.

"The squadron," he said with forced quiet, though his lips twitched in a bloodless line, "—the 91st—is destroyed. The enemy put them down with one blow; enveloped them with gas." He recounted the essence of McGuire's report, then turned once more to the phone.

"Hello, Lieutenant—the enemy ship—where is it now?"

He listened—listened—to a silent receiver: silent save for the sound of a shot—a crashing fall—a loud, panting breath. He heard the breathing close to the distant instrument; it ended in a choking gasp; the instrument was silent in his ear....

He signalled violently for the operator: ordered the ringing of any and all phones about the observatory, and listened in vain for a sound or syllable in reply.

"A plane," he told an orderly, "at once! Phone the commercial flying field near the base of Mount Lawson. Have them hold a car ready for me: I shall land there!"

Chapter 5

To Captain Blake alone, of all those persons on the summit of Mount Lawson, it was given to see and to know and be able to relate what transpired there and in the air above. For Blake, although he appeared like one dead, was never unconscious throughout his experience.

Driving head on toward the ship, he had emptied his drum of cartridges before he threw his plane over and down in a dive that escaped the onrush of the great craft by a scant margin, and that carried him down in company with the men and machines of the squadron that dived from above.

He turned as they turned and climbed as they climbed for the advantage that altitude might give. And he climbed faster: his ship outdistanced them in that tearing, scrambling rush for the heights. The squadron was spiraling upward in close formation with his plane above them when the enemy struck.

He saw that great shape swing around them, terrible

in its silent swiftness, and, like the others, he failed to realize at first the net she was weaving. So thin was the gas and so rapid the circling of the enemy craft, they were captured and cut off inside of the gaseous sphere before the purpose of the maneuver was seen or understood.

He saw the first faint vapor form above him; swung over for a steep bank that carried him around the inside of the great cage of gas and that showed him the spiraling planes as the first wisps of vapor swept past them.

He held that bank with his swift machine, while below him a squadron of close-formed fighting craft dissolved before his eyes into unguided units. The formations melted: wings touched and locked; the planes fell dizzily or shot off in wild, ungoverned, swerving flight. The air was misty about him; it was fragrant in his nostrils; the world was swimming....

It was gas, he knew, and with the light-headedness that was upon him, so curiously like that of excessive altitudes, he reached unconsciously for the oxygen

supply. The blast of pure gas in his face revived him for an instant, and in that instant of clear thinking his plan was formed. He threw his weight on stick and rudder, corrected the skid his ship was taking, and, with one hand holding the tube of life-giving oxygen before his face, he drove straight down in a dive toward the earth.

There were great weights fastened to his arm, it seemed, when he tried to bring the ship from her fearful dive. He moved only with greatest effort, and it was force of will alone that compelled his hands to do their work. His brain, as he saw the gleaming roundness of observatory buildings beneath him, was as clear as ever in his life, but his muscles, his arms and legs, refused to work: even his head; he was slowly sinking beneath a load of utter fatigue.

The observatories were behind him; he must swing back; he could not last long, he knew; each slightest movement was intolerable effort.

Was this death? he wondered; but his mind was so clear! There were the buildings, the trees! How

thickly they were massed beyond—

He brought every ounce of will power to bear ... the throttle!—and a slow glide in ... he was losing speed ... the stick—must—come—back! The crashing branches whipped about him, bending, crackling—and the world went dark....

There were stars above him when he awoke, and his back was wrenched and aching. He tried to move, to call, but found that the paralysing effect of the gas still held him fast. He was lying on the ground, he knew: a door was open in a building beyond, and the light in the room showed him men, a small group of them, standing silent while someone—yes, it was McGuire—shouted into a phone.

"... The squadron," he was saying. "... Lost! Every plane down and destroyed.... Blake is living but injured...." And then Blake remembered. And the tumbling, helpless planes came again before his eyes while he cursed silently at this freezing grip that would not let him cover his face with his hands to shut out the sight.

The figure of a man hurried past him, nor saw the body lying helpless in the cool dark. McGuire was still at the phone. And the enemy ship—?

His mind, filled with a welter of words as he tried to find phrases to compass his hate for that ship. And then, as if conjured out of nothing by his thoughts, the great craft itself came in view overhead in all its mighty bulk.

It settled down swiftly: it was riding on an even keel. And in silence and darkness it came from above. Blake tried to call out, but no sound could be formed by his paralyzed throat. Doors opened in silence, swinging down from the belly of the thing to show in the darkness square openings through which shot beams of brilliant yellow light.

There were cages that lowered—great platforms in slings—and the platforms came softly to rest on the ground. They were moving with life; living beings clustered upon them thick in the dark. Oh God! for an instant's release from the numbness that held his lips and throat to cry out one word!... The shapes were

passing now in the shelter of darkness, going toward the room.... He could see McGuire's back turned toward the door.

Man-shapes, tall and thin, distorted humans, each swathed in bulging garments; horrible staring eyes of glass in the masks about their heads, and each hand ready with a shining weapon as they stood waiting for the men within to move.

McGuire must have seen them first, though his figure was half concealed from Blake where he was lying. But he saw the head turn; knew by the quick twist of the shoulders the man was reaching for a gun. One shot echoed in Blake's ears; one bulging figure spun and fell awkwardly to the ground; then the weapons in those clumsy hands hissed savagely while jets of vapor, half liquid and half gas, shot blindingly into the room. The faces dropped from his sight....

There had been the clamor of surprised and shouting men: there was silence now. And the awkward figures in the bloated casings that protected their bodies from the gas passed in safety to the room. Blake,

bound in the invisible chains of enemy gas, struggled silently, futilely, to pit his will against this grip that held him. To lie there helpless, to see these men slaughtered! He saw one of the creatures push the body of his fallen comrade out of the way: it was cast aside with an indifferent foot.

They were coming back: Blake saw the form of McGuire in unmistakable khaki. He and another man were carried high on the shoulders of some of the invaders. They were going toward the platforms, the slings beneath the ship.... They passed close to Blake, and again he was unnoticed in the dark.

A clamor came from distant buildings, a babel of howls and shrieks, inhuman, unearthly. There were no phrases or syllables, but to Blake it was familiar ... somewhere he had heard it ... and then he remembered the radio and the weird wailing note that told of communication. These things were talking in the same discordant din.

They were gathering now on the platforms slung under the ship. A whistling note from somewhere

within the great structure and the platforms went high in the air. They were loaded, he saw, with papers and books and instruments plundered from the observatories. Some made a second trip to take up the loot they had gathered. Then the black doorways closed; the huge bulk of the ship floated high above the trees; it took form, dwindled smaller and smaller, then vanished from sight in the star-studded sky.

Blake thought of their unconscious passenger—the slim figure of Lieutenant McGuire. Mac had been a close friend and a good one; his ready smile; his steady eyes that could tear a problem to pieces with their analytic scrutiny or gaze far into space to see those visions of a dreamer!

"Far into space." Blake repeated the words in his mind. And: "Good-by Mac," he said softly; "you've shipped for a long cruise, I'm thinking." He hardly realized he had spoken the words aloud.

Lying there in the cold night he felt his strength returning slowly. The pines sang their soothing, whispered message, and the faint night noises served

but to intensify the silence of the mountain. It was some time before the grind of straining gears came faintly in the air to announce the coming of a car up the long grade. And still later he heard it come to a stop some distance beyond. There were footsteps, and voices calling: he heard the voice of Colonel Boynton. And he was able to call out in reply, even to move his head and turn it to see the approaching figures in the night.

Colonel Boynton knelt beside him. "Did they get you, old man?" he asked.

"Almost," Blake told him. "My oxygen—I was lucky. But the others—". He did not need to complete the sentence. The silent canyons among those wooded hills told plainly the story of the lost men.

"We will fight them with gas masks," said the colonel; "your experience has taught us the way."

"Gas-tight uniforms and our own supplies of oxygen," Blake supplemented. He told Boynton of the man-things he had seen come from the ship, of their baggy

suits, their helmets.... And he had seen a small generator on the back of each helmet. He told him of the small, shining weapons and their powerful jets of gas. Deadly and unescapable at short range, he well knew.

"They got McGuire," Blake concluded; "carried him off a prisoner. Took another man, too."

For a moment Colonel Boynton's quiet tones lost their even steadiness. "We'll get them," he said savagely, and it was plain that it was the invaders that filled his mind; "we'll go after them, and we'll get them in spite of their damn gas, and we'll rip their big ship into ribbons—"

Captain Blake was able to raise a dissenting hand. "We will have to go where they are, Colonel, to do that."

Colonel Boynton stared at him. "Well?" he demanded. "Why not?"

"We can't go where *they* went," said Blake simply. "I

laughed at McGuire; told him not to be a fool. But I was the fool—the blind one; we all were, Colonel. That thing came here out of space. It has gone back; it is far beyond our air. I saw it go up out of sight, and I know. Those creatures were men, if you like, but no men that we know—not those shrieking, wailing devils! And we're going to hear more from them, now that they've found their way here!"

Chapter 6

A score of bodies where men had died in strangling fumes in the observatories on Mount Lawson; one of the country's leading astronomical scientists vanished utterly; the buildings on the mountain top ransacked; papers and documents blowing in vagrant winds; tales of a monster ship in the air, incredibly huge, unbelievably swift—

There are matters that at times are not allowed to reach the press, but not happenings like these. And the papers of the United States blazed out with headlines to tell the world of this latest mystery.

Then came corroboration from the far corners of the world. The mystery ship had not visited one section only; it had made a survey of the whole civilized sphere, and the tales of those who had seen it were no longer laughed to scorn but went on the wires of the great press agencies to be given to the world. And with that the censorship imposed by the Department of War broke down, and the tragic story of the destruction of the 91st Air Squadron passed into

written history. The wild tale of Captain Blake was on every tongue.

An invasion from space! The idea was difficult to accept. There were scoffers who tried to find something here for their easy wit. Why should we be attacked? What had that other world to gain? There was no answer ready, but the silent lips of the men who had fallen spoke eloquently of the truth. And the world, in wonder and consternation, was forced to believe.

Were there more to come? How meet them? Was this war—and with whom? What neighboring planet could reasonably be suspected. What had science to say?

The scientists! The scientists! The clamor of the world was beating at the doors of science and demanding explanations and answers. And science answered.

A conference was arranged in London; the best minds in the realms of astronomy and physics came together. They were the last to admit the truth that would not be denied, but admit it they must. And to

some of the questions they found their answer.

It was not Mars, they said, though this in the popular mind was the source of the trouble. Not Mars, for that planet was far in the heavens. But Venus!—misnamed for the Goddess of Love. It was Venus, and she alone, who by any stretch of the imagination could be threatening Earth.

What did it mean? They had no answer. The ship was the only answer to that. Would there be more?—could we meet them?—defeat them? And again the wise men of the world refused to hazard a guess.

But they told what they knew; that Venus was past her eastern elongation, was approaching the earth. She of all the planets that swung around the sun came nearest to Earth—twenty-six million miles in another few weeks. Then whirling away she would pass to the western elongation in a month and a half and drive out into space. Venus circled the sun in a year of 225 days, and in 534 days she would again reach her eastern elongation with reference to the earth, and draw near us again.

They were reluctant to express themselves, these men who made nothing of weighing and analyzing stars a million of light years away, but *if* the popular conception was correct and *if* we could pass through the following weeks without further assault, we could count on a year and a half before the menace would again return. And in a year and a half—well, the physicists would be working—and we might be prepared.

Captain Blake had made his report, but this, it seemed, was not enough. He was ordered to come to Washington, and, with Colonel Boynton, he flew across the country to tell again his incredible story.

It was a notable gathering before which he appeared. All the branches of the service were represented; there were men in the uniform of admirals and generals; there were heads of Departments. And the Secretary of War was in charge.

He told his story, did Blake, before a battery of hostile eyes. This was not a gathering to be stampeded by wild scareheads, nor by popular clamor. They wanted

facts, and they wanted them proved. But the gravity with which they regarded the investigation was shown by their invitation to the representatives of foreign powers to attend.

"I have told you all that happened," Blake concluded, "up to the coming of Colonel Boynton. May I reiterate one fact? I do not wonder at your questioning my state of mind and my ability to observe correctly. But I must insist, gentlemen, that while I got a shot of their gas and my muscles and my nervous system were paralyzed, my brain was entirely clear. I saw what I saw; those creatures were there; they entered the buildings; they carried off Lieutenant McGuire and another man.

"What they were or who they were I cannot say. I do not know that they were men, but their insane shrieking in that queer unintelligible talk is significant. And that means of communication corresponds with the radio reception of which you know.

"If you gentlemen know of any part of this earth that

can produce such a people, if you know of any people or country in this world that can produce such a ship—then we can forget all our wild fancies. And we can prepare to submit to that country and that people as the masters of this earth. For I must tell you, gentlemen, with all the earnestness at my command, that until you have seen that ship in action, seen its incredible speed, its maneuverability, its lightning-like attack and its curtain of gas, you can have no conception of our helplessness. And the insignia that she carries is the flag of our conquerors."

Blake got an approving nod from the Secretary of War as he took his seat. That quiet man rose slowly from his chair to add his words. He spoke earnestly, impressively.

"Captain Blake has hit the nail squarely on the head," he stated. "We have here in this room a representative gathering from the whole world. If there is any one of you who can say that this mystery ship was built and manned by your people, let him speak, and we will send you at once a commission to acknowledge your power and negotiate for peace."

The great hall was silent, in a silence that held only uneasy rustlings as men glanced one at another in wondering dismay.

"The time has come," said the Secretary with solemn emphasis, "when all dissensions among our peoples must cease. Whatever there is or ever has been of discord between us fades into insignificance before this new threat. It is the world, now, against a power unknown; we can only face it as a united world.

"I shall recommend to the President of the United States that a commission be appointed, that it may cooperate with similar bodies from all lands. I ask you, gentlemen, to make like representations to your governments, to the end that we may meet this menace as one country and one man; meet it, God grant, successfully through a War Department of the World."

It was a brave gesture of the President of the United States; he dared the scorn and laughter of the world in standing behind his Secretary of War. The world is quick to turn and rend with ridicule a false prophet.

And despite the unanswerable facts, the scope and power of the menace was not entirely believed. It was difficult for the conscious minds of men to conceive of the barriers of vast space as swept aside and the earth laid open to attack.

England was slow to respond to the invitation of the President: this matter required thought and grave deliberation in parliament. It might not be true: the thought, whether spoken or unexpressed, was clinging to their minds. And even if true—even if this lone ship had wandered in from space—there might be no further attack.

"Why," they asked, "should there be more unprovoked assaults from the people of another planet? What was their object? What had they to gain? ... Perhaps we were safe after all." The answer that destroyed all hope came to them borne in upon a wall of water that swept the British coast.

The telescopes of the world were centered now on just one object in the heavens. The bright evening star that adorned the western sky was the target for

instruments great and small. It was past the half-moon phase now, and it became under magnification a gleaming crescent, a crescent that emitted from the dark sphere it embraced vivid flashes of light. Sykes' report had ample corroboration; the flash was seen by many, and it was repeated the next night and the next.

What was it? the waiting world asked. And the answer came not from the telescopes and their far-reaching gaze but from the waters of the Atlantic. In the full blaze of day came a meteor that swept to the earth in an arc of fire to outshine the sun. There must have been those who saw it strike—passengers and crews of passing ships—but its plunge into the depths of the Atlantic spelled death for each witness.

The earth trembled with the explosion that followed. A gas—some new compound that united with water to give volumes tremendous—that only could explain it. The ocean rose from its depths and flung wave after wave to race outward in circles of death.

Hundreds of feet in height at their source—this could

only be estimated—they were devastating when they struck. The ocean raged over the frail bulwark of England in wave upon wave, and, retreating, the waters left smooth, shining rock where cities had been. The stone and steel of their buildings was scattered far over the desolate land or drawn in the suction of retreating waters to the sea.

Ireland, too, and France and Spain. Even the coast of America felt the shock of the explosion and was swept by tidal waves of huge proportions. But the coast of Britain took the blow at its worst.

The world was stunned and waiting—waiting!—when the next blow fell. The flashes were coming from Venus at regular intervals, just twenty hours and nineteen minutes apart. And with exactly the same time intervals the bolts arrived from space to lay waste the earth.

They struck where they would: the ocean again; the Sahara; in the mountains of China; the Pacific was thrown into fearful convulsions; the wheat fields of Canada trembled and vanished before a blast of

flaming gas....

Twenty hours and nineteen minutes! Where it would strike, the next star-shell, no man might say; that it surely would come was a deadly and nerve-shattering certainty. The earth waited and prayed under actual bombardment.

Some super-gun, said science with conviction; a great bore in the planet itself, perhaps. But it was fixed, and the planet itself aimed with an accuracy that was deadly; aimed once as each revolution brought its gun on the target. Herein, said science, lay a basis for hope.

If, in that distant world, there was only one such bore, it must be altering its aim as the planet approached; the gun must cease to bear upon the earth. And the changing sweep of the missiles' flight confirmed their belief.

Each meteor-shell that came rushing into Earth's embrace burned brilliantly as it tore into the air. And each flaming arc was increasingly bent, until—twenty

hours and nineteen minutes had passed—twenty minutes—thirty—another hour ... and the peoples of Earth dropped humbly to their knees in thankful prayer, or raised vengeful eyes and clenched fists toward the heavens while their quivering lips uttered blasphemous curses. The menace, for the time, had passed; the great gun of Venus no longer was aiming toward the earth.

"No more ships," was the belief; "not this time." And the world turned to an accounting of its losses, and to wonder—wonder—what the planet's return would bring. A year and one half was theirs; one year and a half in which to live in safety, in which to plan and build.

A column, double leaded, in the *London Times* voiced the feeling of the world. It was copied and broadcast everywhere.

"Another attack," it concluded, "is not a probability—it is a certainty. They are destroying us for some reason known only to themselves. Who can doubt that when the planet returns there will be a further

bombardment; an invasion by armed forces in giant ships; bombs dropped from them miles high in the air. This is what we must look forward to—death and destruction dealt out by a force we are unable to meet.

"Our munitions factories may build larger guns, but can they reach the heights at which these monster ships of space will lie, with any faint probability of inflicting damage? It is doubtful.

"Our aircraft is less than useless; its very name condemns it as inept. Craft of the air!—and we have to war against space ships which can rise beyond the thin envelope of gas that encircles the earth.

"The world is doomed—utterly and finally doomed; it is the end of humankind; slavery to a conquering race at the very best, unless—

"Let us face the facts fairly. It is war—war to the death—between the inhabitants of this world and of that other. We are men. What they are God alone can say. But they are creatures of mind as are we; what

they have done, we may do.

"There is our only hope. It is vain, perhaps—preposterous in its assumption—but our sole and only hope. We must meet the enemy and defeat him, and we must do it on his own ground. To destroy their fleet we must penetrate space; to silence their deadly bombardment we must go out into space as they have done, reach their distant world as they have reached ours, and conquer as we would have been conquered.

"It is a tenuous hope, but our only one. Let our men of mundane warfare do their best—it will be useless. But if there be one spark of God-given genius in the world that can point the way to victory, let those in authority turn no deaf ear.

"It is a battle now of minds, and the best minds will win. Humanity—all humankind—is facing the end. In less than one year and a half we must succeed—or perish. And unless we conquer finally and decisively, the story of man in the history of the universe will be a tale that is told, a record of life in a book that is ended—closed—and forgotten through all eternity."

Chapter 7

A breath of a lethal gas shot from the flying ship had made Captain Blake as helpless as if every muscle were frozen hard, and he had got it only lightly, mixed with the saving blast of oxygen. His heart had gone on, and his breathing, though it became shallow, did not cease; he was even able to turn his eyes. But to the men in the observatory room the gas from the weapons of the attacking force came as a devastating, choking cloud that struck them senseless as if with a blow. Lieutenant McGuire hardly heard the sound of his own pistol before unconsciousness took him.

It was death for the men who were left—for them the quick darkness never lifted—but for McGuire and his companion there was reprieve.

He was lying flat on a hard floor when remembrance crept slowly back to his benumbed brain. An odor, sickish-sweet, was in his nostrils; the breath of life was being forcibly pumped and withdrawn from laboring lungs; a mask was tight against his face. He struggled to throw it off, and someone bending over

removed it.

Someone! His eyes stared wonderingly at the grotesque face like a lingering phantasm of fevered dreams. There were others, he saw, and they were working over a body not far away upon the floor. He recognized the figure of Professor Sykes. Short, stocky, his clothes disheveled—but Sykes, unmistakably, despite the mask upon his face.

He, too, revived as McGuire watched, and, like the flyer, he looked wonderingly about him at his strange companions. The eyes of the two met and held in wordless communication and astonishment.

The unreal creatures that hovered near withdrew to the far side of the room. The walls beyond them were of metal, white and gleaming; there were doorways. In another wall were portholes—round windows of thick glass that framed circles of absolute night. It was dark out beyond them with a blackness that was relieved only by sharp pin-points of brilliance—stars in a night sky such as McGuire had never seen.

Past and present alike were hazy to the flyer; the spark of life had been brought back to his body from a far distance; there was time needed to part the unreal from the real in these new and strange surroundings.

There were doorways in the ceiling, and others in the floor near where he lay; ladders fastened to the wall gave access to these doors. A grotesque figure appeared above the floor and, after a curious glance at the two men, scrambled into the room and vanished through the opening in the ceiling. It was some time before the significance of this was plain to the wondering man—before he reasoned that he was in the enemy ship, aimed outward from the earth, and the pull of gravitation and the greater force of the vessel's constant acceleration held its occupants to the rear walls of each room. That lanky figure had been making its way forward toward the bow of the ship. McGuire's mind was clearing; he turned his attention now to the curious, waiting creatures, his captors.

There were five of them standing in the room, five shapes like men, yet curiously, strangely, different.

They were tall of stature, narrow across the shoulders, muscular in a lean, attenuated fashion. But their faces! McGuire found his eyes returning in horrified fascination to each hideous, inhuman countenance.

A colorless color, like the dead gray of ashes; a skin like that of an African savage from which all but the last vestige of color had been drained. It was transparent, parchment-like, and even in the light of the room that glowed from some hidden source, he could see the throbbing lines of blood-vessels that showed livid through the translucent skin. And he remembered, now, the fingers, half-seen in his moments of awakening—they were like clinging tendrils, colorless, too, in that ashy gray, and showed the network of veins as if each hand had been flayed alive.

The observer found himself analyzing, comparing, trying to find some earthly analogy for these unearthly creatures. Why did he think of potatoes sprouting in a cellar? What possible connection had these half-human things with that boyhood

recollection? And he had seen some laboratory experiments with plants and animals that had been cut off from the sunlight—and now the connection was clear; he knew what this idea was that was trying to form.

These were creatures of the dark. These bleached, drained faces showed skin that had never known the actinic rays of the sun; their whole framework proclaimed the process that had been going on through countless generations. Here was a race that had lived, if not in absolute darkness, then in some place where sunlight never shone—a place of half-light—or of clouds.

"Clouds!" The exclamation was startled from him. And: "Clouds!" he repeated meditatively; he was seeing again a cloud-wrapped world in the eye-piece of a big refracting telescope. "Blanketed in clouds," Professor Sykes had said. The scientist himself was speaking to him now in bewildered tones.

"Clouds?" he inquired. "That's a strange remark to make. Where are we, Lieutenant McGuire? I

remember nothing after you fired. Are we flying—in the clouds?"

"A long, long way beyond them, is my guess," said McGuire grimly. It was staggering what all this might mean; there was time needed for fuller comprehension. But the lean bronzed face of the flyer flushed with animation, and in spite of the terrors that must surely lie ahead he felt strangely elated at the actuality of an incredible adventure.

Slowly he got to his feet to find that his muscles still were reluctant to respond to orders; he helped the professor to arise. And from the group that drew back further into the far end of the room came a subdued and rasping tumult of discordant sound.

One, seemingly in charge, held a weapon in his hand, a slender tube no thicker than a common wire; and ending in a cylinder within the creature's hand. He pointed it in threatening fashion while his voice rose in a shrill call. McGuire and Professor Sykes stood quiet and waited for what the next moment might have in store, but McGuire waved the weapon aside in

a gesture that none could fail to read.

"Steady," he told his companion. "We're in a ticklish position. Do nothing to alarm them."

From up above them came an answering shrill note. Another of the beings was descending into the room.

"Ah!" said Lieutenant McGuire softly, "the big boss, himself. Now let's see what will happen."

If there had seemed something of timidity in the repulsive faces of the waiting creatures, this newcomer was of a different type. He opened flabby thin lips to give one sharp note of command. It was as sibilant as the hissing of a snake. The man with the weapon returned it to a holder at his side; the whole group cringed before the power and authority of the new arrival.

The men that they had seen thus far were all garbed alike; a loose-fitting garment of one piece that was ludicrously like the play rompers that children might wear. These were dull red in color, the red of drying

blood, made of strong woven cloth. But this other was uniformed differently.

McGuire noted the fineness of the silky robe. Like the others this was made of one piece, loosely fitting, but its bright vivid scarlet made the first seem drab and dull. A belt of metal about his waist shone like gold and matched the emblem of precious metal in the turban on his head.

All this the eyes of the flyer took in at a glance; his attention was only momentarily diverted from the ashen face with eyes narrow and slitted, that stared with the cold hatred of a cat into those of the men.

He made a sound with a whistling breath. It seemed to be a question directed to them, but the import of it was lost.

"An exceedingly queer lot," Professor Sykes observed. "And this chap seems distinctly hostile."

"He's no friend of mine," said McGuire as the thin, pendulous lips repeated their whistling interrogation.

"I can't place them," mused the scientist. "Those facial characteristics.... But they must be of some nationality, speak some tongue."

He addressed himself to the figure with the immobile, horrid face.

"We do not understand you," he said with an ingratiating smile. "*Comprenez vous Francaise?... Non?*"... German, perhaps, or Spanish?... "*Sprechen sie Deutsche? Usted habla Española?...*"

He followed with a fusillade of questions in strange and varying tongues. "I've even tried him with Chinese," he protested in bewilderment and stared amazed at his companion's laughter.

There had to be a reaction from the strain of the past hours, and Lieutenant McGuire found the serious questioning in polyglot tongues and the unchanging feline stare of that hideous face too much for his mental restraint. He held his sides, while he shook and roared with laughter beyond control, and the figure before him glared with evident disapproval of

his mirth.

There was a hissing order, and two figures from the corner sprang forward to seize the flyer with long clinging fingers. Their strength he had overestimated, for a violent throw of his body twisted him free, and his outstretched hands sent the two sprawling across the room. Their leader took one quick step forward, then paused as if hesitating to meet this young adversary.

"Do go easy," Professor Sykes was imploring. "We do not know where we are nor who they are, but we must do nothing to antagonize them."

McGuire had reacted from his hilarious seizure with an emotional swing to the opposite extreme. "I'll break their damn necks," he growled, "if they get rough with me." And his narrow eyes exchanged glare for glare with those in the face like blood and ashes before him.

The cold cat eyes held steadily upon him while the scarlet figure retreated. A louder call, shrill and

vibrant, came from the thin lips, and a swarm of bodies in dull red were scrambling into the room to mass about their scarlet leader. Above and behind them the face under its brilliant turban and golden clasp was glaring in triumph.

The tall figures crouched, grotesque and awkward; their long arms and hands with grasping, tendril-like fingers were ready. McGuire waited for the sharp hissing order that would throw these things upon him, and he met the attack when it came with his own shoulders dropped to the fighter's pose, head drawn in close and both fists swinging free.

There were lean fingers clutching at his throat, a press of blood-red bodies thick about him, and a clustering of faces where color blotched and flowed.

The thud of fists in blows that started from the floor was new to these lean creatures that clawed and clung like cats. But they trampled on those who went down before the flyer's blows and stood upon them to spring at his head; they crowded in in overwhelming numbers while their red hands tore and twined about

his face.

It was no place now for long swings; McGuire twisted his body and threw his weight into quick short jabs at the faces before him. He was clear for an instant and swung his heavy boot at something that clung to one leg; then met with a rain of hooks and short punches the faces that closed in again. He saw in that instant a wild whirl of bodies where the stocky figure of Professor Sykes was smothered beneath his taller antagonists. But the professor, if he was forgetting the science of the laboratory, was remembering that of the squared circle—and the battle was not entirely one sided.

McGuire was free; the blood was trickling down his face from innumerable cuts where sharp-nailed fingers had sunk deep. He wiped the red stream from his eyes and threw himself at the weaving mass of bodies that eddied about Sykes in frantic struggle across the room.

The face of the professor showed clear for a moment. Like McGuire he was bleeding, and his breath came

in short explosive gasps, but he was holding his own! The eyes of McGuire glimpsed a wildly gesticulating, shouting figure in the rear. The face, contorted with rage, was almost the color of the brilliant scarlet that the creature wore. The blood-stained man in khaki left his companion to fight his own battle, and plunged headlong at a leaping cluster of dull red, smashed through with a frenzied attack of straight rights and lefts, and freed himself to make one final leap at the leader of this unholy pack.

He was fighting in blind desperation now; the two were out-numbered by the writhing, lean-bodied creatures, and this thing that showed in blurred crimson before him was the directing power of them all. The figure symbolized and personified to the raging man all the repulsive ugliness of the leaping horde. The face came clear before him through the mist of blood, and he put the last ounce of his remaining strength and every pound of weight behind a straight, clean drive with his right fist.

His last conscious impression was of a red, clawing hand that was closed around the thick butt of a tube

of steel ... then down, and still down, he plunged into a bottomless pit of whirling, red flashes and choking fumes....

There were memories that were to occur to Lieutenant McGuire afterward—visions, dim and hazy and blurred, of half-waking moments when strange creatures forced food and water into his mouth, then held a mask upon his face while he resisted weakly the breathing of sweet, sickly fumes that sent him back to unconsciousness.

There were many such times; some when he came sufficiently awake to know that Sykes was lying near him, receiving similar care. Their lives were being preserved: How, or why, or what life might hold in store he neither knew nor cared; the mask and the deep-drawn fumes brought stupor and numbness to his brain.

A window was in the floor beside him when he awoke—a circular window of thick glass or quartz. But no longer did it frame a picture of a sky in velvet blackness; no unwinking pin-points of distant stars

pricked keenly through the night; but, clear and dazzling, came a blessed radiance that could mean only sunshine. A glowing light that was dazzling to his sleep-filled eyes, it streamed in golden—beautiful—to light the unfamiliar room and show motionless upon the floor the figure of Professor Sykes. His torn clothing had been neatly arranged, and his face showed livid lines of healing cuts and bruises.

McGuire tried gingerly to move his arms and legs; they were still functioning though stiff and weak from disuse. He raised himself slowly and stood swaying on his feet, then made his uncertain way to his companion and shook him weakly by the shoulder.

Professor Sykes breathed deeply and raised leaden lids from tired eyes to stare uncomprehendingly at McGuire. Soon his dark pupils ceased to dilate, and he, too, could see their prison and the light of day.

"Sunlight!" he said in a thin voice, and he seemed to know now that they were in the air; "I wonder—I wonder—if we shall land—what country? ... Some wilderness and a strange race—a strange, strange

race!"

He was muttering half to himself; the mystery of these people whom he could not identify was still troubling him.

McGuire helped the other man to his feet, and they clung to each to the other for support as they crossed to kneel beside the floor-window and learn finally where their captors meant to take them.

A wilderness, indeed, the sight that met their eyes, but a wilderness of clouds—no unfamiliar sight to Lieutenant McGuire of the United States Army air service. But to settle softly into them instead of driving through with glistening wings—this was new and vastly different from anything he had known.

Sounds came to them in the silence, penetrating faintly through thick walls—the same familiar wailing call that trembled and quavered and seemed to the listening men to be guiding them down through the mist.

Gone was the sunlight, and the clouds beyond the deep-set window were gloriously ablaze with a brilliance softly diffused. The cloud bank was deep, and they felt the craft under them sink slowly, steadily into the misty embrace. It thinned below them to drifting vapor, and the first hazy shadows of the ground showed through from far beneath. Their altitude, the flyer knew, was still many thousands of feet.

"Water," said McGuire, as his trained eyes made plain to him what was still indistinct to the scientist. "An ocean—and a shore-line—" More clouds obscured the view; they parted suddenly to show a portion only of a clear-cut map.

It stretched beyond the confines of their window, that unfamiliar line of wave-marked shore; the water was like frozen gold, wrinkled in countless tiny corrugations and reflecting the bright glow from above. But the land,—that drew their eyes!

Were those cities, those shadow-splashed areas of gray and rose?... The last veiling clouds dissolved, and

the whole circle was plain to their view.

The men leaned forward, breathless, intent, till the scientist, Sykes—the man whose eyes had seen and whose brain recorded a dim shape in the lens of a great telescope—Sykes drew back with a quivering, incredulous breath. For below them, so plain, so unmistakable, there lay an island, large even from this height, and it formed on this round map a sharp angle like a great letter "L."

"We shall know that if we ever see it again," Professor Sykes had remarked in the quiet and security of that domed building surmounting the heights of Mount Lawson. But he said nothing now, as he stared at his companion with eyes that implored McGuire to arouse him from this sleep, this dream that could never be real. But McGuire, lieutenant one-time in the forces of the U. S. A., had seen it too, and he stared back with a look that gave dreadful confirmation.

The observatory—Mount Lawson—the earth!—those were the things unreal and far away. And here before them, in brain-stunning actuality, were the markings

unmistakable—the markings of Venus. And they were landing, these two, in the company of creatures wild and strange as the planet—on Venus itself!

Chapter 8

Miles underneath the great ship, from which Lieutenant McGuire and Professor Sykes were now watching through a floor-window of thick glass, was a glittering expanse of water—a great ocean. The flickering gold expanse that reflected back the color of the sunlit clouds passed to one side as the ship took its station above the island, a continent in size, that had shown by its shape like a sharply formed “L” an identifying mark to the astronomer.

They were high in the air; the thick clouds that surrounded this new world were miles from its surface, and the things of the world that awaited were tiny and blurred.

Airships passed and repassed far below. Large, some of them—as bulky as the transport they were on; others were small flashing cylinders, but all went swiftly on their way.

It must have come—some ethereal vibration to warn others from the path—for layer after layer of craft

were cleared for the descent. A brilliant light flashed into view, a dazzling pin-point on the shore below, and the great ship fell suddenly beneath them. Swiftly it dropped down the pathway of light; on even keel it fell down and still down, till McGuire, despite his experience in the air, was sick and giddy.

The light blinked out at their approach. It was some minutes before the watching eyes recovered from the brilliance to see what mysteries might await, and then the surface was close and the range of vision small.

A vast open space—a great court paved with blocks of black and white—a landing field, perhaps, for about it in regular spacing other huge cylinders were moored. Directly beneath in a clear space was a giant cradle of curved arms; it was a mammoth structure, and the men knew at a glance that this was the bed where their great ship would lie.

The smooth pavement seemed slowly rising to meet them as their ship settled close. Now the cradle was below, its arms curved and waiting. The ship entered their grasp, and the arms widened, then closed to

draw the monster to its rest. Their motion ceased. They were finally, beyond the last faint doubt, at anchor on a distant world.

A shrill cackle of sound recalled them from the thrill of this adventure, and the attenuated and lanky figure, with its ashen, blotchy face that glared at them from the doorway, reminded them that this excursion into space was none of their desire. They were prisoners—captives from a foreign land.

A long hand moved its sinuous fingers to motion them to follow, and McGuire regarded his companion with a hopeless look and a despondent shrug of his shoulders.

“No use putting up a fight,” he said; “I guess we’d better be good.”

He followed where the figure was stepping through a doorway into a corridor beyond. They moved, silent and depressed, along the dimly lighted way; the touch of cold metal walls was as chilling to their spirits as to their flesh.

But the mood could not last: the first ray of light from the outside world sent shivers of anticipation along their spines. They were landing, in very fact, upon a new world; their feet were to walk where never man had stood; their eyes would see what mortal eyes had never visioned.

Fears were forgotten, and the men clung to each other not for the human touch but because of an ecstasy of intoxicating, soul-filling joy in the sheer thrill of adventure.

They were gripping each other's hand, round-eyed as a couple of children, as they stepped forward into the light.

Before them was a scene whose blazing beauty of color struck them to frozen silence; their exclamations of wonder died unspoken on their lips. They were in a city of the stars, and to their eyes it seemed as if all the brilliance of the heavens had been gathered for its building.

The spacious, open court itself stood high in the air

among the masses of masonry, and beyond were countless structures. Some towered skyward; others were lower; and all were topped with bulbous towers and graceful minarets that made a forest of gleaming opal light. Opalescence everywhere!—it flashed in red and gold and delicate blues from every wall and cornice and roof.

“Quartz?” marveled Sykes after one long drawn breath. “Quartz or glass?—what are they made of? It is fairyland!”

A jewelled city! Garish, it might have been, and tawdry, in the full light of the sun. But on these weirdly unreal structures the sun’s rays never shone; they were illumined only by the soft golden glow that diffused across this world from the cloud masses far above.

McGuire looked up at that uniform, glowing, golden mass that paled toward the horizon and faded to the gray of banked clouds. His eyes came slowly back to the ramp that led downward to the checkered black and white of the court. Beyond an open portion the

pavement was solidly massed with people.

“People!—we might as well call them that,” McGuire had told Sykes; “they are people of a sort, I suppose. We’ll have to give them credit for brains: they’ve beaten us a hundred years in their inventions.”

He was trying to see everything, understand everything, at once. There was not time to single out the new impressions that were crowding upon him. The air—it was warm to the point of discomfort; it explained the loose, light garments of the people; it came to the two men laden with strange scents and stranger sounds.

McGuire’s eyes held with hungry curiosity upon the dwellers in this other world; he stared at the gaping throng from which came a bedlam of shrill cries. Lean colorless hands gesticulated wildly and pointed with long fingers at the two men.

The din ceased abruptly at a sharp, whistled order

from their captor. He stood aside with a guard that had followed from the ship, and he motioned the two before him down the gangway. It was the same scarlet one who had faced them before, the one whom McGuire had attacked in a frenzy of furious fighting, only to go down to blackness and defeat before the slim cylinder of steel and its hissing gas. And the slanting eyes stared wickedly in cold triumph as he ordered them to go before him in his march of victory.

McGuire passed down toward the masses of color that were the ones who waited. There were many in the dull red of the ship's crew; others in sky-blue, in gold and pink and combinations of brilliance that blended their loose garments to kaleidoscopic hues. But the figures were similar in one unvarying respect: they were repulsive and ghastly, and their faces showed bright blotches of blood vessels and blue markings of veins through their parchment-gray skins.

The crowd parted to a narrow, living lane, and lean fingers clutched writhingly to touch them as they passed between the solid ranks.

McGuire had only a vague impression of a great building beyond, of lower stories decorated in barbaric colors, of towers above in strange forms of the crystal, colorful beauty they had seen. He walked toward it unseeing; his thoughts were only of the creatures round about.

“What damned beasts!” he said. Then, like his companion, he set his teeth to restrain all show of feeling as they made their way through the lane of incredible living things.

They followed their captor through a doorway into an empty room—empty save for one blue-clad individual who stood beside an instrument board let into the wall. Beyond was a long wall, where circular openings yawned huge and black.

The one at the instrument panel received a curt order: the weird voice of the man in red repeated a word that stood out above his curious, wordless tone. “Torg,” he said, and again McGuire heard him repeat the syllable.

The operator touched here and there among his instruments, and tiny lights flashed; he threw a switch, and from one of the black openings like a deep cave came a rushing roar of sound. It dropped to silence as the end of a cylindrical car protruded into the room. A door in the metal car opened, and their guard hustled them roughly inside. The one in red followed while behind him the door clanged shut.

Inside the car was light, a diffused radiance from no apparent source, the whole air was glowing about them. And beneath their feet the car moved slowly but with a constant acceleration that built up to tremendous speed. Then that slackened, and Sykes and McGuire clung to each other for support while the car that had been shot like a projectile came to rest.

“Whew!” breathed the lieutenant; “that was quick delivery.” Sykes made no reply, and McGuire, too, fell silent to study the tremendous room into which they were led. Here, seemingly, was the stage for their next experience.

A vast open hall with a floor of glass that was like obsidian, empty but for carved benches about the walls; there was room here for a mighty concourse of people. The walls, like those they had seen, were decorated crudely in glaring colors, and embellished with grotesque designs that proclaimed loudly the inexperienced touch of the draughtsman. Yet, above them, the ceiling sprang lightly into vaulted, sweeping curves. McGuire's training had held little of architecture, yet even he felt the beauty of line and airy gracefulness of treatment in the structure itself.

The contrast between the flaunting colors and the finished artistry that lay beneath must have struck a discordant note to the scientist. He leaned closer to whisper.

"It is all wrong some way—the whole world! Beauty and refinement—then crude vulgarity, as incongruous as the people themselves—they do not belong here."

"Neither do we," was McGuire's reply; "it looks like a

tough spot that we're in."

He was watching toward a high, arched entrance across the room. A platform before it was raised some six feet above the floor, and on this were seats—ornate chairs, done in sweeping scrolls of scarlet and gold. A massive seat in the center was like the fantastic throne of a child's fairy tale. From the corridor beyond that entrance came a stir and rustling that rivetted the man's attention.

A trumpet peal, vibrant and peculiar, blared forth from the ceiling overhead, and the red figures of the guards stood at rigid attention with lean arms held stiffly before them. The one in scarlet took the same attitude, then dropped his hands to motion the two men to give the same salute.

"You go to hell," said Lieutenant McGuire in his gentlest tones. And the scarlet figure's thin lips were snarling as he turned to whip his arms up to their position. The first of a procession of figures was entering through the arch.

Sykes, the scientist, was paying little attention. “It isn’t true,” he was muttering aloud; “it can’t be true. Venus! Twenty-six million miles at inferior conjunction!”

He seemed lost in silent communion with his own thoughts; then: “But I said there was every probability of life; I pointed out the similarities—”

“Hush!” warned McGuire. The eyes of the scarlet man were sending wicked looks in their direction. Tall forms were advancing through the arch. They, too, were robed in scarlet, and behind them others followed.

The trumpet peal from the dome above held now on a long-drawn, single note, while the scarlet men strode in silence across the dais and parted to form two lines. An inverted “V” that faced the entrance—they were an assembly of rigid, blazing statues whose arms were extended like those on the floor below.

The vibrant tone from on high changed to a crashing blare that shrieked discordantly to send quivering

protest through every nerve of the waiting men. Those about them were shouting, and again the name of Torg was heard, as, in the high arch, another character appeared to play his part in a strange drama.

Thin like his companions, yet even taller than them, he wore the same brilliant robes and, an additional mark of distinction, a head-dress of polished gold. He acknowledged the salute with a quick raising of his own arms, then came swiftly forward and took his place upon the massive throne.

Not till he was seated did the others on the platform relax their rigid pose and seat themselves in the semicircle of chairs. And not till then did they so much as glance at the men waiting there before them—the two Earth-men, standing in silent, impassive contemplation of the brilliant scene and with their arms held quiet at their sides. Then every eye turned full upon the captives, and if McGuire had seen deadly malevolence in the face of their captor he found it a hundred-fold in the inhuman faces that looked down upon them now.

The inquiring mind of Professor Sykes did not fail to note the character of their reception. “But why,” he asked in whispers of his fellow-prisoner, “—why this open hatred of us? What possible animus can they have against the earth or its people?”

The figure on the throne voiced a curt order; the one who had brought them stepped forward. His voice was raised in the same discordant, singing tone that leaped and wandered from note to note. It conveyed ideas—that was apparent; it was a language that he spoke. And the central figure above nodded a brief assent as he finished.

Their captor took an arm of each in his long fingers and pushed them roughly forward to stand alone before the battery of hard eyes.

Now the crowned figure addressed them directly. His voice quavered sharply in what seemed an interrogation. The men looked blankly at each other.

Again the voice questioned them impatiently. Sykes and McGuire were silent. Then the young flyer took

an involuntary step forward and looked squarely at the owner of the harsh voice.

“We don’t know what you are saying,” he began, “and I suppose that our lingo makes no sense to you—” He paused in helpless wonderment as to what he could say. Then—

“But what the devil is it all about?” he demanded explosively. “Why all the dirty looks? You’ve got us here as prisoners—now what do you expect us to do? Whatever it is, you’ll have to quit singing it and talk something we can understand.”

He knew his words were useless, but this reception was getting on his nerves—and his arm still tingled where the scarlet one had gripped him.

It seemed, though, that his meaning was not entirely lost. His words meant nothing to them, but his tone must have carried its own message. There were sharp exclamations from the seated circle. The one who had brought them sprang forward with outstretched, clutching hands; his face was a blood-red blotch.

McGuire was waiting in crouching tenseness that made the red one pause.

“You touch me again,” said the waiting man, “and I’ll knock you into an outside loop.”

The attacker’s indecision was ended by a loud order from above. McGuire turned as if he had been spoken to by the leader on the throne. The thin figure was leaning far forward; his eye were boring into those of the lieutenant, and he held the motionless pose for many minutes. To the angry man, staring back and upward, there came a peculiar optical illusion.

The evil face was vanishing in a shifting cloud that dissolved and reformed, as he watched, into pictures. He knew it was not there, the thing he saw; he knew he was regarding something as intangible as thought; but he got the significance of every detail.

He saw himself and Professor Sykes; they were being crushed like ants beneath a tremendous heel; he knew that the foot that could grind out their lives was that of the one on the throne.

The cloud-stuff melted to new forms that grew clearer to show him the earth. A distorted Earth—and he knew the distortion came from the mind of the being before him who had never seen the earth at first hand; yet he knew it for his own world. It was turning in space; he saw oceans and continents; and before his mental gaze he saw the land swarming with these creatures of Venus. The one before him was in command; he was seated on an enormous throne; there were Earth people like Sykes and himself who crept humbly before him, while fleets of great Venusian ships hovered overhead.

The message was plain—plain as if written in words of fire in the brain of the man. McGuire knew that these creatures intended that the vision should be true—they meant to conquer the earth. The slim, khaki-clad figure of Lieutenant McGuire quivered with the strength of his refusal to accept the truth of what he saw. He shook his head to clear it of these thought wraiths.

“Not—in—a—million—years!” he said, and he put behind his words all the mental force at his command. “Try that, old top, and they’ll give you the fight of your life—” He checked his words as he saw plainly that the thin cruel face that stared and stared was getting nothing from his reply.

“Now what do you think about that?” he demanded of Professor Sykes. “He got an idea across to me—some form of telepathy. I saw his mind, or I saw what he wanted me to see of it. It’s taps, he says, for us, and then they think they’re going across and annex the world.”

He glanced upward again and laughed loudly for the benefit of those who were watching him so closely. “Fine chance!” he said; “a fat chance!” But in the deeper recesses of his mind he was shaken.

For themselves there was no hope. Well, that was all in a lifetime. But the other—the conquest of the earth—he had to try with all his power of will to keep from his mind the pictures of destruction these beastly things could bring about.

The chief of this strange council made a gesture of contempt with the grotesque hands that were so translucent yet ashy-pale against his scarlet robe, and the down-drawn thin lips reflected the thoughts that prompted it. The open opposition of Lieutenant McGuire failed to impress him, it seemed. At a word the one who had brought them sprang forward.

He addressed himself to the circle of men, and he harangued them mightily in harsh discordance. He pointed one lean hand at the two captives, then beat it upon his own chest. "They are mine," he was saying, as the men knew plainly. And they realized as if the weird talk came like words to their ears that this monster was demanding that the captives be given him.

An exchange of dismayed glances, and "Not so good!" said McGuire under his breath; "Simon Legree is asking for his slaves. Mean, ugly devil, that boy!"

The lean figures on the platform were bending

forward, an expression of mirth—distorted, animal smiles—upon their flabby lips. They represented to the humans, so helpless before them, a race of thinking things in whom no last vestige of kindness or decency remained. But was there an exception? One of the circle was standing; the one beside them was sullenly silent as the other on the platform addressed their ruler.

He spoke at some length, not with the fire and vehemence of the one who had claimed them, but more quietly and dispassionately, and his cold eyes, when they rested on those of McGuire and Sykes, seemed more crafty than actively ablaze with malevolent ill-will. Plainly it was the councilor now, addressing his superior. His inhuman voice was silenced by a reply from the one on the throne.

He motioned—this gold-crowned figure of personified evil—toward the two men, and his hand swept on toward the one who had spoken. He intoned a command in harsh gutturals that ended in a sibilant shriek. And the two standing silent and hopeless exchanged looks of despair.

They were being delivered to this other—that much was plain—but that it boded anything but captivity and torment they could not believe. That last phrase was too eloquent of hissing hate.

The creature rose, tall and ungainly, from his throne; amid the salutations of his followers he turned and vanished through the arch. The others of his council followed, all but the one. He motioned to the two men to come with him, and the sullen one who had demanded the men for himself obeyed an order from this councilor who was his superior.

He snapped an order, and four of his men ranged themselves about the captives as a guard. Thin metal cords were whipped about the wrists of each; their hands were tied. The wire cut like a knife-edge if they strained against it.

The new director of their destinies was vanishing through an exit at one side of the great hall; their guard hustled them after. A corridor opened before

them to end in a gold-lit portal; it was daylight out beyond where a street was filled with hurrying figures in many colors. With quavering shrieks they scattered like frightened fowls as an airship descended between the tall buildings that reflected its passing in opalescent hues.

It was a small craft compared with the one that had brought them, and it swept down to settle lightly upon the street with no least regard for those who might be crushed by its descent. Consideration for their fellows did not appear as a marked characteristic of this strange people, McGuire observed thoughtfully. They swarmed in endless droves, these multicolored beings who made of the thoroughfare an ever-changing kaleidoscope—and what was a life or two, more or less, among so many? He found no comfort for themselves in the thought.

Shoulder to shoulder, the two followed where the scarlet figure of the councilor moved toward the waiting ship. Only the professor paid further heed to their surroundings; he marveled aloud at the numbers of the people.

“Hundreds of them,” he said; “thousands! They are swarming everywhere like rats. Horrible!” His eyes passed on to the buildings in their glory of delicate hues, as he added, “And the contrast they make with their surroundings! It is all wrong some way; I wish I knew—”

They were in the ship when McGuire replied. “I hope we live long enough to satisfy your curiosity,” he said grimly.

The ship was rising beneath them; the opal and quartz of the city’s walls were flashing swiftly down.

Chapter 9

They were in a cabin at the very nose of the ship, seated on metal chairs, their hands unshackled and free. Their scarlet guardian reclined at ease somewhat to one side, but despite his apparent disregard his cold eyes seldom left the faces of the two men.

Windows closed them in; windows on each side, in

front, above them, and even in the floor beneath. It was a room for observation whose metal-latticed walls served only as a framework for the glass. And there was much to be observed.

The golden radiance of sunlit clouds was warm above. They rose toward it, until, high over the buildings' tallest spires, there spread on every hand the bewildering beauty of that forest of minarets and sloping roofs and towers, whose many facets made glorious blendings of soft color. Aircraft at many levels swept in uniform directions throughout the sky. The ship they were in hung quiet for a time, then rose to a higher level to join the current of transportation that flowed into the south.

"We will call it south," said Professor Sykes. "The sun-glow, you will observe, is not directly overhead; the sun is sinking; it is past their noon. What is the length of their day? Ah, this interesting—interesting!" The certain fate they had foreseen was forgotten; it is not often given to an astronomer to check at first hand his own indefinite observations.

“Look!” McGuire exclaimed. “Open country! The city is ending!”

Ahead and below them the buildings were smaller and scattered. Their new master was watching with closest scrutiny the excitement of the men; he whispered an order into a nearby tube, and the ship slowly slanted toward the ground. He was studying these new specimens, as McGuire observed, but the lieutenant paid little attention; his eyes were too thoroughly occupied in resolving into recognizable units the picture that flowed past them so quickly. He was accustomed, this pilot of the army air service, to reading clearly the map that spreads beneath a plane, but now he was looking at an unfamiliar chart.

“Fields,” he said, and pointed to squared areas of pale reds and blues; “though what it is, heaven knows. And the trees!—if that’s what they are.” The ship went downward where an area of tropical denseness made a tangled mass of color and shadow.

“Trees!” Lieutenant McGuire had exclaimed, but these forests were of tree-forms in weirdest shapes

and hues. They grew to towering heights, and their branches and leaves that swayed and dipped in the slow-moving air were of delicate pastel shades.

“No sunlight,” said the Professor excitedly; “they have no direct rays of the sun. The clouds act as a screen and filter out actinic rays.”

McGuire did not reply. He was watching the countless dots of color that were people—people who swarmed here as they had in the city; people working at these great groves, crouching lower in the fields as the ship swept close; people everywhere in teeming thousands. And like the vegetation about them, they, too, were tall and thin, attenuated of form and with skin like blood-stained ash.

“They need the sun,” Sykes was repeating; “both vegetable and animal life. The plants are deficient in chlorophyl—see the pale green of the leaves!—and the people need vitamins. Yet they evidently have electric power in abundance. I could tell them of lamps—”

His comments ceased as McGuire lurched heavily against him. The flyer had taken note of the tense, attentive attitude of the one in scarlet; the man was leaning forward, his eyes focused directly upon the scientist's face; he seemed absorbing both words and emotions.

How much could he comprehend? What power had he to vision the idea-pictures in the other's mind? McGuire could not know. But "Sorry!" he told Sykes; "that was clumsy of me." And he added in a whisper, "Keep your thoughts to yourself; I think this bird is getting them."

Buildings flashed under them, not massed solidly as in the city, yet spaced close to one another as if every foot of ground not devoted to their incredible agriculture were needed to house the inhabitants. The ground about them was alive with an equally incredible humanity that swarmed over all this world in appalling profusion.

Their horrid flesh! Their hideous features! And their number! McGuire had a sudden, sickening thought. They were larvae, these crawling hordes—vile worm-things that infested a beautiful world—that bred here in millions, their numbers limited only by the space for their bodies and the food for their stomachs. And he, McGuire, a *man*—he and this other man with his clear-thinking scientific brain were prisoners to this horde; captives, to be used or butchered by those vile, crawling things!

And again it was this world of contrast that drove home the conviction with its sickening certainty. A world of beauty, of delicate colors, of sweeping oceans and gleaming shores and towering cities with their grace and beauty and elfin splendor yet a world that shuddered beneath this devouring plague of grublike men.

They swept past cities and towns and over many miles of open land before their craft swung eastward toward the dark horizon. The master gave another

order into the speaking tube and their ship shot forward, faster and yet faster, with a speed that pressed them heavily into their seats. Behind them was the glory of the sunlit clouds; ahead the gloomy gray-black masses that must make a stygian night sky over this lonely world—a world cut off by that vaporous shell from all communion with the stars.

They were over the water; before them a dark ocean reached out in forbidding emptiness to a darker horizon. Ahead, the only broken line in the vast level expanse was a mountain rising abruptly from the sea. It was a volcanic cone surmounting an island; the sunlight's glow reflected from behind them against the sombre mass that lifted toward the clouds. Their ship was high enough to clear it, but instead it swung, as McGuire watched, toward the south.

The island drifted past, and again they were on their course. But to the flyer there were significant facts that could not pass unobserved. Their own ship had swung in a great circle to avoid this mountain. And all through the skies were others that did the same. The air above and about the grim sentinel peak was

devoid of flying shapes.

McGuire caught the eyes of the councilor, their keeper. "What is that?" he asked, though he knew the words were lost on the other. He nodded his head toward the distant peak, and his question was plainly in regard to the island. And for the first time since their coming to this wild world, he saw, flashing across the features of one of these men, a trace of emotion that could only be construed as fear.

The slitted cat eyes lost their look of complacent superiority. They widened involuntarily, and the face was drained of its blotched color. There was fear, terror unmistakable, though it showed for but an instant. He had control of his features almost at once, but the flyer had read their story.

Here was something that gave pause to this race of conquering vermin; a place in the expanse of this vast sea that brought panic to their hearts. And there came to him, as he stowed the remembrance away in his mind, the first glow of hope. These things could fear a mountain; it might be that they could be

brought to fear a man.

The sky was clearing rapidly of traffic and the mountain of his speculations was lost astern, when another island came slanting swiftly up to meet them as their ship swept down from the heights. It was a tiny speck in the ocean's expanse, a speck that resolved itself into the squared fields of colored growth, orchards whose brilliant, strange fruits glowed crimson in the last light of day, and enormous trees, beyond which appeared a house.

A palace, McGuire concluded, when he saw clearly the many-storied pile. Like the buildings they had seen, this also constructed of opalescent quartz. There were windows that glowed warmly in the dusk. A sudden wave of loneliness, almost unbearable, swept over the man.

Windows and gleaming lights, the good sounds of Earth; home!... And his ears, as he stepped out into the cool air, were assailed with the strange cackle and

calling of weird folk; the air brought him scents, from the open ground beyond, of fruits and vegetation like none he had ever known; and the earth, the homeland of his vain imaginings, was millions of empty miles away....

The leader stopped, and McGuire looked dispiritedly at the unfamiliar landscape under dusky lowering skies. Trees towered high in the air—trees grotesque and weird by all Earth standards—whose limbs were pale green shadows in the last light of day. The foliage, too, seemed bleached and drained of color, but among the leaves were flashes of brilliance where night-blooming flowers burst open like star-shells to fill the air with heavy scents.

Between the men and the forest growth was a row of denser vegetation, great ferns twenty feet and more in height, and among them at regular intervals stood plants of another growth—each a tremendous pod held in air on a thick stalk. Tendrils coiled themselves like giant springs beside each pod, tendrils as thick as a man's wrist. The great pods were ranged in a line that extended as far as McGuire could see in the dim

light.

His shoulders drooped as the guard herded him and his companion toward the building beyond. He must not be cast down—he would not! Who knew how much of such feeling was read by these keen-eyed observers? And the only thought with which he could fill his mind, the one forlorn ghost of a hope that he could cling to, was that of an island, a volcanic peak that rose from dark waters to point upward toward the heights.

The guard of four was clustered about; the figures were waiting now in the gathering dark—waiting, while the one in scarlet listened and spoke alternately into a jeweled instrument that hung by a slender chain about his neck. He raised one lean hand to motion the stirring guards to silence, listened again intently into the instrument, then pointed that hand toward the cloud-filled sky, while he craned his thin neck to look above him.

The men's eyes followed the pointing hand to see only the sullen black of unlit clouds. The last distant

aircraft had vanished from the skies; not a ship was in the air—only the enveloping blanket of high-flung vapor that blocked out all traces of the heavens. And then!—

The cloud banks high in the skies flashed suddenly to dazzling, rolling flame. The ground under their feet was shaken as by a distant earthquake, while, above, the terrible fire spread, a swift, flashing conflagration that ate up the masses of clouds.

“What in thunder—” McGuire began; then stopped as he caught, in the light from above, the reflection of fierce exultation in the eyes of the scarlet one. The evil, gloating message of those eyes needed no words to explain its meaning. That this cataclysm was self-made by these beings, McGuire knew, and he knew that in some way it meant menace to him and his.

Yet he groped in thought for some definite meaning. No menace could this be to himself personally, for he and Sykes stood there safe in the company of the councilor himself. Then the threat of this flaming blast must be directed toward the earth!

The fire vanished, and once more, as Professor Sykes had seen on that night so long ago, the blanket of clouds was broken. McGuire followed the gaze of the scientist whose keen eyes were probing in these brief moments into the depths of star-lit space.

“There—there!” Sykes exclaimed in awe-struck tones. His hand was pointing outward through the space where flames had cleared the sky. A star was shining in the heavens with a glory that surpassed all others. It outshone all neighboring stars, and it sent its light down through the vast empty reaches of space, a silent message to two humans, despondent and heartsick, who stared with aching eyes.

Lieutenant McGuire did not hear his friend’s whispered words. No need to name that distant world—it was Earth! Earth!... And it was calling to its own....

There was a flying-field—so plain before his mental eyes; men in khaki and leather who moved and talked

and spoke of familiar things ... and the thunder of motors ... and roaring planes....

Some far recess within his deeper self responded strangely. What now of threats and these brute-things that threatened?—he was one with this picture he had visioned. He was himself; he was a man of that distant world of men; they would show these vile things how men could meet menace—or death.... His shoulders were back and unconsciously he stood erect.

The scarlet figure was close beside them in the dusk, his voice vibrant with a quality which should have struck fear to his captives' hearts as he ordered them on. But the look in his crafty eyes changed to one of puzzled wonder at sight of the men.

Hands on each other's shoulders, they stood there in the gathering dark, where grotesque trees arched twistingly overhead. Their moment of depression had passed; Earth had called, and they had heard it, each after his own fashion. But to each the call had been one of clear courage. No longer cast off and forlorn, they were one with their own world.

“Down,” said Professor Sykes with a whimsical smile; “down, but not out!” And the lieutenant responded in kind.

“Are we down-hearted?” he demanded loudly. And the two turned as one man to grin at the scarlet one as they thundered. “N-o-o!”

Chapter 10

Two men grinned in derision at the horrible, man-shaped thing that held their destinies in his lean, inhuman hands!—but they turned abruptly away to look again above them where that bright star still shone through an opening in the clouds.

“The earth! Home!” It seemed as if they could never tear their eyes away from the sight.

Their captor whistled an order, and the guard of four tugged vainly at the two, who resisted that they might gaze upon their own world until the closing clouds should blot it from sight. A cry from one of the red guards roused them.

The dark was closing in fast, and their surroundings were dim. Vaguely, McGuire felt more than saw one of the red figures whirled into the air. He sensed a movement in the jungle darkness where were groves of weird trees and the tangle of huge vegetable growths. What it was he could not say, but he felt the guard who clutched at him quiver in terror.

Their leader snatched at the instrument that hung about his neck and put it to his lips; he whistled an order, sharp and shrill. Blazing light that seemed to flame in the air was the response; the air was aglow with an all-pervading brilliance like that in the car that had whirled them from the landing field. The light was everywhere, and the building before them was surrounded by a dazzling envelope of luminosity.

Whatever of motion or menace there had been ceased abruptly. Their guard, three now in number instead of four, seized them roughly and hustled them toward an open door. No time, as they passed, for more than fleeting impressions: a hall of warm, glowing light—a passage that branched off—and, at the end, a room into which they were thrown, while a metal door clanged behind them.

These were no gentle hands that hurled the men staggering through the doorway, and Professor Sykes fell headlong upon the glassy floor. He sprang to his feet, his face aflame with anger. “The miserable beasts!” he shouted.

“Take it easy,” admonished the flyer. “We’re in the hoose-gow; no use of getting all fussed up if they don’t behave like perfect gentlemen.

“There’s a bunk in the corner,” he said, and pointed to a woven hammock that was covered with soft cloths; “and here’s another that I can sling. Twin beds! What more do you want?”

He opened a door and the splash of falling water came to them. A fountain cascaded to the ceiling to fall splashing upon a floor of inlaid, glassy tile. McGuire whistled.

“Room and bath,” he said. “And you complained of the service!”

“I have an idea,” he told the scientist, “that our scarlet friend who owns this place intends to treat us decently, even though his helpers are a bit rough. My hunch is that he wants to get some information out of us. That old bird back there in the council chamber told me as plain as day that they think they are going to conquer the earth. Maybe that’s why we are here—

as exhibits A and B, for them to study and learn how to lick us.”

“You are talking what I would have termed nonsense a month ago,” replied Sykes, “but now—well, I am afraid you are right. And,” he said slowly, “I fear that they are equally correct. They have conquered space; they have ships propelled by some unknown power; they have gas weapons, as you and I have reason to know. And they have all the beastly ferocity to carry such a plan through to success. But I wonder what that sky-splitting blast meant.”

“Bombardment,” the flyer told him; “bombardment of the earth as sure as you’re alive.”

“More nonsense,” said Sykes; “and probably correct.... Well, what are we to do?—sit tight and give them as little information as we can? or—” His question ended unfinished; the alternative, it seemed, was not plain to him.

“There’s only one answer,” said McGuire. “We must get away; escape somehow.”

Professor Sykes' eyes showed his appreciation of a spirit that could still dare to hope, but he asked dejectedly: "Escape? Good idea. But where to?"

"I have an idea," the flyer said slowly. "An idea about an island." He told the professor what he had observed—the fact that there was one spot of land on this globe from which the traffic of these monsters of Venus steered clear. This, he explained, must have some significance.

"Whatever is there, God only knows," he admitted, "but it is something these devils don't like a little bit. It might be interesting to learn more. We'll make a break for it; find a boat. No, we probably can't do it, but we can make a try. Now what is our first step, I wonder."

"Our first step," said Professor Sykes, measuring his words as if he might be working out some astronomical calculation, "is into the inverted shower-bath, if you feel as hot as I do. And our next step, when all is quiet for the night, is through the window I see beyond. I can see the branches of one of those

undernourished trees from here.”

“Last one in is a lop-eared Venusian!” said McGuire, throwing off his jacket. And in that strange room in a strange world, under the shadow of death and of tortures unknown, the two men stripped with all the care-free abandon of a couple of schoolboys racing to be first in the old swimming hole.

It was some time later when the door opened and a long red hand pushed a tray of food into the room. The tray was of unbreakable crystal—he rattled it heedlessly upon the floor—and it held crystal dishes of unknown foods.

They were sampling them all when Sykes remarked plaintively, “I would like to know what under heaven I am eating.”

“I’ve wished to know that in lots of restaurants,” McGuire replied. “I remember a place down on—” He stopped abruptly, then chewed in silence upon a fruit

like a striped pepper that stung his mouth and tongue while he scarcely felt it. References to Earth things plainly were to be avoided: the visions they brought before one's eyes were unnerving.

They made a pretence of sleeping in case they were being observed, and it was some hours later when the two stood quietly beside the open window. As Sykes had seen, there were branches of a pale, twisted tree-growth close outside. McGuire tried his weight upon them, then swung himself out, hand over hand, upon the branch that bent low beneath him. Sykes was close behind when he clambered to the ground to stand for some minutes, listening silently in the dark.

"Too easy!" the lieutenant whispered. "They are too foxy to leave a gateway like that—but here we are. The shore is off in this direction."

The dark of a night unrelieved by a single star was about them as they moved noiselessly away. They followed open ground at first. The building that had been their brief prison was upon their right; beyond and at the left was where the ship landed—it was

gone now—and beyond that the wall of vegetation.

And again, in the dark, McGuire had an uncanny sense of motion. Soft bodies were slipping quietly one upon another; something that lived was there beyond them in the night. No sound or sign of life came from the house; no guard had been posted; and McGuire stopped again, before plunging into the tangled growth, to whisper, “Too easy, Sykes! There’s something about this—”

He had pushed aside the fronds of a giant fern; a cautious step beyond his hands touched a slippery, pliant vine. And his whisper ended as he felt the thing turn and twist beneath his hand. It was alive!—writhing!—cold as the body of a monster snake, and just as vicious and savage in the way that it whipped down and about him in the gloom of the starless night.

The thing was alive! It threw its coils around his body in an embrace that left him breathless; a slender

tendrils were tightening about his neck; his hands and arms were bound.

His ankle was grasped as he was whirled aloft—a human hand that gripped him this time—and Sykes, forgetting discretion and the need for silence, was shouting in the darkness that gave no clue to their opponent. “Hang on!” he yelled. “I’ve got you, Mac!”

His shouts were cut short by another serpent shape that thrashed him and smashed the softer growing things to earth that it might wrap this man, too, in its deadly coils.

McGuire felt his companion’s hold loosen as he was lifted from the ground; there were other arms flailing about him—living, coiling things that seemed to fight one with another for this prize. Abruptly, blindingly, the scene was vividly etched before him: the strange trees, the ferns, the writhing and darting serpent-arms! They were illumined in a dazzling, white light!

He was in the air, clutched strangely in constricting arms; an odor of rotted flesh was in his nostrils,

sickening, suffocating! Beyond and almost beneath him a cauldron of green gaped open, and he saw within it a pool of thick liquid that eddied and steamed to give off the stench of putrescence.

All this in an instant of vision—and in that instant he knew the death they courted. It was a giant pod that held that pool—one of the growths he had seen ranged out like a line of sentinels. But the terrible tendrils that had been coiled and at rest were wrapped about him now, drawing him to that reeking pool of death and the waiting thick lips that would close above him. Sykes, too! The tendrils that had clutched him were whisking his helpless body where another gaping mouth was open—

And then, in the blazing light that was more brilliant than any light of day in this world, the hold about McGuire relaxed. He saw, as he fell, the thick, green lips snap shut; and the arms that had held him pulled back into harmless, tight-wound coils.

Their bodies crashed to earth where a great fern bent beneath them to cushion their fall. And the men lay

silent and gasping for great choking breaths, while from the building beyond came the cackle and shrieking of man-things in manifest enjoyment of the frustrated plans.

It was the laughter that determined McGuire.

“Damn the plants!” he said between hoarse breaths. “Man-eating plants—but they’re—better—than—those devils! And there’s only—one line of them: I saw them here before. Shall we go on?—make a break for it?”

Sykes rolled to the shelter of an arching frond and, without a word, went crawling away. McGuire was behind him, and the two, as they came to open ground, sprang to their feet and ran on through the weird orchard where tree trunks made dim, twisting lines. They ran blindly and helplessly toward the outer dark that promised temporary shelter.

A hopeless attempt: both men, knew the futility of it, while they stumbled onward through the dark. Behind them the night was hideous with noise as the great palace gave forth an eruption of shrieking, inhuman

forms that scattered with whistling and wailing calls in all directions.

A mile or more of groping, hopeless flight, till a yellow gleam shone among the trees to guide them. A building, beyond a clearing, gave a bright illumination to the black night.

“We’ve run in a circle,” choked McGuire, his voice weak and uncertain with exhaustion. “Like a couple of fools!—”

He waited until the heavy breathing that shook his body might be controlled, then corrected himself. “No—this is another—a new one—see the towers! And listen—it’s a radio station!”

The slender frameworks that towered high in air glowed like flame—a warning to the ships whose lights showed now and then far overhead. And, clear and distinct, there came to the listening men the steady, crackling hiss of an uninterrupted signal.

Against the lighted building moving figures showed

momentarily, and McGuire pulled his friend into the safe concealment of a tangle of growth, while the group of yelling things sped past.

“Come on,” he told Sykes; “we can’t get away—not a chance! Let’s have a look at this place, and perhaps—well, I have an idea!” He slipped silently, cautiously on, where a forest of jungle ferns gave promise of safe passage.

Some warning had been sounded; the occupants of the building were scattered to aid in the man-hunt. Only one was left in the room where two Earth-men peeped in at the door.

The figure was seated upon an insulated platform, and his long hands manipulated keys and levers on a table before him. McGuire and Sykes stared amazedly at this broadcasting station whose air was filled with a pandemonium of crashing sound from some distant room, but McGuire was concerned mainly with the motion of a lean, blood-red hand that swung an object like a pointer in free-running sweeps above a dial on the table. And he detected a variation in the din from

beyond as the pointer moved swiftly.

Here was the control board for those messages he had heard; this was the instrument that varied the sending mechanism to produce the wailing wireless cries that made words in some far-distant ears.

McGuire, as he slipped into the room and crept within leaping distance of the grotesque thing so like yet unlike a man, was as silent as the nameless, writhing horror that had seized them in the dark. He sprang, and the two came crashing to the floor.

Lean arms came quickly about him to clutch and tear at his face, but the flyer had an arm free, and one blow ended the battle. The man of Venus relaxed to a huddle of purple and yellow cloth from which a ghastly face protruded. McGuire leaped to his feet and sprang to the place where the other had been.

“Hold them off as long as you can!” he shouted to Sykes, and his hand closed upon the pointer.

Did this station send where he was hoping? Was this the station that had communicated with the ship that

had hovered above their flying field in that far-off land? He did not know, but it was a powerful station, and there was a chance—

He moved the pointer frantically here and there, swung it to one side and another; then found at last a point on the outside of the strange design beneath his hand where the pointer could rest while the crashing crackle of sound was stilled.

And now he swung the pointer—upon the plate—anywhere!—and the noise from beyond told instantly of the current's passage. He held it an instant, then pushed it back to the silent spot—a dash! A quick return that flashed back again to bring silence—a dot! More dashes and dots ... and McGuire thanked a kindly heaven that had permitted him to learn the language of the air, while he cursed his slowness in sending.

Would it reach? Would there be anyone to hear? No certainty; he could only flash the wild Morse symbols out into the night. He must try to get word to them—warn them! And “Blake,” he called, and spelled out

the name of their field, “warning—Venus—”

“Hold them!” he yelled to Sykes at the sound of rushing feet. “Keep them off as long as you can!”

“... Prepare—for invasion. Blake, this is McGuire....” Over and over, he worked the swinging pointer into symbols that might in some way, by some fortunate chance, help that helpless people to resist the horror that lay ahead.

And while heavy bodies crashed against the door that Sykes was holding, there came from some deep-hidden well of memory an inspiration. There was a man he had once met—a man who had confided wondrous things; and now, with the knowledge of these others who had conquered space, he could believe wholly what he had laughed and joked about before. That man, too, had claimed to have travelled far from the earth; he had invented a machine; his name—

The pointer was swinging in frenzied haste to spell over and over the name of a man, and the name, too,

of a forgotten place in the mountains of Nevada. It was repeating the message; then finished in one long crashing wail as a cloud of vapor shot about McGuire and his hand upon the pointer went suddenly limp.

Chapter 11

Captain Blake's game of solitaire had become an obsession. He drove himself to the utmost in the line of duty, and, through the day, the demands of the flying field filled his mind to forgetfulness. And for the rest, he forced his mind to concentrate upon the turn of the cards. He could not read—and he must not think!—so he sat through long evenings trying vainly to forget.

He looked up with an expressionless face as Colonel Boynton entered the room. The colonel saw the cards and nodded.

“Does that help?” he asked, and added without waiting for an answer, “I don't like cards, but I find my mathematics works well.... My old problems—I can concentrate on them, and stop this eternal, damnable thinking, thinking—”

There was something of the same look forming about the eyes of both—that look that told of men who struggled gamely under the sentence of death,

refusing to think or to fear, and waiting, waiting, impotently. Blake looked at the colonel with a carefully emotionless gaze. "It's hell in the big towns, I hear."

The Colonel nodded. "Can't blame them much, if that's what appeals to them. A year and a half!—and they've got to forget it. Why not crowd all the recklessness and excesses they can into the time that is left?—poor devils! But for the most part the world is wagging along, and people are going through the familiar motions."

"Well," said Blake, "I used to wonder at times how a man might feel if he were facing execution. Now we all know. Just going dumbly along, feeling as little as we can, thinking of anything, everything—except the one thing. They've turned to using dope, a lot of them, I hear. Maybe it helps; nobody cares much. Only a year and a half."

He raised his face from which all expression was consciously erased. "Any possible hope?" he asked. "Or do we take it when it comes and fight with what

we've got as long as we can? There was some talk in the papers of an invention—Bureau of Standards cooperating with the big General Committee to investigate. Anything come of it?"

"A thousand of them," said the colonel, "all futile. No, we can't expect much from those things. Though there's a whisper that came to me from Washington. General Clinton—you may remember him; he was here when the thing first broke—says that some scientist, a real one, not another of these half-baked geniuses, has worked out a transformation of some kind. It was too deep for me, but it is based upon changing hydrogen into helium, I think. Liberates some perfectly tremendous amount of power. The general had it all down pat—"

He stopped speaking at the change in Captain Blake's face. The careful repression of all emotions was gone; the face was suddenly alive—

"I know," he said sharply; "I remember something of the theory. There is a difference in the atoms or their protons—the liberation of an electron from each atom

—matter actually transformed into energy; theoretical, what I have read. But—but—Oh my God, Boynton, do you mean that they’ve got it?—that it will drive us through space?”

The colonel drove one fist into the palm of his other hand. “Fool! Idiot!” he exclaimed, and it was evident that the epithets were intended for himself.

“I had forgotten that you had been trained along that line. The general wants a man to work with them, somewhat as a liason officer to link the army requirements closely with their developments; we are hoping to work out a space ship, of course. You are just the man; I will radio him this minute. Be ready to leave—” The slamming of the door marked a hurried exit toward the radio room.

And abruptly, stifflingly, Captain Blake dared to hope. “Scientists will come through with something, some new method of propulsion. All the world is looking to them!” His thoughts were leaping from one possibility to another. “Some miracle of power that will drive a fleet through space as they have done, to battle with

the enemy on his own ground—”

Could he help? Was there one little thing that he could do to apply their knowledge to practical ends? The thought thrilled him with overpowering emotion an hour later as he felt the lift of the plane beneath him.

“Report to General Clinton,” the colonel’s reply had said. “Captain Blake will be assigned to special duty.” He opened the throttle to his ship’s best cruising speed, but his spirit was soaring ahead to urge on the swift scout ship whose wings drove steadily into the gathering dusk.

And then, after long hours, Washington! Brief words with many men—and discouragement! The seat of government of the United States was a city of despondent men, weary, hopeless, but fighting. There was a look of strain on every face; the eyes told a story of sleepless nights and futile thinking and planning. Blake’s elation was short lived.

He was sent to New York and on into the state, where

the laboratories of a great electrical company had turned their equipment from commercial purposes to those of war. Here, surely, one might find fuel to feed the dying embers of hope; the new development must give greater promise than General Clinton had intimated.

“Nothing you can do as yet,” he was told, when he had stated his mission. “It is still experimental, but we have worked out the transformation on a small scale, and harnessed the power.”

Captain Blake was in no mood for temporizing; he was tired with being put off. He stared belligerently at the chief of this department.

“Power—hell!” he said. “We’ve got power now. How will you apply it? How will we use it for travelling through space?”

The great man of science was unmoved by the outburst. “That is poppycock,” he replied; “the unscientific twaddle of the sensational press. We are practical men here; we are working to give you men

who do the fighting better ships and better arms. But you will use them right here on Earth.”

The calm assurance of this man who spoke with a voice of such confidence and authority left the flyer speechless. His brain sent a chaos of profane and violent expletives to the lips that dared not frame them. There was no adequate reply.

Blake jammed his hat upon his head and walked blindly from the room. Heedless of the protests of those he jostled on the street he went raging on, but some subconscious urge directed his steps. He found himself at the railway. There was a station, and a grilled window where he was asking for a ticket back to Washington. And on the following day—

“There is nothing I can do,” he told General Clinton.
“It is hopeless. I ask to be relieved.”

“Why?” The general snapped the question at him. What kind of man was this that Boynton had sent him?

“They are fools,” said Blake bluntly, “pompous, well-meaning fools! They are planning better motors, more power”—he laughed harshly—“and they think that with them we can attack ships that are independent of the air.”

“Still,” asked General Clinton coldly, “for what purpose do you wish to be relieved? What do you intend to do?”

“Return to the field,” said Captain Blake, “to work, and put my planes and personnel in the best possible condition; then, when the time comes, go up and fight like hell.”

An unusual phrasing of a request when one is addressing one’s commander; but the older man threw back his shoulders, that were bending under responsibilities too great for one man to bear, and took a long breath that relaxed his face and seemed to bring relief.

“You’ve got the right idea,”—he spoke slowly and thoughtfully—“the right philosophy. It is all we have

left—to fight like hell when the time comes. Give my regards to Colonel Boynton; he sent me a good man after all.”

Another long flight, westward this time, and, despite the failure of his hopes and of his errand, Blake was flying with a mind at peace. “It is all we have left,” the general had said. Well, it was good to face facts, to admit them—and that was that! There was no use of thinking or worrying.... He lifted the ship to a higher level and glanced at his compass. There were clouds up ahead, and he drove still higher into the night, until he was above them.

And again his peace of mind was not to last.

It was night when he swung the ship over his home port and signalled for a landing. A flood of light swept out across the field to guide him down. He went directly to the colonel’s quarters but found him gone.

“In the radio room, I think,” an orderly told him.

Colonel Boynton was listening intently in the silent

room; he scowled with annoyance at the disturbance of Blake's coming; then, seeing who it was, he motioned quickly for the captain to listen in.

"Good Lord, Blake," he told the captain in an excited whisper; "I'm glad you're here. Another ship had been sighted; she's been all over the earth; just scouting and mapping, probably. And there have been signals the same as before—the same until just now. Listen!—it's talking Morse!—it's been calling for you!"

He thrust a head set into Blake's hands, then reached for some papers. "Poor reception, but there's what we've got," he said.

The paper held the merest fragments of messages that the operator had deciphered. Blake examined them curiously while he listened at the silent receiver.

"Maricopa"—the message, whatever it was, was meant for them, but there were only parts of words and disjointed phrases that the man had written down—"Venus attacking Earth ... Captain Blake ... Sykes and...."

At the name of Sykes, Blake dropped the paper.

“What does this mean?” he demanded. “Sykes!—why Sykes was the astronomer who was captured with McGuire!”

“Listen! Listen!” The colonel’s voice was almost shrill with excitement.

The night was whispering faintly the merest echo of a signal from a station far away, but it resolved itself into broken fragments of sound that were long and short in duration, and the fragments joined to form letters in the Morse code.

“See Winslow,” it told them, and repeated the message: “See Winslow at Sierra....” Some distant storm crashed and rattled for breathless minutes. “Blake see Winslow. This is McGuire, Blake. Winslow can help—”

The message ended abruptly. One long, wailing note; then again the night was voiceless ... and in the radio room at Maricopa Flying Field two men stood

speechless, unbreathing, to stare at each other with incredulous eyes, as might men who had seen a phantom—a ghost that spoke to them and called them by name.

“McGuire—is—alive!” stammered Blake. “They’ve taken him—there!”

Colonel Boynton was considering, weighing all the possibilities, and his voice, when he answered, had the ring of conviction.

“That was no hoax,” he agreed; “that quavering tone could never be faked. That message was sent from the same station we heard before. Yes, McGuire is alive—or was up to the end of that sending.... But, who the devil is Winslow?”

Blake shook his head despairingly. “I don’t know,” he said. “And it seems as if I should—”

It was hours later, far into the night, when he sprang from out of a half-conscious doze to find himself in the middle of the floor with the voice of McGuire ringing

clearly in his ears. A buried memory had returned to the level of his conscious mind. He rushed over to the colonel's quarters.

"I've got it," he shouted to that officer whose head was projecting from an upper window. "I remember! McGuire told me about this Winslow—some hermit that he ran across. He has some invention—some machine—said he had been to the moon. I always thought Mac half believed him. We'll go over Mac's things and find the address."

"Do you think—do you suppose—?" began Colonel Boynton doubtfully.

"I don't dare to think," Blake responded. "God only knows if we dare hope; but Mac—Mac's got a level head; he wouldn't send us unless he knew! Good Lord, man!" he exclaimed, "Mac radioed us from Venus; is there anything impossible after that?"

"Wait there," said Colonel Boynton; "I'll be right down —"

Chapter 12

Lieutenant McGuire awoke, as he had on other occasions, to the smell of sickly-sweet fumes and the stifling pressure of a mask held over his nose and mouth. He struggled to free himself, and the mask was removed. Another of the man-creatures whom McGuire had not seen before helped him to sit up.

A group of the attenuated figures, with their blood-and-ashes faces, regarded him curiously. The one who had helped him arise forced the others to stand back, and he gave McGuire a drink of yellow fluid from a crystal goblet. The dazed man gulped it down to feel a following surge of warmth and life that pulsed through his paralyzed body. The figures before him came sharply from the haze that had enveloped them. A window high above admitted a golden light that meant another day, but it brought no cheer or encouragement to the flyer. McGuire felt crushed and hopeless in the knowledge that his life must still go on.

If only that sleep could have continued—carried him

out to the deeper sleep of death! What hope for them here? Not a chance! And then he remembered Sykes; he mustn't desert Sykes. He looked about him to see the same prison room from which he and Sykes had escaped. The body of the scientist was motionless on the hammock-bed across the room; an occasional deep-drawn breath showed that the man still lived.

No, he must not leave Sykes, even if he had the means of death. They would fight it through together, and perhaps—perhaps—they might yet be of service, might find some way to avert the catastrophe that threatened their world. Hopeless? Beyond doubt. But he must hope—and fight!

The leader had watched the light of understanding as it returned to the flyer's eyes. He motioned now to the others, and McGuire was picked up bodily by four of them and carried from the room.

McGuire's mind was alert once more; he was eager to learn what he could of this place that was to be their prison, but he saw little. A glory of blending colors beyond, where the golden light from without shone

through opal walls—then he found himself upon a narrow table where straps of metal were thrown quickly about to bind him fast. He was tied hand and foot to the table that moved forward on smooth rollers to a waiting lift.

What next? he questioned. Not death, for they had been too careful to keep him alive, these repulsive things that stared at him with such cold malevolence. Then what? And McGuire found himself with unpleasant recollections of others he had seen strapped in similar fashion to an operating table.

The lift that he had thought would rise fell smoothly, instead, to stop at some point far below ground where the table with its helpless burden was rolled into a great room.

He could move his head, and McGuire turned and twisted to look at the maze of instruments that filled the room—a super-laboratory for experiments of which he dared not think.

“Whoever says I’m not scared to death is a liar,” he

whispered to himself, but he continued to look and wonder as he was wheeled before a gleaming machine of many coils and shining, metal parts. A smooth sheet of metal stood vertically beyond him; painted a grayish-white, he saw; but he could not imagine its use. A throng of people, seated in the room, turned blood-red faces toward the bound man and the metal sheet.

“Looks as if we were about to put on a show of some kind,” he told himself, “and I am cast for a leading role.” He watched as best he could from his bound position while a tall figure in robes of lustreless black appeared to stand beside him.

The newcomer regarded him with a face that was devoid of all emotion. McGuire felt the lack of the customary expression of hatred; there was not even that; and he knew he was nothing more than a strange animal, bound, and helpless, ready for this weird creature’s experiments. The one in black held a pencil whose tip was a tiny, brilliant light.

Abruptly the room plunged to darkness, where the

only visible thing was this one point of light. Ceaselessly it waved back and forth before his eyes; he followed it in a pattern of strange design; it approached and receded. Again and again the motion was repeated, until McGuire felt himself sinking—sinking—into a passive state of lethargy. His muscles relaxed; his mind was at rest; there seemed nothing in the entire universe of being but the single point of light that drew him on and on ... till something whispered from the far reaches of black space....

It came to him, an insistent call. It was asking about the earth—his own world. *What of Earth's armies and their means of defense?* Vaguely he sensed the demand, and without conscious volition he responded. He pictured the world he had known; how plainly he saw the wide field at Maricopa, and the sweeping flight of a squadron of planes! *Yes—yes! How high could they ascend?* From one of the planes he saw the world below; the ships were near their ceiling; this was the limit of their climb. *And did they fight with gas? What of their deadliness?* And again he was seated in a plane, and he was firing tiny bullets from a

tiny gun. No. They did not use gas. *But on the ground below—what fortifications? What means of defense?*

McGuire's mind was no longer his own; he could only respond to that invisible questioner, that insistent demand from out of the depths where he was floating. And yet there was something within him that protested, that clamored at his mind and brain.

Fortifications! They must know about fortifications—anti-aircraft guns—means for combatting aerial attack. Yes, he knew, and he must explain—and the thing within him pounded in the back of his brain to draw him back to himself.

He saw a battery of anti-aircraft guns in operation; the guns were firing; shells were bursting in little plumes of smoke high in the air. And that self within him was shouting now, hammering at him; "You are seeing it," it told him; "it is there before you on the screen. Stop! Stop!"

And for an instant McGuire had the strange experience of witnessing his own thoughts. Memories,

mental records of past experience, were flashing through his mind; mock battles, and the batteries were firing! And, before him, on the metal screen, there glowed a vivid picture of the same thing. Men were serving the guns with sure swiftness; the bursts were high in the air—in a flash of understanding Lieutenant McGuire knew that he was giving his country's secrets to the enemy. And in that same instant he felt himself swept upward from the depths of that darkness where he had drifted. He was himself again, bound and helpless before an infernal contrivance of these devil-creatures. They had read his thoughts; the machine beside him had projected them upon the screen for all to see; a steady clicking might mean their reproduction in motion pictures for later study! He, Lieutenant McGuire, was a traitor against his will!

The screen was blank, and the lights of the room came on to show the thin lips that smiled complacently in a cruel and evil face.

McGuire glared back into that face, and he tried with all the mental force that he could concentrate to get

across to the exultant one the fact that they had not wholly conquered him. This much they had got—but no more!

The thin-lipped one had an instrument in his hand, and McGuire felt the prick of a needle plunged into his arm. He tried to move his head and found himself powerless. And now, in the darkness of the room where all lights were again extinguished, the helpless man was fighting the most horrible of battles, and the battleground was within his own mind. He was two selves, and he fought and struggled with all his consciousness to keep those memories from flooding him.

With one part of himself he knew what it meant: a sure knowledge given these invaders of what they must prepare to meet; he was betraying his country; the whole of humanity! And that raging, raving self was powerless to check the flow of memory pictures that went endlessly through his mind and out upon the screen beyond....

He had no sense of time; he was limp and exhausted

with his fruitless struggle when he felt himself released from the bondage of the metal straps and placed again in the hammock in his room. And he could only look wanly and hopelessly after the figure of Professor Sykes, carried by barbarous figures to the same ordeal.

Sleep, through the long night, restored both McGuire and his companion to normal strength. The flyer was seated with his head bowed low in his cupped hands. His words seemed wrung from an agony of spirit. "So that's what they brought us here for," he said harshly; "that's why they're keeping us alive!"

Professor Sykes walked back and forth in their bare room while he shook his impotent fists in the air.

"I told them everything," he exploded; "everything!" Their astronomical knowledge must be limited; under this blanket of clouds they can see nothing, and from their ships they could make approximations only.

"And I have told them—the earth, and its days and seasons—its orbital velocity and motion—its relation

to the orbit of this accursed planet. They had documents from the observatory and I explained them; I corrected their time of firing their big gun on its equatorial position. Oh, there is little I left untold—damn them!”

“I wish to heaven,” said the flyer savagely, “that we had known; we would have jumped out of their beastly ship somehow ten thousand feet up, and we would have taken our information with us.”

Sykes nodded agreement. “Well,” he asked, “how about to-morrow, and the next day, and the next? They will want more facts; they will pump the last drop of information from us. Are we going to allow it?”

McGuire’s tone was dry. “You know the answer to that as well as I do. We have just two alternatives; either we get out of here—find some place to hide in, then find some way to put a crimp in their plans; or we get out of here for good. It’s twenty feet, not twenty thousand, from that window to the ground, but I think a head-first dive would do it.”

Sykes did not reply at once; he seemed to be weighing some problem in his mind.

“I would prefer the water,” he said at last. “If we *can* get away and reach the shore, and if there is not a possibility of escape—which I must admit I consider highly improbable—well, we can always swim out as far as we can go, and the result will be certain.

“This other is so messy.” The man had stopped his ceaseless pacing, and he even managed a cheerful smile at the lieutenant. “And, remember, it might only cripple us and leave us helpless in their hands.”

“Sounds all right to me,” McGuire agreed, and there was a tone of finality in his voice as he added:

“They’ve made us do that traitor act for the last time, anyway.”

Daylight comes slowly through cloud-filled skies; the window of the room where the fountain sprayed ceaselessly was showing the first hint of gold in the eastern sky. Above was the utter darkness of the cloud-wrapped night as the two men swung

noiselessly out into the grotesque branches of a tree to make their way into the gloom below. There, under the cover of great leaves, they crouched in silence, while the darkness about them faded and a sound of subdued whistling noises came to them from the night.

A wheel creaked, and in the dim light two figures appeared tugging at a cart upon which was a cage of woven wire. Beyond them, against the darker background of denser growth, tentacles coiled and twisted above the row of guardian plants that surrounded the house.

One of the ghostly forms reached within the cage and brought forth a struggling object that whimpered in fear. The low whine came distinctly to the hidden men. They saw a vague black thing tossed through the air and toward the deadly plants; they heard the swishing of pliant tentacles and the yelping cry of a frightened animal. And the cry rose to a shriek that ended with the gulping splash of thick liquid.

The giant pod next in line was open—they could see it

dimly—and its tentacles were writhing convulsively, hungrily, across the ground. Another animal was taken from the cage and thrown to the waiting, serpent forms that closed about and whirled it high in air. Another—and another! The yelps of terror grew faint in the distance as the monsters passed on in their gruesome work. And the two men, palpitant with memories of their own experience, were limp and sick with horror.

In the growing light they saw more plainly the fleshy, pliant arms that whipped through the air or felt searchingly along the ground. No hope there for bird or beast that passed by in the night; nor for men, as they knew too well. But now, as the golden light increased, the arms drew back to form again the tight-wound coils that flattened themselves beside the monstrous pods whose lips were closing. Locked within them were the pools of liquid that could dissolve a living body into food for these vampires of the vegetable world.

“Damnable!” breathed Sykes in a savage whisper.
“Utterly damnable! And this world is peopled with

such monsters!”

The last deadly arm was tightly coiled when the men stole off through the lush growth that reached even above their heads. McGuire remembered the outlines he had seen from the air and led the way where, if no better concealment could be found, the ocean waited with promise of rest and release from their inhuman captors.

They counted on an hour's start—it would be that long before their jailer would come with their morning meal and give the alarm—and now they went swiftly and silently through the stillness of a strange world. The air that flicked misty-wet across their faces was heavy and heady with the perfume of night-blooming plants. Crimson blossoms flung wide their odorous petals, and the first golden light was filtered through tremendous tree-growths of pale lavenders and grays to show as unreal colors in the vegetation close about them.

They found no guards; the isolation of this island made the land itself their prison, and the men ran at

full speed through every open space, knowing as they ran that there was no refuge for them—only the ocean waiting at the last. But their flight was not unobserved.

A great bird rose screaming from a tangle of vines; its heavy, flapping wings flashed red against the pale trees. A pandemonium of shrieking cries echoed its alarm as other birds took flight; the forest about them was in an uproar of harsh cries. And faintly, from far in the rear, came a babel of shrill calls—weird, inhuman!—the voices of the men-things of Venus.

“It’s all off,” said McGuire sharply; “they’ll be on our trail now!” He plunged through where the trees were more open, and Sykes was beside him as they ran with a burst of speed toward a hilltop beyond.

They paused, panting, upon the crest. A wide expanse of foliage in delicate shadings swept out before them to wave gently in a sea of color under the morning breeze, and beyond was another sea that beckoned with white breakers on a rocky shore.

“The ocean!” gasped Sykes, and pointed a trembling hand toward their goal. “But—I had no idea—that suicide—was—such hard work!”

The tall figure of Lieutenant McGuire turned to the shorter, breathless man, and he gripped hard at one of his hands.

“Sykes,” he said, “I’ll never get another chance to say it—but you’re one good scout!... Come on!”

McGuire fought to force his way through jungle growth, while screaming birds marked where they went. The sounds of their pursuers were close behind them when the two tore their way through the last snarled tangle of pale vine to stand on a sheer bluff, where, below, deep waters crashed against a rocky wall. They staggered with weariness and gulped sobbingly of the morning air. McGuire could have sworn he was exhausted beyond any further effort, yet from somewhere he summoned energy to spring savagely upon a tall, blood-red figure whose purpling

face rose suddenly to confront them.

One hand closed upon the metal tube that the other hand raised, and, with his final reserve of strength, the flyer wrapped an arm about the tall body and rushed it stumblingly toward the cliff. To be balked now!—to be brought back to that intolerable prison and the unthinkable role of traitor! The khaki-clad figure wrenched furiously at the deadly tube as they struggled and swayed on the edge of the cliff.

He freed his arm quickly, and, regardless of the clawing thing that tore at his face and eyes, he launched one long swing for the horrible face above him. He saw the awkward fall of a lean body, and he swayed helplessly out to follow when the grip of Sykes' hand pulled him back and up to momentary safety.

McGuire's mind held only the desire to kill, and he would have begun a staggering rush toward the shrieking mob that broke from the cover behind them, had not Sykes held him fast. At sight of the weapon, their own gas projector, still clutched in the flyer's

hand, the pursuers halted. Their long arms pointed and their shrill calls joined in a chorus that quavered and fell uncertainly.

One, braver than the rest, dashed forward and discharged his weapon. The spurting gas failed to reach its intended victims; it blew gently back toward the others who fled quickly to either side. Above the trees a giant ship nosed swiftly down, and McGuire pointed to it grimly and in silence. The men before them were massed now for a rush.

“This is the end,” said the flyer softly. “I wonder how this devilish thing works; there’s a trigger here. I will give them a shot with the wind helping, then we’ll jump for it.”

The ship was above them as the slim figure of Lieutenant McGuire threw itself a score of paces toward the waiting group. From the metal tube there shot a stream of pale vapor that swept downward upon the others who ran in panic from its touch.

Then back—and a grip of a hand!—and two Earth-men

who threw themselves out and downward from a sheer rock wall to the cool embrace of deep water.

They came to the top, battered from their fall, but able to dive under a wave and emerge again near one another.

“Swim!” urged Sykes. “Swim out! They may get us here—recover our bodies—resuscitate us. And that wouldn’t do!”

Another wave, and the two men were swimming beyond it; swimming feebly but steadily out from shore, while above them a great cylinder of shining metal swept past in a circling flight. They kept on while their eyes, from the wave tops, saw it turn and come slowly back in a long smooth descent.

It was a hundred feet above the water a short way out at sea, and the two men made feeble motions with arms and legs, while their eyes exchanged glances of dismay.

A door had opened in the round under-surface, and a

figure, whose gas-suit made it a bloated caricature of a man, was lowered from beneath in a sling. From the stern of the ship gaseous vapor belched downward to spread upon the surface of the water. The wind was bringing the misty cloud toward them. “The gas!” said McGuire despairingly. “It will knock us out, and then that devil will get us! They’ll take us back! Our last chance—gone!”

“God help us!” said Sykes weakly. “We can’t—even—die—” His feeble strokes stopped, and he sank beneath the water. McGuire’s last picture as he too sank and the waters closed over his head, was the shining ship hovering beyond.

He wondered only vaguely at the sudden whirling of water around him. A solid something was rising beneath his dragging feet; a firm, solid support that raised him again to the surface. He realized dimly the air about him, the sodden form of Professor Sykes some few feet distant. His numbed brain was trying to comprehend what else the eyes beheld.

A metal surface beneath them rose higher, shining

wet, above the water; a metal tube raised suddenly from its shield, to swing in quick aim upon the enemy ship approaching from above.

His eyes moved to the ship, and to the man-thing below in the sling. Its clothes were a mass of flame, and the figure itself was falling headlong through the air. Above the blazing body was the metal of the ship itself, and it sagged and melted to a liquid fire that poured, splashing and hissing, to the waters beneath. In the wild panic the great shape threw itself into the air; it swept out and up in curving flight to plunge headlong into the depths....

The gas was drifting close, as McGuire saw an opening in the structure beside him. The voice of a man, human, kindly, befriending, said something of "hurry" and "gas," and "lift them carefully but make haste." The white faces of men were blurred and indistinct as McGuire felt himself lowered into a cool room and laid, with the unconscious form of Sykes, upon a floor.

He tried to remember. He had gone down in the water

—Sykes had drowned, and he himself—he was tired—tired. “And this,”—the thought seemed a certainty in his mind—“this is death. How—very—peculiar—” He was trying to twist his lips to a weak laugh as the lighted ports in the wall beside him changed from gold to green, then black—and a rushing of torn waters was in his ears....

Chapter 13

Lieutenant McGuire had tried to die. He and Professor Sykes had welcomed death with open arms, and death had been thwarted by their enemies who wanted them alive—wanted to draw their knowledge from them as a vampire bat might seek to feast. And, when even death was denied them, help had come.

The enemy ship had gone crashing to destruction where its melting metal made hissing clouds of steam as it buried itself in the ocean. And this craft that had saved them—Lieutenant McGuire had never been on a submarine, but he knew it could be only that that held him now and carried him somewhere at tremendous speed.

This was miracle enough! But to see, with eyes which could not be deceiving him, a vision of men, human, white of face—men like himself—bending and working over Sykes' unconscious body—that could not be immediately grasped.

Their faces, unlike the bleached-blood horrors he had

seen, were aglow with the flush of health. They were tall, slenderly built, graceful in their quick motions as they worked to revive the unconscious man. One stopped, as he passed, to lay a cool hand on McGuire's forehead, and the eyes that looked down seemed filled with the blessed quality of kindness.

They were human—his own kind!—and McGuire was unable to take in at first the full wonder of it.

Did the tall man speak? His lips did not move, yet McGuire heard the words as in some inner ear.

“We were awaiting you, friend Mack Guire.” The voice was musical, thrilling, and yet the listening man could not have sworn that he heard a voice at all. It was as if a thought were placed within his mind by the one beside him.

The one who had paused hurried on to aid the others, and McGuire let his gaze wander.

The porthole beside him showed dimly a pale green light; they were submerged, and the hissing rush of

water told him that they were travelling fast. There was a door in the farther wall; beyond was a room of gleaming lights that reflected from myriads of shining levers and dials. A control room. A figure moved as McGuire watched, to press on a lever where a red light was steadily increasing in brightness. He consulted strange instruments before him, touched a metal button here and there, then opened a switch, and the rippling hiss of waters outside their craft softened to a gentler note.

The tall one was beside him again.

“Your friend will live,” he told him in that wordless tongue, “and we are almost arrived. The invisible arms of our anchorage have us now and will draw us safely to rest.”

The kindly tone was music in McGuire’s ears, and he smiled in reply. “Friends!” he thought. “We are among friends.”

“You are most welcome,” the other assured him, “and, yes, you are truly among friends.” But the lieutenant

glanced upward in wonder, for he knew that he had uttered no spoken word.

Their ship turned and changed its course beneath them, then came finally to rest with a slight rocking motion as if cushioned on powerful springs. Sykes was being assisted to his feet as the tall man reached for McGuire's hand and helped him to rise.

The two men of Earth stood for a long minute while they stared unbelievably into each other's eyes. Their wonder and amazement found no words for expression but must have been apparent to the one beside them.

"You will understand," he told them. "Do not question this reality even to yourselves. You are safe!... Come." And he led the way through an opening doorway to a wet deck outside. Beyond this was a wharf of carved stone, and the men followed where steps were inset to allow them to ascend.

Again McGuire could not know if he heard a tumult of sound or sensed it in some deeper way. The air about

them was aglow with soft light, and it echoed in his ears with music unmistakably real—beautiful music!—exhilarating! But the clamor of welcoming voices, like the words from their tall companion, came soundlessly to him.

There were people, throngs of them, waiting. Tall like the others, garbed, like those horrible beings of a past that seemed distant and remote, in loose garments of radiant colors. And everywhere were welcoming smiles and warm and friendly glances.

McGuire let his dazed eyes roam around to find the sculptured walls of a huge room like a tremendous cave. The soft glow of light was everywhere, and it brought out the beauty of flowing lines and delicate colors in statuary and bas-relief that adorned the walls. Behind him the water made a dark pool, and from it projected the upper works of their strange craft.

His eyes were hungry for these new sights, but he turned with Sykes to follow their guide through the colorful crowd that parted to let them through. They

passed under a carved archway and found themselves in another and greater room.

But was it a room? McGuire marveled at its tremendous size. His eyes took in the smooth green of a grassy lawn, the flowers and plants, and then they followed where the hand of Sykes was pointing. The astronomer gripped McGuire's arm in a numbing clutch; his other hand was raised above.

"The stars," he said. "The clouds are gone; it is night!"

And where he pointed was a vault of black velvet. Deep hues of blue seemed blended with it, and far in its depths were the old familiar star-groups of the skies. "Ah!" the scientist breathed, "the beautiful, friendly stars!"

Their guide waited; then, "Come," he urged gently, and led them toward a lake whose unruffled glassy surface mirrored the stars above. Beside it a man was waiting to receive them.

McGuire had to force his eyes away from the unreal beauty of opal walls like the fairy structures they had seen. There was color everywhere that blended and fused to make glorious harmony that was pure joy to the eyes.

The man who waited was young. He stood erect, his face like that of a Grecian statue, and his robe was blazing with the flash of jewels. Beside him was a girl, tall and slender, and sweetly serious of face. Like the man, her garments were lovely with jeweled iridescence, and now McGuire saw that the throng within the vast space was similarly apparelled.

The tall man raised his hand.

“Welcome!” he said, and McGuire realized with a start that the words were spoken aloud. “You are most welcome, my friends, among the people of that world you call Venus.”

Professor Sykes was still weak from his ordeal; he wavered perceptibly where he stood, and the man before them turned to give an order. There were

chairs that came like magic; bright robes covered them; and the men were seated while the man and girl also took seats beside them as those who prepare for an intimate talk with friends.

Lieutenant McGuire found his voice at last. "Who are you?" he asked in wondering tones. "What does it mean? We were lost—and you saved us. But you—you are not like the others." And he repeated, "What does it mean?"

"No," said the other with a slight smile, "we truly are not like those others. They are not men such as you and I. They are something less than human: animals—vermin!—from whom God, in His wisdom, has seen fit to withhold the virtues that raise men higher than the beasts."

His face hardened as he spoke and for a moment the eyes were stern, but he smiled again as he continued.

"And we," he said, "you ask who we are. We are the people of Venus. I am Djorn, ruler, in name, of all. 'In name' I say, for we rule here by common reason; I am

only selected to serve. And this is my sister, Althora. The name, with us, means 'radiant light.'" He turned to exchange smiles with the girl at his side. "We think her well named," he said.

"The others,"—he waved toward the throng that clustered about—"you will learn to know in time."

Professor Sykes felt the need of introductions.

"This is Lieutenant—" he began, but the other interrupted with an upraised hand.

"Mack Guire," he supplied; "and you are Professor Sykes.... Oh, we know you!" he laughed; "we have been watching you since your arrival; we have been waiting to help you."

The professor was open-mouthed.

"Your thoughts," explained the other, "are as a printed page. We have been with you by mental contact at all times. We could hear, but, at that distance, and—pardon me!—with your limited

receptivity, we could not communicate.

“Do not resent our intrusion,” he added; “we listened only for our own good, and we shall show you how to insulate your thoughts. We do not pry.”

Lieutenant McGuire waved all that aside. “You saved us from them,” he said; “that’s the answer. But—what does it mean? Those others are in control; they are attacking our Earth, the world where we lived. Why do you permit—?”

Again the other’s face was set in sterner lines.

“Yes,” he said, and his voice was full of unspoken regret, “they do rule this world; they *have* attacked your Earth; they intend much more, and I fear they must be successful. Listen. Your wonderment is natural, and I shall explain.

“We are the people of Venus. Some centuries ago we ruled this world. Now you find us a handful only, living like moles in this underworld.”

“Underworld?” protested Professor Sykes. He pointed above to the familiar constellations. “Where are the clouds?” he asked.

The girl, Althora, leaned forward now. “It will please my brother,” she said in a soft voice, “that you thought it real. He has had pleasure in creating that—a replica of the skies we used to know before the coming of the clouds.”

Professor Sykes was bewildered. “That sky—the stars—they are not real?” he asked incredulously. “But the grass—the flowers—”

Her laugh rippled like music. “Oh, they are real,” she told him, and her brother gave added explanation.

“The lights,” he said: “we supply the actinic rays that the clouds cut off above. We have sunlight here, made by our own hands; that is why we are as we are and not like the red ones with their bleached skins. We had our lights everywhere through the world when we lived above, but those red beasts are ignorant; they do not know how to operate them; they do not

know that they live in darkness even in the light.”

“Then we are below ground?” asked the flyer. “You live here?”

“It is all we have now. At that time of which I tell, it was the red ones who lived out of sight; they were a race of rodents in human form. They lived in the subterranean caves with which this planet is pierced. We could have exterminated them at any time, but, in our ignorance, we permitted them to live, for we, of Venus—I use your name for the planet—do not willingly take life.”

“They have no such compunctions!” Professor Sykes’ voice was harsh; he was remembering the sacrifice to the hungry plants.

A flash as of pain crossed the sensitive features of the girl, and the man beside her seemed speaking to her in soundless words.

“Your mind-picture was not pleasant,” he told the scientist; then continued:

“Remember, we were upon the world, and these others were within it. There came a comet. Oh, our astronomers plotted its course; they told us we were safe. But at the last some unknown influence diverted it; its gaseous projection swept our world with flame. Only an instant; but when it had passed there was left only death....”

He was lost in recollection for a time; the girl beside him reached over to touch his hand.

“Those within—the red ones—escaped,” he went on. “They poured forth when they found that catastrophe had overwhelmed us. And we, the handful that were left, were forced to take shelter here. We have lived here since, waiting for the day when the Master of Destinies shall give us freedom and a world in which to live.”

“You speak,” suggested the scientist, “as if this had happened to you. Surely you refer to your ancestors; you are the descendants of those who were saved.”

“We are the people,” said the other. “We lived then;

we live now; we shall live for a future of endless years.

“Have you not searched for the means to control the life principle—you people of Earth?” he asked. “We have it here. You see”—and he waved a hand toward the standing throng—“we are young to your eyes and the others who greeted you were the same.”

McGuire and the scientist exchanged glances of corroboration.

“But your age,” asked Sykes, “measured in years?”

“We hardly measure life in years.”

Professor Sykes nodded slowly; his mind found difficulty in accepting so astounding a fact. “But our language?” he queried. “How is it that you can speak our tongue?”

The tall man smiled and leaned forward to place a hand on a knee of each of the men beside him. “Why not,” he asked, “when there doubtless is relationship

between us.

“You called the continent Atlantis. Perhaps its very existence is but a fable now: it has been many centuries since we have had instruments to record thought force from Earth, and we have lost touch. But, my friends, even then we of Venus had conquered space, and it was we who visited Atlantis to find a race more nearly like ourselves than were the barbarians who held the other parts of Earth.

“I was there, but I returned. There were some who stayed and they were lost with the others in the terrible cataclysm that sank a whole continent beneath the waters. But some, we have believed, escaped.”

“Why have you not been back?” the flyer asked. “You could have helped us so much.”

“It was then that our own destruction came upon us. The same comet, perhaps, may have caused a change of stresses in your Earth and sunk the lost Atlantis. Ah! That was a beautiful land, but we have never seen

it since. We have been—here.

“But you will understand, now,” he added, “that, with our insight into your minds, we have little difficulty in mastering your language.”

This talk of science and incredible history left Lieutenant McGuire cold. His mind could not wander long from its greatest concern.

“But the earth!” he exclaimed. “What about the earth? This attack! Those devils mean real mischief!”

“More than you know; more than you can realize, friend Mack Guire!”

“Why?” demanded the flyer. “Why?”

“Have your countries not reached out for other countries when land was needed?” asked the man, Djorn. “Land—land! Space in which to breed—that is the reason for the invasion.

“This world has no such continents as yours. Here the

globe is covered by the oceans; we have perhaps one hundredth of the land areas of your Earth And the red ones breed like flies. Life means nothing to them; they die like flies, too. But they need more room; they intend to find it on your world."

"A strange race," mused Professor Sykes. "They puzzled me. But—'less than human,' I think you said. Then how about their ships? How could they invent them?"

"Ours—all ours! They found a world ready and waiting for them. Through the centuries they have learned to master some few of our inventions. The ships!—the ethereal vibrations! Oh, they have been cleverer than we dreamed possible."

"Well, how can we stop them?" demanded McGuire. "We must. You have the submarines—"

"One only," the other interrupted. "We saved that, and we brought some machinery. We have made this place habitable; we have not been idle. But there are limitations."

“But your ray that you projected—it brought down their ship!”

“We were protecting you, and we protect ourselves; that is enough. There is One will deliver us in His own good time; we may not go forth and slaughter.”

There was a note of resignation and patience in the voice that filled McGuire with hopeless forebodings. Plainly this was not an aggressive race. They had evolved beyond the stage of wanton slaughter, and, even now, they waited patiently for the day when some greater force should come to their aid.

The man beside them spoke quickly. “One moment—you will pardon me—someone is calling—” He listened intently to some soundless call, and he sent a silent message in reply.

“I have instructed them,” he said. “Come and you shall see how impregnable is our position. The red ones have resented our destruction of their ship.”

The face of the girl, Althora, was perturbed. “More

killings?" she asked.

"Only as they force themselves to their own death," her brother told her. "Be not disturbed."

The throng in the vast space drew apart as the figure of their leader strode quickly through with the two men following close. There were many rooms and passages; the men had glimpses of living quarters, of places where machinery made soft whirring sounds; more sights than their eyes could see or their minds comprehend. They came at last to an open chamber.

The men looked up to see above them a tremendous inverted-cone, and there was the gold of cloudland glowing through an opening at the top. It was the inside of a volcano where they stood, and McGuire remembered the island and its volcanic peak where the ship had swerved aside. He felt that he knew now where they were.

Above them, a flash of light marked the passage of a ship over the crater's mouth, and he realized that the ships of the reds were not avoiding the island now.

Did it mean an attack? And how could these new friends meet it?

Before them on the level volcanic floor were great machines that came suddenly to life, and their roar rose to a thunder of violence, while, in the center, a cluster of electric sparks like whirling stars formed a cloud of blue fire. It grew, and its hissing, crackling length reached upward to a fine-drawn point that touched the opening above.

“Follow!” commanded their leader and went rapidly before them where a passage wound and twisted to bring them at last to the light of day.

The flame of the golden clouds was above them in the midday sky, and beneath it were scores of ships that swept in formations through the air.

“Attacking?” asked the lieutenant with ill-concealed excitement.

“I fear so. They tried to gas us some centuries ago; it may be they have forgotten what we taught them

then.”

One squadron came downward and swept with inconceivable speed over a portion of the island that stretched below. The men were a short distance up on the mountain’s side, and the scene that lay before them was crystal clear. There were billowing clouds of gas that spread over the land where the ships had passed. Other ships followed; they would blanket the island in gas.

The man beside them gave a sigh of regret. “They have struck the first blow,” he said. He stood silent with half-closed eyes; then: “I have ordered resistance.” And there was genuine sorrow and regret in his eyes as he looked toward the mountain top.

McGuire’s eyes followed the other’s gaze to find nothing at first save the volcanic peak in hard outline upon the background of gold; then only a shimmer as of heat about the lofty cone. The air above him quivered, formed to ripples that spread in great circles where the enemy ships were flashing away.

Swifter than swift aircraft, with a speed that shattered space, they reached out and touched—and the ships, at that touch, fell helplessly down from the heights. They turned awkwardly as they fell or dropped like huge pointed projectiles. And the waters below took them silently and buried in their depths all trace of what an instant sooner had been an argosy of the air.

The ripples ceased, again the air was clear and untroubled, but beneath the golden clouds was no single sign of life.

The flyer's breathless suspense ended in an explosive gasp. "What a washout!" he exclaimed, and again he thought only of this as a weapon to be used for his own ends. "Can we use that on their fleets?" he asked. "Why, man—they will never conquer the earth; they will never even make a start."

The tall figure of Djorn turned and looked at him. "The lust to kill!" he said sadly. "You still have it—though you are fighting for your own, which is some excuse.

“No, this will not destroy their fleets, for their fleets will not come here to be destroyed. It will be many centuries before ever again the aircraft of the reds dare venture near.”

“We will build another one and take it where they are —” The voice of the fighting man was vibrant with sudden hope.

“We were two hundred years building and perfecting this,” the other told him. “Can you wait that long?”

And Lieutenant McGuire, as he followed dejectedly behind the leader, heard nothing of Professor Sykes’ eager questions as to how this miracle was done.

“Can you wait that long?” this man, Djorn, had asked. And the flyer saw plainly the answer that spelled death and destruction to the world.

Chapter 14

The mountains of Nevada are not noted for their safe and easy landing places. But the motor of the plane that Captain Blake was piloting roared smoothly in the cool air while the man's eyes went searching, searching, for something, and he hardly knew what that something might be.

He went over again, as he had done a score of times, the remarks of Lieutenant McGuire. Mac had laughed that day when he told Blake of his experience.

"I was flying that transport," he had said, "and, boy! when one motor began to throw oil I knew I was out of luck. Nothing but rocky peaks and valleys full of trees as thick and as pointed as a porcupine's quills. Flying pretty high to maintain altitude with one motor out, so I just naturally *had* to find a place to set her down. I found it, too, though it seemed too good to be true off in that wilderness.

"A fine level spot, all smooth rock, except for a few clumps of grass, and just bumpy enough to make the

landing interesting. But, say, Captain! I almost cracked up at that, I was so darn busy staring at something else.

“Off in some trees was a dirigible—Sure; go ahead and laugh; I didn’t believe it either, and I was looking at it. But there had been a whale of a storm through there the day before, and it had knocked over some trees that had been screening the thing, and there it was!

“Well, I came to in time to pull up her nose and miss a rock or two, and then I started pronto for that valley of trees and the thing that was buried among them.”

Captain Blake recalled the conversation word for word, though he had treated it jokingly at the time. McGuire had found the ship and a man—a half-crazed nut, so it seemed—living there all alone. And he wasn’t a bit keen about Mac’s learning of the ship. But leave it to Mac to get the facts—or what the old bird claimed were facts.

There was the body of a youngster there, a man of

about Mac's age. He had fallen and been killed the day before, and the old man was half crazy with grief. Mac had dug a grave and helped bury the body, and after that the old fellow's story had come out.

He had been to the moon, he said. And this was a space ship. Wouldn't tell how it operated, and shut up like a clam when Mac asked if he had gone alone. The young chap had gone with him, it seemed, and the man wouldn't talk—just sat and stared out at the yellow mound where the youngster was buried.

Mac had told Blake how he argued with the man to prove up on his claims and make a fortune for himself. But no—fortunes didn't interest him. And there were some this-and-that and be-damned-to-'em people who would never get *this* invention—the dirty, thieving rats!

And Mac, while he laughed, had seemed half to believe it. Said the old cuss was so sincere, and he had nothing to sell. And—there was the ship! It never got there without being flown in, that was a cinch. And there wasn't a propellor on it nor a place for one

—just open ports where a blast came out, or so the inventor said.

Captain Blake swung his ship on another slanting line and continued to comb the country for such marks as McGuire had seen. And one moment he told himself he was a fool to be on any such hunt, while the next thought would remind him that Mac had believed. And Mac had a level head, and he had radioed from Venus!

There was the thing that made anything seem possible. Mac had got a message through, across that space, and the enemy had ships that could do it. Why not this one?

And always his eyes were searching, searching, for a level rocky expanse and a tree-filled valley beyond, with something, it might be, shining there, unless the inventor had camouflaged it more carefully now.

It was later on the same day when Captain Blake's blocky figure climbed over the side of the cockpit. Tired? Yes! But who could think of cramped limbs and

weary muscles when his plane was resting on a broad, level expanse of rock in the high Sierras and a sharp-cut valley showed thick with pines beyond. He could see the corner only of a rough log shack that protruded.

Blake scrambled over a natural rampart of broken stone and went swiftly toward the cabin. But he stopped abruptly at the sound of a harsh voice.

“Stop where you are,” the voice ordered, “and stick up your hands! Then turn around and get back as fast as you can to that plane of yours.” There was a glint of sunlight on a rifle barrel in the window of the cabin.

Captain Blake stopped, but he did not turn. “Are you Mr. Winslow?” he asked.

“That’s nothing to you! Get out! Quick!”

Blake was thinking fast. Here was the man, without doubt—and he was hostile as an Apache; the man behind that harsh voice meant business. How could

he reach him? The inspiration came at once. McGuire was the key.

“If you’re Winslow,” he called in a steady voice, “you don’t want me to go away; you want to talk with me. There’s a young friend of yours in a bad jam. You are the only one who can help.”

“I haven’t any friends,” said the rasping voice: “I don’t want any! Get out!”

“You had one,” said the captain, “whether you wanted him or not. He believed in you—like the other young chap who went with you to the moon.”

There was an audible gasp of dismay from the window beyond, and the barrel of the rifle made trembling flickerings in the sun.

“You mean the flyer?” asked the voice, and it seemed to have lost its harsher note. “The pleasant young fellow?”

“I mean McGuire, who helped give decent burial to

your friend. And now he has been carried off—out into space—and you can help him. If you’ve a spark of decency in you, you will hear what I have to say.”

The rifle vanished within the cabin; a door opened to frame a picture of a tall man. He was stooped; the years, or solitude, perhaps, had borne heavily upon him; his face was a mat of gray beard that was a continuation of the unkempt hair above. The rifle was still in his hand.

But he motioned to the waiting man, and “Come in!” he commanded. “I’ll soon know if you’re telling the truth. God help you if you’re not.... Come in.”

An hour was needed while the bearded man learned the truth. And Blake, too, picked up some facts. He learned to his great surprise that he was talking with an educated man, one who had spent a lifetime in scientific pursuits. And now, as the figure before him seemed more the scientist and less the crazed fabricator of wild fancies, the truth of his claims seemed not so remote.

Half demented now, beyond a doubt! A lifetime of disappointments and one invention after another stolen from him by those who knew more of law than of science. And now he held fortune in the secret of his ship—a secret which he swore should never be given to the world.

“Damn the world!” he snarled. “Did the world ever give anything to me? And what would they do with this? They would prostitute it to their own selfish ends; it would be just one more means to conquer and kill; and the capitalists would have it in their own dirty hands so that new lines of transportation beyond anything they dared dream would be theirs to exploit.”

Blake, remembering the history of a commercial age, found no ready reply to that. But he told the man of McGuire and the things that had made him captive; he related what he, himself, had seen in the dark night on Mount Lawson, and he told of the fragmentary message that showed McGuire was still alive.

“There’s only one way to save him,” he urged. “If your ship is what you claim it is—and I believe you one hundred per cent—it is all that can save him from what will undoubtedly be a horrible death. Those things were monsters—inhuman!—and they have bombarded the earth. They will come back in less than a year and a half to destroy us.”

Captain Blake would have said he was no debater, but the argument and persuasion that he used that night would have done credit to a Socrates. His opponent was difficult to convince, and not till the next day did the inventor show Blake his ship.

“Small,” he said as he led the flyer toward it.

“Designed just for the moon trip, and I had meant to go alone. But it served; it took us there and back again.”

He threw open a door in the side of the metal cylinder. Blake stood back for only a moment to size up the machine, to observe its smooth duralumin shell and the rounded ends where portholes opened for the expelling of its driving blast. The door opening

showed a thick wall that gave insulation. Blake followed the inventor to the interior of the ship.

The man had seen Winslow examining the thick walls. “It’s cold out there, you know,” he said, and smiled in recollection, “but the generator kept us warm.” He pointed to a simple cylindrical casting aft of the ship’s center part. It was massive, and braced to the framework of the ship to distribute a thrust that Blake knew must be tremendous. Heavy conduits took the blast that it produced and poured it from ports at bow and stern. There were other outlets, too, above and below and on the sides, and electric controls that were manipulated from a central board.

“You’ve got a ship,” Blake admitted, “and it’s a beauty. I know construction, and you’ve got it here. But what is the power? How do you drive it? What throws it out through space?”

“Aside from one other, you will be the only man ever to know.” The bearded man was quiet now and earnest. The wild light had faded from his eyes, and he pondered gravely in making the last and final

decision.

“Yes, you shall have it. It may be I have been mistaken. I have known people—some few—who were kindly and decent; I have let the others prejudice me. But there was one who was my companion—and there was McGuire, who was kind and who believed. And now you, who will give your life for a friend and to save humanity!... You shall have it. You shall have the ship! But I will not go with you. I want nothing of glory or fame, and I am too old to fight. My remaining years I choose to spend out here.” He pointed where a window of heavy glass showed the outer world and a grave on a sloping hill.

“But you shall have full instructions. And, for the present, you may know that it is a continuous explosion that drives the ship. I have learned to decompose water into its components and split them into subatomic form. They reunite to give something other than matter. It is a liquid—liquid energy, though the term is inaccurate—that separates out in two forms, and a fluid ounce of each is the product of thousands of tons of water. The potential energy is all

there. A current releases it; the energy components reunite to give matter again—hydrogen and oxygen gas. Combustion adds to their volume through heat.

“It is like firing a cannon in there,”—he pointed now to the massive generator—“a super-cannon of tremendous force and a cannon that fires continuously. The endless pressure of expansion gives the thrust that means a constant acceleration of motion out there where gravity is lost.

“You will note,” he added, “that I said ‘constant acceleration.’ It means building up to speeds that are enormous.”

Blake nodded in half-understanding.

“We will want bigger ships,” he mused. “They must mount guns and be heavy enough to take the recoil. This is only a sample; we must design, experiment, build them! Can it be done? ... It *must* be done!” he concluded and turned to the inventor.

“We don’t know much about those devils of the stars,

and they may have means of attack beyond anything we can conceive, but there is just one way to learn: go up there and find out, and take a licking if we have to. Now, how about taking me up a mile or so in the air?"

The other smiled in self-deprecation. "I like a good fighter," he said; "I was never one myself. If I had been I would have accomplished more. Yes, you shall go up a mile or so in the air—and a thousand miles beyond." He turned to close the door and seal it fast.

Beside the instrument board he seated himself, and at his touch the generator of the ship came startingly to life. It grumbled softly at first, then the hoarse sound swelled to a thunderous roar, while the metal grating surged up irresistibly beneath the captain's feet. His weight was intolerable. He sank helplessly to the floor....

Blake was white and shaken when he alighted from the ship an hour later, but his eyes were ablaze with excitement. He stopped to seize the tall man by the shoulders.

“I am only a poor devil of a flying man,” he said, “but I am speaking for the whole world right now. You have saved us; you’ve furnished the means. It is up to us now. You’ve given us the right to hope that humanity can save itself, if humanity will do it. That’s my next job—to convince them. We have less than a year and a half....”

There was one precious week wasted while Captain Blake chafed and waited for a conference to be arranged at Washington. A spirit of hopelessness had swept over the world—hopelessness and a mental sloth that killed every hope with the unanswerable argument: “What is the use? It is the end.” But a meeting was arranged at Colonel Boynton’s insistence, though his superiors scoffed at what he dared suggest.

Blake appeared before the meeting, and he told them what he knew—told it to the last detail, while he saw the looks of amusement or commiseration that passed from man to man.

There were scientists there who asked him coldly a

question or two and shrugged a supercilious shoulder; ranking officers of both army and navy who openly excoriated Colonel Boynton for bringing them to hear the wild tale of a half-demented man. It was this that drove Blake to a cold frenzy.

The weeks of hopeless despair had worn his nerves to the breaking point, and now, with so much to be done, and so little time in which to do it, all requirements of official etiquette were swept aside as he leaped to his feet to face the unbelieving men.

“Damn it!” he shouted, “will you sit here now and quibble over what you think in your wisdom is possible or not. Get outside those doors—there’s an open park beyond—and I’ll knock your technicalities all to hell!”

The door slammed behind him before the words could be spoken to place him under arrest, and he tore across a velvet lawn to leap into a taxi.

There was a rising storm of indignant protest within the room that he had left. There were admirals,

purple of face, who made heated remarks about the lack of discipline in the army, and generals who turned accusingly where the big figure of Colonel Boynton was still seated.

It was the Secretary of War who stilled the tumult and claimed the privilege of administering the rebuke which was so plainly needed. "Colonel Boynton," he said, and there was no effort to soften the cutting edge of sarcasm in his voice, "it was at your request and suggestion that this outrageous meeting was held. Have you any more requests or suggestions?"

The colonel rose slowly to his feet.

"Yes, Mr. Secretary," he said coldly, "I have. I know Captain Blake. He seldom makes promises; when he does he makes good. My suggestion is that you do what the gentleman said—step outside and see your technicalities knocked to hell." He moved unhurriedly toward the door.

It was a half-hour's wait, and one or two of the more openly skeptical had left when the first roar came

faintly from above. Colonel Boynton led the others to the open ground before the building. "I have always found Blake a man of his word," he said quietly, and pointed upward where a tiny speck was falling from a cloud-flecked sky.

Captain Blake had had little training in the operation of the ship, but he had flown it across the land and had concealed it where fellow officers were sworn to secrecy. And he felt that he knew how to handle the controls.

But the drop from those terrible heights was a fearful thing, and it ended only a hundred feet above the heads of the cowering, shouting humans who crouched under the thunderous blast, where a great shell checked its vertical flight and rebounded to the skies.

Again and again the gleaming cylinder drove at them like a projectile from the mortars of the gods, and it roared and thundered through the air or turned to vanish with incredible speed straight up into the heights, to return and fall again ... until finally it hung

motionless a foot above the grass from which the uniformed figures had fled. Only Colonel Boynton was there to greet the flyer as he laid his strange craft gently down.

“Nice little show, Captain,” he said, while his broad face broke into the widest of grins. “A damn nice little show! But take that look off of your face. They’ll listen to you now; they’ll eat right out of your hand.”

Chapter 15

If Lieutenant McGuire could have erased from his mind the thought of the threat that hung over the earth he would have found nothing but intensest pleasure in the experiences that were his.

But night after night they had heard the reverberating echoes of the giant gun speeding its messenger of death toward the earth, and he saw as plainly as if he were there the terrible destruction that must come where the missiles struck. Gas, of course; that seemed the chief and only weapon of these monsters, and Djorn, the elected leader of the Venus folk, confirmed him in this surmise.

“We had many gases,” he told McGuire, “but we used them for good ends. You people of Earth—or these invaders, if they conquer Earth—must some day engage in a war more terrible than wars between men. The insects are your greatest foe. With a developing civilization goes the multiplication of insect and bacterial life. We used the gases for that war, and we made this world a heaven.” He sighed

regretfully for his lost world.

“These red ones found them, and our factories for making them. But they have no gift for working out or mastering the other means we had for our defense—the electronic projectors, the creation of tremendous magnetic fields: you saw one when we destroyed the attacking ships. Our scientists had gone far—”

“I wish to Heaven you had some of them to use now,” said the lieutenant savagely, and the girl, Althora, standing near, smiled in sympathy for the flyer’s distress. But her brother, Djorn, only murmured: “The lust to kill: that is something to be overcome.”

The fatalistic resignation of these folk was disturbing to a man of action like McGuire. His eyes narrowed, and his lips were set for an abrupt retort when Althora intervened.

“Come,” she said, and took the flyer’s hand. “It is time for food.”

She took him to the living quarters occupied by her

brother and herself, where opal walls and jewelled inlays were made lovely by the soft light that flooded the rooms.

“Just one tablet,” she said, and brought him a thin white disc, “then plenty of water. You must take this compressed food often and in small quantities till your system is accustomed.”

“You make this?” he asked.

“But certainly. Our chemists are learned men. We should lack for food, otherwise, here in our underground home.”

He let the tablet dissolve in his mouth. Althora leaned forward to touch his hand gently.

“I am sorry,” she said, “that you and Djorn fail to understand one another. He is good—so good! But you—you, too, are good, and you fear for the safety of your own people.”

“They will be killed to the last woman and child,” he

replied, "or they will be captured, which will be worse."

"I understand," she told him, and pressed his hand; "and if I can help, Lieutenant Mack Guire, I shall be so glad."

He smiled at her stilted pronunciation of his name. He had had the girl for an almost constant companion since his arrival; the sexes, he found, were on a level of mutual freedom, and the girl's companionship was offered and her friendship expressed as openly as might have been that of a youth. Of Sykes he saw little; Professor Sykes was deep in astronomical discussions with the scientists of this world.

But she was charming, this girl of a strange race so like his own. A skin from the velvet heart of a rose and eyes that looked deep into his and into his mind when he permitted; eyes, too, that could crinkle to ready laughter or grow misty when she sang those weird melodies of such thrilling sweetness.

Only for the remembrance of Earth and the horrible

feeling of impotent fury, Lieutenant McGuire would have found much to occupy his thoughts in this loveliest of companions.

He laughed now at the sounding of his name, and the girl laughed with him.

“But it *is* your name, is it not?” she asked.

“Lieutenant Thomas McGuire,” he repeated, “and those who like me call me ‘Mac.’”

“Mac,” she repeated. “But that is so short and hard sounding. And what do those who love you say?”

The flyer grinned cheerfully. “There aren’t many who could qualify in that respect, but if there were they would call me Tommy.”

“That is better,” said Althora with engaging directness; “that is much better—Tommy.” Then she sprang to her feet and hurried him out where some further wonders must be seen and exclaimed over without delay. But Lieutenant McGuire saw the pink

flush that crept into her face, and his own heart responded to the telltale betrayal of her feeling for him. For never in his young and eventful life had the man found anyone who seemed so entirely one with himself as did this lovely girl from a distant star.

He followed where she went dancing on her way, but not for long could his mind be led away from the menace he could not forget. And on this day, as on many days to come, he struggled and racked his brain to find some way in which he could thwart the enemy and avert or delay their stroke.

It was another day, and they were some months on their long journey away from the earth when an inspiration came. Althora had offered to help, and he knew well how gladly she would aid him; the feeling between them had flowered into open, if unspoken love. Not that he would subject her to any danger—he himself would take all of that when it came—but meanwhile—

“Althora,” he asked her, “can you project your mind into that of one of the reds?”

“I could, easily,” she replied, “but it would not be pleasant. Their minds are horrible; they reek of evil things.” She shuddered at the thought, but the man persisted.

“But if you could help, would you be willing? I can do so little; I can never stop them; but I may save my people from some suffering at least. Here is my idea:

“Djorn tells me that I had it figured right: they plan an invasion of the earth when next the two planets approach. He has told me of their armies and their fleets of ships that will set off into space. I can’t prevent it; I am helpless! But if I knew what their leader was thinking—”

“Torg!” she exclaimed. “You want to know the mind of that beast of beasts!”

“Yes,” said the man. “It might be of value. Particularly if I could know something of their great gun—where it is and what it is—well, I might do something about that.”

The girl averted her eyes from the savage determination on his face. “No—no!” she exclaimed; “I could not. Not Torg!”

McGuire’s own face fell at the realization of the enormity of this favor he had demanded. “That’s all right,” he said and held her soft hand in his; “just forget it. I shouldn’t have asked.”

But she whispered as she turned to walk away: “I must think, I must think. You ask much of me, Tommy; but oh, Tommy, I would do much for you!” She was sobbing softly as she ran swiftly away.

And the man in khaki—this flyer of a distant air-service—strode blindly off to rage and fume at his helplessness and his inability to strike one blow at those beings who lived in that world above.

There were countless rooms and passages where the work of the world below went on. There were men and women whose artistic ability found outlet in carvings and sculpture, chemists and others whose work was the making of foods and endless

experimentation, some thousand of men and women in the strength of their endless youth, who worked for the love of the doing and lived contentedly and happily while they waited for the day of their liberation. But of fighters there were none, and for this Lieutenant McGuire grieved wholeheartedly.

He was striding swiftly along where a corridor ended in blackness ahead. There was a gleaming machine on the floor beside him when a hand clutched at his arm and a warning voice exclaimed: "No further, Lieutenant McGuire; you must not go!"

"Why?" questioned the lieutenant. "I've got to walk—do something to keep from this damnable futile thinking."

"But not there," said the other; "it is a place of death. Ten paces more and you would have vanished in a flicker of flame. The projector"—he touched the mechanism beside them—"is always on. Our caves extend in an endless succession; they join with the labyrinth where the red ones used to live. They could attack us but for this. Nothing can live in its invisible

ray; they are placed at all such entrances.”

“Yet Djorn,” McGuire told himself slowly, “said they had no weapons. He knows nothing of war. But, great heavens! what wouldn’t I give for a regiment of scrappers—good husky boys with their faces tanned and a spark in their eyes and their gas masks on their chests. With a regiment, and equipment like this—”

And again he realized the futility of armament with none to serve and direct it.

It was a month or more before Althora consented to the tests. Djorn advised against it and made his protest emphatic, but here, as in all things, Althora was a free agent. It was her right to do as she saw fit, and there was none to prevent in this small world where individual liberty was unquestioned.

And it was still longer before she could get anything of importance. The experiments were racking to her nerves, and McGuire, seeing the terrible strain upon her, begged her to stop. But Althora had gained the vision that was always before her loved one’s eyes—a

world of death and disaster—and he, here where the bolt would be launched, and powerless to prevent. She could not be dissuaded now.

It was a proud day for Althora when she sent for McGuire, and he found her lying at rest, eyes closed in her young face that was lined and tortured with the mental horror she was contacting. She silenced his protests with a word.

“The gun,” she whispered; “they are talking about the gun ... and the bombardment ... planning....”

More silent concentration. Then:

“The island of Bergo,” she said, “—remember that! The gun is there ... a great bore in the earth ... solid rock ... but the casing of titanite must be reinforced ... and bands shrunk about the muzzle that projects ... heavy bands ... it shows signs of distortion—the heat! ...”

She was listening to the thoughts, and selecting those that bore upon gun.

“... Only fifty days ... the bombardment must begin ... Tahnor has provided a hundred shells; two thousand tals of the green gas-powder in each one ... the explosive charges ready ... yes—yes!...”

“Oh!” she exclaimed and opened her troubled eyes. “The beast is so complacent, so sure! And the bombardment will begin in fifty days! Will it really cause them anguish on your Earth, Tommy?”

“Just plain hell; that’s all!”

McGuire’s voice was low; his mind was reaching out to find and reject one plan after another. The gun!... He must disable it; he could do that much at least. For himself—well, what of it?—he would die, of course.

The guard he had been taught to place about his own thoughts must have relaxed, for Althora cried out in distress.

“No—no!” she protested; “you shall not! I have tried to help you, Tommy dear—say that I have helped you! —but, oh, my beloved, do not go. Do not risk your life

to silence this one weapon. They would still have their ships. Remember what Djorn has told of their mighty fleets, their thousands of fighting men. You cannot stop them; you can hardly hinder them. And you would throw away your life! Oh, please do not go!”

McGuire was seated beside her. His face was hidden in one hand while the other was held tight between the white palms of Althora’s tense hands. He said nothing, and he shielded his eyes and locked his mind against her thought force.

“Tommy,” said Althora, and now her voice was all love and softness, “Tommy, my dear one! You will not go, for what can you do? And if you stay—oh, my dear!—you can have what you will—the secret of life shall be yours—to live forever in perpetual youth. You may have that. And me, Tommy.... Would you throw your life away in a hopeless attempt, when life might hold so much? Am I offering so little, Tommy?”

And still the silence and the hand that kept the eyes from meeting hers; then a long-drawn breath and a slim figure in khaki that stood unconsciously erect to

look, not at the girl, but out beyond the solid walls, through millions of miles of space, to the helpless speck called Earth.

“You offer me heaven, my dear,” he spoke softly. “But sometimes”—and his lips twisted into a ghost of a smile—“sometimes, to earn our heaven, we have to fight like hell. And, if we fail to make the fight, what heaven worth having is left?”

“And the people,” he said softly; “the homes in the cities and towns and villages. My dear, that’s part of loving a soldier: you can never own him altogether; his allegiance is divided. And if I failed my own folk what right would I have to you?”

He dared to look at the girl who lay before him. That other vision was gone but he had seen a clear course charted, and now, with his mind at rest, he could smile happily at the girl who was looking up at him through her tears.

She rose slowly to her feet and stood before him to lay firm hands upon his shoulders. She was almost as

tall as he, and her eyes, that had shaken off their tears but for a dewy fringe, looked deep and straight into his.

“We have thought,” she said slowly, “we people of this world, that we were superior to you and yours; we have accepted you as someone a shade below our plane of advancement. Yes, we have dared to believe that. But I know better. We have gone far, Tommy, we people of this star; we have lived long. Yet I am wondering if we have lost some virtues that are the heritage of a sterner race.

“But I am learning, Tommy; I am so thankful that I can learn and that I have had you to teach me. We will go together, you and I. We will fight our fight, and, the Great One willing, we will earn our heaven or find it elsewhere—together.”

She leaned forward to kiss the tall man squarely upon the lips with her own soft rose-petal lips that clung and clung ... and the reply of Lieutenant McGuire, while it was entirely wordless, seemed eminently satisfactory.

Althora, the beautiful daughter of Venus, had the charm and allure of her planet's fabled namesake. But she thought like a man and she planned like a man. And there was no dissuading her from her course. She was to fight beside McGuire—that was her intention—and beyond that there was no value in argument. McGuire was forced to accept the insistent aid, and he needed help.

Sykes dropped his delving into astronomical lore and answered to the call, but there was no other assistance. Only the three, McGuire, Althora and Sykes. There were some who would agree to pilot the submarine that was being outfitted, but they would have no part in the venture beyond transporting the participants.

More than once McGuire paused to curse silently at the complaisance of this people. What could he not do if they would help. Ten companies of trained men, armed with their deadly electronic projectors that disintegrated any living thing they reached—and he would clutch at his tousled hair and realize that they were only three, and go grimly back to work.

“I don’t know what we can do till we get there,” he told Sykes. “Here we are, and there is the gun: that is all we know, except that the thing must be tremendous and our only hope is that there is some firing mechanism that we can destroy. The gun itself is a great drilling in the solid rock, lined with one of their steel alloys, and with a big barrel extending up into the air: Althora has learned that.

“They went deep into the rock and set the firing chamber there; it’s heavy enough to stand the stress. They use a gas-powder, as Althora calls it, for the charge, and the same stuff but deadlier is in the shell. But they must have underground workings for loading and firing. Is there a chance for us to get in there, I wonder! There’s the big barrel that projects. We might ... but no!—that’s too big for us to tackle, I’m afraid.”

“How about that electronic projector on the submarine?” Sykes suggested. “Remember how it melted out the heart of that big ship? We could do a lot with that.”

“Not a chance! Djorn and the others have strictly forbidden the men to turn it on the enemy since they have given no offense.

“No offense!” he repeated, and added a few explosive remarks.

“No, it looks like a case of get there and do what dirty work we can to their mechanism before they pot us—and that’s that!”

But Sykes was directing his thoughts along another path.

“I wonder ...” he mused; “it might be done: they have laboratories.”

“What are you talking about? For the love of heaven, man, if you’re got an idea, let’s have it. I’m desperate.”

“Nitrators!” said the scientist. “I have been getting on pretty good terms with the scientific crowd here, and I’ve seen some mighty pretty manufacturing

laboratories. And they have equipment that was never meant for the manufacture of nitro-explosives, but, with a few modifications—yes, I think it could be done.”

“You mean nitro-glycerine? TNT?”

“Something like that. Depends upon what materials we can get to start with.”

The lieutenant was pounding his companion upon the back and shouting his joy at this faintest echo of encouragement.

“We’ll plant it alongside the gun—No, we’ll get into their working underground. We’ll blow their equipment into scrap-iron, and perhaps we can even damage the gun itself!” He was almost beside himself with excitement at thought of a weapon being placed in his straining helpless hands.

It was the earth-shaking thunder of the big gun that hastened their final preparations and made McGuire tremble with suppressed excitement where he helped

Sykes to draw off a syrupy liquid into heavy crystal flasks.

There were many of these, and the two men would allow no others to touch them, but stored them themselves and nested each one in a soft bed within the submarine. Then one last repetition of their half-formed plans to Djorn and his followers and a rush toward the wharf where the submarine was waiting.

Althora was waiting, too, and McGuire wasted minutes in a petition that he knew was futile.

“Wait here, Althora,” he begged. “I will come back; this is no venture for you to undertake. I can take my chances with them, but you—! It is no place for you,” he concluded lamely.

“There is no other place for me,” she said; “only where you are.” And she led the way while the others followed into the lighted control room of the big under-water craft.

McGuire’s eyes were misty with a blurring of tears

that were partly from excitement, but more from a feeling of helpless remonstrance that was mingled with pure pride. And his lips were set in a straight line.

The magnetic pull that held them to their anchorage was reversed; the ship beneath them was slipping smoothly beneath the surface and out to sea, guided through its tortuous windings of water-worn caves and rocky chambers under the sea by the invisible electric cords that drew it where they would.

And ahead on some mysterious island was a gun, a thing of size and power beyond anything of Earth. He was going to spike that gun if it was the last act of his life; and Althora was going with him. He drew her slim body to him, while his eyes stared blindly, hopefully, toward what the future held.

Chapter 16

Throughout the night they drove hour after hour at terrific speed. The ship was running submerged, for McGuire was taking no slightest chance of their being observed from the air. He and the others slept at times, for the crew that handled the craft very evidently knew the exact course, and there were mechanical devices that insured their safety. A ray was projected continuously ahead of them; it would reflect back and give on an indicator instant warning of any derelict or obstruction. Another row of quivering needles gave by the same method the soundings from far ahead.

But the uncertainty of what their tomorrow might hold and the worry and dread lest he find himself unable to damage the big gun made real rest impossible for McGuire.

But he was happy and buoyant with hope when, at last, the green light from the ports showed that the sun was shining up above, and the slackening drive of the submarine's powerful motors told that their

objective was in sight.

They lay quietly at last while a periscope of super-sensitiveness was thrust cautiously above the water. It brought in a panoramic view of the shoreline ahead, amplified it and projected the picture in clear-cut detail upon a screen. If Lieutenant McGuire had stood on the wet deck above and looked directly at the island the sight could have been no clearer. The colors of torn and blasted tree-growths showed in all their pale shades, and there was stereoscopic depth to the picture that gave no misleading illusions as to distance.

The shore was there with the white spray of breakers on a rocky shoal, and a beach beyond. And beyond that, in hard outline against a golden sky, was a gigantic tube that stood vertically in air to reach beyond the upper limits of the periscope's vision.

McGuire tingled at the sight. To be within reach of this weapon that had sent those blasting, devastating missiles upon the earth! He paced back and forth in the small room to stop and stare again, and resume

his pacing that helped to while away the hours they must wait. For there were man-shapes swarming over the land, and the dull, blood-red of their loose uniforms marked them as members of the fighting force spawned by this prolific breed.

“Not a chance until they’re out of the picture,” said the impatient man; “they would snow us under. It’s just as I thought: we must wait until the gun is ready to fire; then they will beat it. They won’t want to be around when that big boy cuts loose.”

“And then?” asked Althora.

“Then Sykes and I will take our collection of gallon flasks ashore, and I sure hope we don’t stumble.” He grinned cheerfully at the girl.

“That reinforced concrete dome seems to be where they get down into the ground; it is close to the base of the gun. We will go there—blow it open if we have to—but manage in some way to get down below. Then a time-fuse on the charge, and the boat will take me off, and we will leave as fast as these motors can drive

us.”

He omitted to mention any possible danger to Sykes and himself in the handling of their own explosive, and he added casually, “You will stay here and see that there is no slip-up on the getaway.”

He had to translate the last remark into language the girl could understand. But Althora shook her head.

“You do try so hard to get rid of me, Tommy,” the laughed, “but it is no use. I am going with you—do not argue—and I will help you with the attack. Three will work faster than two—and I am going.”

McGuire was silent, then nodded his assent. He was learning, this Earth-man, what individual freedom really meant.

Only the western sky showed golden masses on the shining screen when McGuire spoke softly to the captain:

“Your men will put us ashore; you may ask them to

stand by now.” And to Professor Sykes, “Better get that ‘soup’ of yours ready to load.”

The red-clad figures were growing dim on the screen, and the blotches of colors that showed where they were grouped were few. Some there were who left such groups to flee precipitately toward a waiting airship.

This was something the lieutenant had not foreseen. He had expected that the force that served the gun would have some shock-proof shelter; he had not anticipated a fighting ship to take them away.

“That’s good,” he exulted; “that is a lucky break. If they just get out of sight we will have the place to ourselves.”

There were no red patches on the screen now, and the picture thrown before them showed the big ship, its markings of red and white distinct even in the shadow-light of late afternoon, rising slowly into the air. It gathered speed marvelously and vanished to a speck beyond the land.

“We’re getting the breaks,” said McGuire crisply. “All right—let’s go!”

The submarine rose smoothly, and the sealed doors in the superstructure were opened while yet there was water to come trickling in. Men came with a roll of cloth that spread open to the shape of a small boat, while a metal frame expanded within it to hold it taut.

McGuire gasped with dismay as a seaman launched it and leaped heavily into the frail shell to attach a motor to one end.

“Metal!” the captain reassured him; “woven metal, and water-tight! You could not pierce it with anything less than a projector.”

Sykes was ready with one of the crystal flasks as the boat was brought alongside, and McGuire followed with another. They took ten of the harmless-looking containers, and both men held their breaths as the boat grounded roughly on the boulder-strewn shore.

They lifted them out and bedded them in the sand,

then returned to the submarine. This time Althora, too, stepped into the boat. They loaded in the balance of the containers; the motor purred. Another landing, and they stood at last on the island, where a mammoth tube towered into the sky and the means for its destruction was at their feet.

But there was little time; already the light was dimming, and the time for the firing of the big weapon was drawing near. The men worked like mad to carry the flasks to the base of the gun, where a dome of concrete marked the entrance to the rooms below.

Each man held a flask of the deadly fluid when Althora led the way where stairs went deep down into the earth under the domed roof. This part of the work had been foreseen, and the girl held a slender cylinder that threw a beam of light, intensely bright.

They found a surprising simplicity in the arrangements underground. Two rooms only had been carved from the solid rock, and one of these ended in a wall of gray metal that could be only the

great base of the gun. But nowhere was a complication of mechanism that might be damaged or destroyed, nor any wiring or firing device.

A round door showed sharp edges in the gray metal, but only the strength of many men could have removed its huge bolts, and these two knew there must be other doors to seal in the mighty charge.

“Not a wire!” the scientist exclaimed. “How do they fire it?” The answer came to him with the question.

“Radio, of course; and the receiving set is in the charge itself; the barrel of the gun is its own antenna. They must fire it from a distance—back on the island where we were, perhaps. It would need to be accurately timed.”

“Come on!” shouted McGuire, and raised the flask of explosive to his shoulder.

Each one knew the need for haste; each waited every moment for the terrible blast of gun-fire that would jar their bodies to a lifeless pulp or, by detonating

their own explosive, destroy them utterly. But they carried the flasks again to the top, and the three of them worked breathlessly to place their whole supply where McGuire directed.

The massive barrel of the gun was beside them; it was held in tremendous castings of metal that bolted to anchorage in the ground. One great brace had an overhanging flange; the explosive was placed beneath it.

Professor Sykes had come prepared. He attached a detonator to one of the flasks, and while the other two were placing the explosive in position he fastened two wires to the apparatus with steady but hurrying fingers; then at full speed he ran with the spool from which the wires unwound.

McGuire and Althora were behind him, running for the questionable safety of the sand-hills. Sykes stopped in the shelter of a tiny valley where winds had heaped the sand.

“Down!” he shouted. “Get down—behind that sand

dune, there!”

He dropped beside them, the bared ends of the wires in his hands. There was a battery, too, a case no larger than his hands. Professor Sykes, it appeared, had gained some few concessions from his friends, who had learned to respect him in the field of science.

One breathless moment he waited; then—

“Now!” he whispered, and touched the battery’s terminals with the bare wires.

To McGuire it seemed, in that instant of shattering chaos, that the great gun itself must have fired. He had known the jar of heavy artillery at close range; he had had experience with explosives. He had even been near when a government arsenal had thrown the countryside into a hell of jarring, ear-splitting pandemonium. But the concussion that shook the earth under him now was like nothing he had known.

The hill of sand that sheltered them vanished to sweep in a sheet above their heads. And the air struck

down with terrific weight, then left them in an airless void that seemed to make their bodies swell and explode. It rushed back in a whirling gale to sweep showers of sand and pebbles over the helpless forms of the three who lay battered and stunned.

An instant that was like an age; then the scientist pointed with a weak and trembling hand where a towering spire of metallic gray leaned slowly in the air. So slowly it moved, to the eyes of the watchers—a great arc of gathering force and speed that shattered the ground where it struck.

“The gun!” was all that the still-dazed lieutenant could say. “The—the gun!” And he fell to shivering uncontrollably, while tears of pure happiness streamed down his face.

The mammoth siege gun—the only weapon for bombardment of the helpless Earth—was a mass of useless metal, a futile thing that lay twisted and battered on the sands of the sea.

The submarine now showed at a distance; it had

withdrawn, by prearrangement, to the shelter of the deeper water. McGuire looked carefully at the watch on his wrist, and listened to make certain that the explosion had not stopped it. Sykes had told him the length of the Venusian day—twenty hours and nineteen minutes of Earth time, and he had made his calculations from the day of the Venusians. And, morning and night, McGuire had set his watch back and had learned to make a rough approximation of the time of that world.

The watch now said five-thirteen, and the sun was almost gone; a line of gold in the western sky; and McGuire knew that it was a matter only of minutes till the blast of the big gun would rock the island. One heavy section of the great barrel was resting upon the shattered base, and McGuire realized that this blocking of the monster's throat must mean it would tear itself and the island around it to fragments when it fired. He ran toward the beach and waved his arms wildly in air to urge on the speeding craft that showed dim and vague across the heaving sea.

It drove swiftly toward them and stopped for the

launching of the little boat. There was a delay, and McGuire stood quivering with impatience where the others, too, watched the huddle of figures on the submarine's deck.

It was Althora who first sensed their danger. Her voice was shrill with terror as she seized McGuire's arm and pointed landward.

"Tommy—Tommy!" she said. "They are coming! I saw them!"

A swarming of red figures over the nearby dunes gave quick confirmation of her words. McGuire looked about him for a weapon—anything to add efficiency to his bare hands—and the swarm was upon them as he looked.

He leaped quickly between Althora and the nearest figures that stretched out grasping hands, and a red face went white under the smashing impact of the flyer's fist.

They poured over the sand-hills now—scores of

leaping man-shapes—and McGuire knew in an instant of self-accusation that there had been a shelter after all, where a portion of the enemy force had stayed. The explosion had brought them, and now—

He struck in a raging frenzy at the grotesque things that came racing upon them. He knew Sykes was fighting too. He tore wildly at the lean arms that bound him and kept him from those a step or two away who were throwing the figure of a girl across the shoulders of one of their men, while her eyes turned hopelessly toward McGuire.

They threw the two men upon the sand and crowded to kneel on the prostrate bodies and strike and tear with their long hands, then tied them at ankles and wrists with metal cords, and raised them helpless and bound in the air.

One of the red creatures pointed a long arm toward the demolished gun and shrieked something in a terror-filled tone. The others, at the sound, raced off through the sand, while those with the burden of the three captives followed as best they could.

“The gun!” said Professor Sykes in a thick voice: the words were jolted out of him as the two who carried him staggered and ran. “They know—that it—hasn’t—gone off—”

The straggling troop that strung out across the dim-lit dunes was approaching another domed shelter of heavy concrete. They crowded inside, and the bodies of the three were thrown roughly to the floor, while the red creatures made desperate haste to close the heavy door. Then down they went into the deeper safety of a subterranean room, where the massive walls about them quivered to a nerve-deadening jar. It shook those standing to the floor, and the silence that followed was changed to a bedlam by the inhuman shrieking of the creatures who were gloating over their safety and the capture they had achieved. They leaped and capered in a maniacal outburst and ceased only at the shrill order of one who was in command.

At his direction the three were carried out of doors and thrown upon the ground. McGuire turned his head to see the face of Althora. There was blood

trickling from a cut on her temple, and her eyes were dazed and blurred, but she managed a trembling smile for the anxious eyes of the man who could only struggle hopelessly against the thin wires that held him.

Althora hurt! Bound with those cutting metal cords! Althora—in such beastly hands! He groaned aloud at the thought.

“You should never have come; I should never have let you. I have got you into this!” He groaned again in an agony of self-reproach, then lay silent and waited for what must come. And the answer to his speculations came from the night above, where the lights of a ship marked the approach of an enemy craft.

The ships of the red race could travel fast, as McGuire knew, but the air monster whose shining, pointed beak hung above them where they lay helpless in the torturing bonds of fine wire, was to give him a new conception of speed.

It shot to the five thousand-foot level, when the

captives were safe aboard, and the dark air shrieked like a tortured animal where the steel shell tore it to tatters. And the radio, in an adjoining room, never ceased in its sputtering, changing song.

The destruction of the Earth-bombarding gun! The capture of the two Earth-men who had dared to fight back! And a captive woman of the dreaded race of true Venusians! There was excitement and news enough for one world. And the discordant singing of the radio was sounding in the ears of the leaders of that world.

They were waiting on the platform in the great hall where Sykes and McGuire had stood, and their basilisk eyes glared unwinkingly down at the three who were thrown at their feet.

The leader of them all, Torg himself, arose from his ornate throne and strode forward for a closer view of the trophies his huntsmen had brought in. A whistled word from him and the wires that had bound Althora's slim ankles were cut, while a red-robed warrior dragged her roughly to her feet to stand

trembling and swaying as the blood shot cruelly through her cramped limbs.

Torg's eyes to McGuire were those of a devil feasting on human flesh, as he stared appraisingly and gloatingly at the girl who tried vainly to return the look without flinching. He spoke for a moment in a harsh tone, and the seated councilors echoed his weird notes approvingly.

"What does he say?" McGuire implored, though he knew there could be nothing of good in that abominable voice. "What does he say, Althora?"

The face that turned slowly to him was drained of the last vestige of color. "I—do not—know," she said in a whisper scarcely audible; "but he thinks—terrible things!"

She seemed speaking of some nightmare vision as she added haltingly, "There is a fleet of many ships, and Torg is in command. He has thousands of men, and he goes forth to conquer your Earth. He goes there to rule." She had to struggle to bring the words to her

lips now. "And—he takes me—with—him!"

"No—no!" the flyer protested, and he struggled insanely to free his hands from the wires that cut the deeper into his flesh. The voice of Althora, clear and strong now, brought him back.

"I shall never go, Tommy; never! The gift of eternal life is mine, but it is mine to keep only if I will. But, for you and your friend—" She tried to raise her hands to her trembling lips.

"Yes," said Lieutenant McGuire quietly, "for us—?"

But there were some things the soft lips of Althora refused to say. Again she tried vainly to raise her hands, then turned her white, stricken face that a loved one might not see the tears that were mingling with the blood-stains on her cheeks, nor read in her eyes the horror they beheld.

But she found one crumb of comfort for the two doomed men.

“You will live till the sailing of the ships, Tommy,” she choked, “and then—we will go together, Tommy—you and I.”

Her head was bowed and her shoulders shaking, but she raised her head proudly erect as she was seized by a guard whose blood-red hands forced her from the room.

And the dry, straining eyes of Lieutenant McGuire, that watched her going, saw the passing to an unknown fate of all he held dear, and the end of his unspoken dreams.

He scarcely felt the grip of the hands that seized him, nor knew when he and Sykes were carried from the room where Torg, the Emperor, held his savage court. The stone walls of the room where they were thrown could not hold his eyes; they looked through and beyond to see only the white and piteous face of a girl whose lips were whispering: “We will go together, Tommy—you and I.”

Chapter 17

The little ship that Captain Blake had thrown with reckless speed through the skies over Washington, D. C., made history that day in the records of the earth. None, now, could doubt that here, at last, was the answer that the world had hoped for until hope had died. Unbelievable in its field of action, incredible in its wild speed, but real, nevertheless!—the countries of the earth were frantic in their acclaim. Only the men who formed the International Board of Defense failed to join in the enthusiasm. They sat by day and night in earnest conference on ways and means.

From Earth and sub-Venus converge a titanic offensive of justice on the unspeakable man-things of Torg.

This little ship—so wonderful, and so inadequate! It was only a promise of what might come. There must be new designs made; men must learn to dream in new terms and set down their dreams in cold lines and figures on drafting boards. A cruiser of space must be designed, to mount heavy guns, carry great

loads, absorb the stresses that must come to such a structure in flight and in battle. And above all, it must take the thrust of this driving force—new and tremendous—of which men knew so little as yet. And then many like it must be built.

The fuel must be prepared, and this, alone, meant new and different machinery, which itself must be designed before the manufacturing process could begin.

There was work to be done—a world of work!—and so few months in which to do it. The attack from the distant gun had long since ceased and the instruments of the astronomers showed the enemy planet shrinking far off in space. But it would return; there was only a year for preparation.

Captain Blake was assigned to the direction of design. An entire office building in Washington was vacated for his use, and in a few hours he rallied a staff of assistants who demanded the entire use of a telephone system that spread countrywide. And the call went out that would bring the best brains of the

land to the task before them.

The windows of the building shone brightly throughout the nights when the call was answered, and engineers and draftsmen worked at fever heat on thrusts and stresses and involved mathematical calculations. And, while owners of great manufacturing plants waited with unaccustomed patience for a moment's talk with Blake, the white sheets on the drafting boards showed growing pictures of braces and struts and curved plates, of castings for gun mounts, and ammunition hoists. And the manufacturers were told in no uncertain terms exactly what part of this experimental ship they would produce, and when it must be delivered.

"If only we dared go into production," said Blake; "but it is out of the question. This first ship must demonstrate its efficiency; we must get the 'bugs' out of our design; correct our errors and be ready with a production schedule that will work with precision."

Only one phase of this proposed production troubled him; the manufacture must be handled all over the

world. He talked with men from England and France, from Germany and Italy and a host of other lands, and he raged inwardly while he tried to drive home to them the necessity for handling the work in just one way—his way—if results were to be achieved.

The men of business he could convince, but his chief disquiet came from those whose thoughts were of what they termed "statesmanship," and who seemed more apprehensive of the power that this new weapon would give the United States of America than they were of the threat from distant worlds.

From his friends in high quarters came hints of the same friction, but he knew that the one demand Winslow had laid down was being observed: the secret of the mysterious fuel would remain with us. Winslow had shown little confidence in the countries of the old world, and he had sworn Blake to an agreement that his strange liquids—that new form of matter and substance—should remain with this country.

And swiftly the paper ship grew. The parts were in

manufacture, and arriving at the assembly plant in Ohio. Blake's time was spent there now, and he caught only snatches of sleep on a cot in his office, while he worked with the forces of men who succeeded each other to keep the assembly room going night and day.

There was an enormous hangar that was designed for the assembling of a giant dirigible; it housed another ship now. Hardly a ship, yet it began to take form where great girders held the keel that was laid, and duralumin plates and strong castings were bolted home.

A thousand new problems, and innumerable vexing errors—the "bugs" that inhere with a new, mechanical job—yet the day came when the ship was a thing of sleek beauty, and her thousand feet of length enclosed a maze of latticed struts where ammunition rooms and sleeping quarters, a chart room and control stations were cleverly interspaced. And above, where the great shape towered high in the big hangar, were the lean snouts of cannon, and recesses that held rapid-fire guns and whole batteries of

machine guns for close range.

Rows of great storage batteries were installed, to furnish the first current for the starting of the ship, till her dynamos that were driven by the exhaust blast itself could go into action and carry on. And then—

An armored truck that ground slowly up under heavy guard to deliver two small flasks of liquid whose tremendous weight must be held in containers of thick steel, and be hoisted with cranes to their resting place within the ship. And Captain Blake, with his heart in his throat through fear of some failure, some slip in their plans—Captain Blake, of the gaunt, worn frame, and face haggard from sleepless nights—stood quietly at a control board while the great doors of the hangar swung open.

At the closing of a switch the current from the batteries flowed through the two liquids, to go on in conductors of heavy copper to a generator that was heavy and squat and devoid of moving parts. Within it were electrodes that were castings of copper, and between them the miracle of regenerated matter was

taking place.

What came to them as energy from the cables was transformed to a tangible thing—a vast bulk of gas, of hydrogen and oxygen that had once been water, and the pressure of the gas made a roaring inferno of the exhausts. A spark plug ignited it, and the heat of combustion added pressure to pressure, while the quivering, invisible live steam poured forth to change to vaporous clouds that filled the hangar.

The man at the control board stood trembling with knowledge of the power he had unleashed. He moved a lever to crack open a valve, and the clouds poured now from beneath the ship, that raised slowly and smoothly in the air. It hung quietly poised, while the hands that directed it sent a roaring blast from the great stern exhaust, and the creation of many minds became a thing of life that moved slowly, gliding out into the sunlight of the world.

The cheers of crowding men, insane with hysterical emotion at sight of their work's fulfillment, were lost in the thunder of the ship. The blunt bow lifted where

the sun made dazzling brilliance of her sweeping curves, and with a blast that thundered from her stern the first unit of the space forces of the Earth swept upward in an arc of speed that ended in invisibility. No enveloping air could hold her now; she was launched in the ocean of space that would be her home.

Captain Blake, the following day, sat in Washington before a desk piled high with telegrams of congratulation. His tired face was smiling as he replaced a telephone receiver that had spoken words of confidence and commendation from the President of the United States. But he pushed the mass of yellow papers aside to resume his examination of a well-thumbed folder marked: "Production Schedule." The real work was yet to be done.

It was only two short months later that he sat before the same desk, with a face that showed no mark of smiles in its haggard lines.

His ship was a success, and was flying continuously, while men of the air service were trained in its

manipulation and gunners received practice in three-dimensional range finding and cruiser practice in the air. Above, in the airless space, they learned to operate the guns that were controlled from within the air-tight rooms. They were learning, and the ship performed the miracles that were now taken as matters of fact.

But production!

Captain Blake rose wearily to attend a conference at the War Department. He had asked that it be called, and the entire service was represented when he reached there. He went without preamble or explanation to the point.

"Mr. Secretary," he said, and faced the Secretary of War, "I have to report, sir, that we have failed. It is utterly impossible, under present conditions, to produce a fleet of completed ships.

"You know the reason; I have conferred with you often. It was a mistake to depend on foreign aid; they have failed us. I do not criticize them: their ways are

their own, and their own problems loom large to them. The English production of parts has come through, or is proceeding satisfactorily, but the rest is in hopeless confusion. The Red menace from Russia is the prime reason, of course. With the Reds mobilizing their forces, we cannot blame her neighbors for preparing to defend themselves. But our program!—and the sure invasion that will come in six short months!—to be fighting among ourselves—it is damnable!"

He paused to stare in wordless misery at the silent gathering before him. Then—

"I have failed," he blurted out. "I have fallen down on the job. It was my responsibility to get the cooperation that insured success. Let me step aside. Is there anyone now who can take up the work and bring order and results from this chaos of futility?"

He waited long for a reply. It was the Secretary of War who answered in a quiet voice.

"We must not be too harsh," he said, "in our criticism

of our foreign friends, but neither should we be unfair to Captain Blake. You do yourself an injustice; there is no one who could have done more than you. The reason is here." He struck at a paper that he held in his hand. "Europe is at war. Russia has struck without warning; her troops are moving and her air force is engaged this minute in an attack upon Paris. It is a traitor country at home that has defeated us in our war with another world."

"I think," he added slowly, "there is nothing more that could have been done: you have made a brave effort. Let us thank you, Captain Blake, while we can. We will fight, when the time comes, as best we can; that goes without saying."

A blue and gold figure arose slowly to speak a word for the navy. "It is evident by Captain Blake's own admission, that the proposed venture must fail. It has been evident to some of us from the start." It was a fighter of the old school who was speaking; his voice was that of one whose vision has dimmed, who sees but the dreams of impractical visionaries in the newer inventions, and whose reliance for safety is placed

only in the weapons he knows.

"The naval forces of the United States will be ready," he told them, "and I would ask you to remember that we can still place dependence upon the ships that float in the water, and the forces who have manned them since the history of this country began."

Captain Blake had sprung to his feet. Again he addressed the Secretary for War.

"Mr. Secretary," he said, and there was a fighting glint in his eyes, "I make no reply to this gentleman. His arm of the service will speak for itself as it has always done. But your own words have given me new hope and new energy. I ask you, Mr. Secretary, for another chance. The industrial forces of the United States are behind us to the last man and the last machine. I have talked with them. I know!

"We have only six months left for a prodigious effort. Shall we make it? For the safety of our country and the whole world let us attempt the impossible: go ahead on our own; turn the energy and the mind of

this whole country to the problem.

"The great fleet of the world can never be. Shall we build and launch the Great Fleet of the United States, and take upon our own shoulders the burden and responsibility of defense?

"It cannot be done by reasonable standards, but the time is past for reason. Possible or otherwise, we must do it. We will—if you will back me in the effort!"

There was a rising discord of excited voices in the room. Men were leaping to their feet to shake vehement fists in the faces of those who wagged their heads in protest. The Secretary of War arose to still the storm. He turned to walk toward the waiting figure of Captain Blake.

"You can't do it," he said, and gripped the Captain by the hand; "you can't do it—but you may. This country has seen others who have done the impossible when the impossible had to be done. It's your job; the President will confirm my orders. Go to it, Blake!"

Chapter 18

The wires that bound the two men were removed, and McGuire and Sykes worked in agony to bring life back to the hands and feet that were swollen and blue.

Then—red guards who forced them to stumble on their numbed legs, where darting pains made them set their lips tight—a car that went swiftly through the darkness of a tube to stop finally in another building—a room with metal walls, one window with a balcony beyond, high above the ground—a door that clanged behind them; and the two men, looking one at the other with dismayed and swollen eyes, knew in their hearts that here, beyond a doubt, was their last earthly habitation.

They said nothing—there was nothing of hope or comfort to be said—and they dropped soddenly upon the hard floor, where finally the heavy breathing and nervous starts of Professor Sykes showed that to him at least had come the blessed oblivion of exhausted sleep. But there was no sleep for Lieutenant McGuire.

There was a face that shone too clearly in the dark,

and his thoughts revolved endlessly in words of reproach for his folly in allowing Althora's love to lead her to share his risk. From the night outside their window came a ceaseless clatter and hubbub, but to this he was oblivious.

Only with the coming of morning's soft golden light did McGuire know the reason for the din and activity that echoed from outside—and the reason, too, for their being placed in this room.

Their lives should end with the sailing of the fleet, and there, outside their window, were the ships themselves. Ships everywhere, as far as he could see across the broad level expanse, and an army of men who scurried like ants—red ones, who worked or directed the others, and countless blues and yellows who were loading the craft with enormous cargoes.

"Squawk, damn you!" said Lieutenant McGuire to the distant shrieking throng; "and I hope they're ready for you when you reach the earth." But his savage voice carried no conviction. What was there that Earth could do to meet this overwhelming assault?

"What is it?" asked Sykes. He roused from his sleep to work gingerly at his aching muscles, then came and stood beside McGuire.

"They have put us here as a final taunt," McGuire told him. "There is the fleet that is going to make our world into a nice little hell, and Torg, the beast! has put us here to see it leave. Then we get ours, and they don't know that we know that."

"Your first way was the best," the scientist observed; "we should have done it then. We still can."

"What do you mean?" The flyer's voice was dull and lifeless.

Sykes pointed to the little balcony and the hard pavement below.

"Althora," he said, and McGuire winced at the name, "seemed to think that we were in for some exquisite torture. Here is the way out. It is a hundred-foot drop; they think we are safe; but they have been unintentionally kind."

"Yes," his companion agreed, "they don't know that we know of the torture. We will wait ... and when I am sure that—Althora—is—gone ... when there is nothing I can do to help—"

"Help?" queried the professor gently. "There is nothing now of help, nor anyone who can help us. We must face it, my boy; *c'est fini*. Our little journey is approaching its end."

There was no reply, and McGuire stood throughout the day to stare with eyes of smouldering hatred where the scurrying swarms of living things made ready to invade and infest the earth.

Food and water was pushed through the doorway, but he ate sparingly of the odd-colored fruits; the only thing that could hold his thoughts from the hopeless repetition of unanswerable "whys" was the sight of the fleet. And every bale and huge drum was tallied mentally as it passed before his eyes. The ships were being loaded, and with their sailing—But, no! He must not let himself think of that!

Throughout the day ships came and departed, and one leviathan, ablaze in scarlet color; sailed in to settle down where great steel arms enfolded it, not far from the watching men. Scarlet creatures in authority directed operations, and workmen swarmed about the great ship. Once McGuire swore softly and viciously under his breath, for he had seen a figure that could be only that of Torg, and the crowd saluted with upraised arms as the scarlet figure passed into the scarlet ship. This, McGuire knew, was the flagship that should carry Torg himself. Torg and ——. He paled at the thought of the other name.

The only break in the long day came with the arrival of a squad of guards, who hustled the two men out into a passageway and drove them to another room, where certain measurements were taken. The muscular figures of the two were different from these red ones, but it was a moment before McGuire realized the sinister significance of the proceedings. Their breadth of shoulders, the thickness of their chests—what had these figures to do with their captivity? And then the flyer saw the measures

compared with the dimensions of a steel cage. Its latticed shape could be endlessly compressed, and within, he saw, were lancet points that lined the ghastly thing throughout. Long enough to torture, but not to kill; a thousand delicate blades to pierce the flesh; and the instrument, it seemed, was of a size that could enclose the writhing, helpless body of a man.

Other unnameable contrivances about the room took on new significance with the knowledge that here was the chamber of horrors whose workings had been seen by Althora in the mind of their captor—horrors of which she could not speak.

McGuire was sick and giddy as the guards led him roughly back to their prison room. And Professor Sykes, too, required no explanation of what they had seen.

The guards were many, and resistance was useless, but each man looked silently at the other's desperate eyes when the metal cords were twisted again about their wrists, and their hands were tied securely to

metal rings anchored in the wall beside the window.

"And there," said the flyer, "goes our last chance of escape. They were not as dumb as we thought: they knew how good a leap to the pavement would look after we had been in there."

"Less than human!" Sykes was quoting the comment of Althora's brother. "I think Djorn was quite conservative in his statement."

McGuire examined carefully the cords that tied his hands to the wall beside him. The knots were secure, and the metal ring was smooth and round. "I didn't know," he said, as he worked and twisted, "but there might be a cutting edge, but we haven't a chance. No getting rid of these without a wire cutter or an acetylene torch—and we seem to be just out of both."

Professor Sykes tried to adopt the other's nonchalant tone. "Careless of us," he began—then stopped breathless to press his body against the wall.

"It's there!" he said. "Oh, my God, if I could only get

it, it might work—it might!"

"The battery," he explained to the man beside him, whose assumed indifference vanished at this suggestion of hope; "—the little battery that I used on the gun, to fire the explosive. It has an astounding amperage, and a voltage around three hundred. It's in my pocket—and I can't reach it!"

"You can't keep a good man licked!" McGuire exulted. "You mean that the current might melt the wire?"

"Soften it, perhaps, depending upon the resistance." Sykes refused to share the other's excitement. "But we can't get at it."

"We've got to," was the answer. "Move over this way." The man in khaki twisted his arms awkwardly to permit him to bend his body to one side, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as the strain forced the thin bonds into his wrists. But he brought his agonized face against the other's body, and gripped the fabric of Sykes' coat between his teeth.

The twisting of his head raised the cloth an inch at a time, and despite Sykes' efforts to hold the garment with his elbow, it slipped back time and again.

McGuire straightened at intervals to draw a choking breath and ease the strain upon his tortured wrists; then back again in his desperate contortions to worry at the cloth and pull and hold—and try again to raise the heavy pocket where a battery made sagging folds.

He was faint and gasping when finally the cloth was brought where the scientist's straining fingers could grasp it to writhe and twist in clumsy efforts that would force the battery's terminals within reach.

"I'll try it on mine," said Sykes. "It may be hot—and you've had your share." He was holding the flat black thing to bring the copper tips against the metal about his wrists. McGuire saw the man's lips go white as a wisp of smoke brought to his nostrils the sickening odor of burned flesh.

The metal glowed, and the man was writhing in silent self-torture when at last he threw his weight upon the strands and fell backward to the floor. He lay for a

moment, trembling and quivering—but free. And the knowledge of that freedom and of the greater torture they would both escape, gave him strength to rise and work with crippled hands at his companion's bonds, till McGuire, too, was free—free to forget his own swollen, bleeding wrists in compassionate regard for the other.

Like an injured animal, Professor Sykes had licked with his tongue at his wrists, where hot wire had burned deep and white, and he was trying for forgetfulness an hour later, in examination of the door to their room.

"What is the idea?" McGuire inquired, when he turned from his ceaseless contemplation of the fleet. "Not trying to get out, are you?"

"I am trying to stay in," said Sykes, and looked again at the object that interested him. "These long bolts," he explained: "top and bottom; operated from outside, but exposed in here. They come together when unlocked; five inches apart now. If I had something to hold them apart—

"You haven't a piece of steel about five inches long, have you?—or anything to substitute for it? If you have, I can lock this door so the devils won't come in and surprise us before we can make the jump."

"The battery?" suggested McGuire.

Sykes shook his head. "I tried it. Too long, and besides it would crumble. They operate these with a lever; I saw it outside." He went on silently with his study of the door and the little gap between heavy bolts, which, if closed, would mean security from invasion.

"They're about through," McGuire spoke from his post at the window after some time. "The rush seems to be about over. I imagine they'll pull out in the morning."

He pointed as Sykes stood beside him. "Those big ones over beyond have not been touched all day; only some of the crew, I judge, working around them. And way over you see forty or fifty whaling big ones: they must have been ready before we came. They have finished on these nearer by. It looks like a big day for

the brutes."

And Professor Sykes led him on to talk more of the preparations he had seen, and his deductions as to the morrow. It was all too evident what was really on the lieutenant's mind. It was not the thought of their own immediate death, but the terrible dread and horror of Althora's fate, that hammered and hammered in his brain. To speak of anything else meant a moment's relief.

Sykes pointed to a tall mast that was set in the plaza pavement, some hundred feet away. Wires swung from it to several points, one of them ending above their window and entering the building. "What is that?" he asked, "—some radio device? That ball of metal on the top might be an aerial." But McGuire had fallen silent again, and stared stonily at the deadly fighting ships he was powerless to combat.

On the morning that followed, there was no uncertainty. This was the day! And from a balconied window up high in the side of a tall stone building, two men stood wordless and waiting while they

watched the preparations below.

The open space was a sea of motion like flowing blood, where thousands of figures in dull red marched in rank after rank to be swallowed in the mammoth ships that McGuire had noted in the distance. Then other colors, and swarms of what they took to be women-folk of this wild race—a medley of color that flowed on and on as if it would never cease, to fill one after another of the great ships.

"Transports, that's what they are," said McGuire. "I can see now why they have no steel beaks like the others. They don't need any rams, nor ports for firing that beastly gas. They are gray, too, while the fighting ships are striped with red, all except the scarlet one of Torg's. Those are colonists we are watching, and soldiers to conquer the Earth where the damned swarm settles."

He stopped to stare at a body of red-clad soldiers, drawn up at attention. They made a lane, and their arms were raised in the salute that seemed only for Torg. They stood rigid and motionless; then, from

below the watching men, came one in the full splendor of his scarlet regalia. The air echoed with the din of his shouted name, but the bedlam of noise fell on deaf ears for McGuire. He could hear nothing, and in all the vast kaleidoscope of color he could see only one object—the white face of a girl who was half led and half carried by a guard of the red ones, where their Emperor led the way.

It was a strangled cry that was torn from the flyer's throat—the name of this girl who was going to the doom she had failed to avoid. Her life, she had said, was hers to keep only if she willed, but her plans had failed, and she went faltering and stumbling after a scarlet man beast.

"Althora!" called the flyer, and the figure of the girl was struggling with her guards in a frenzy that tore their hands free. She turned to look toward the sound of the voice, and her face was like that of one dead as her eyes found the man she loved.

"Tommy," she called: "oh, Tommy, my dear! Good-by!" The words were ended by the clutch of the scarlet

Emperor who turned to seize her.

A clatter came from the door behind them, but Lieutenant McGuire gave no heed. Only Professor Sykes sprang back from the balcony to seize and struggle with the moving bolts.

The man on the balcony was hardly less than a maniac as he glared wildly about, but he was not too unreasoning to see the folly of a wild leap into the throng below. He could never reach her—never. And then his eyes fell upon the wire that led from above him to the great pole in the open plaza. There was shouting from behind where the executioners were wrestling with the bolts.

"Hold them," the flyer shouted, "just for a minute! For God's sake, Sykes, keep them back! There's a chance!"

He sprang to the balustrade of the balcony, but he saw as he leaped where Professor Sykes had raised his leg to force the thickness of his knee between the bolts whose levers outside were bringing them closer

together.

"Go to it," was the answer. "I can hold them"—a stifled groan—"for a—minute!" Professor Sykes had found his substitute for five inches of steel, and the living flesh yielded but slowly to the pressure of the bolts.

McGuire was working frantically at the wire, then held himself in check while he carefully unwound it from its fastening. There was a splice, and he worked with bleeding fingers to unfasten the tight coils. And then the end was free and in his hands. He dropped to the balcony to pull in the slack, and he wrapped the end about beneath his arms and twisted it tight, then leaped out into space. No thought of himself nor of Sykes in this one wild moment, only of Althora in the grip of those beastly hands.

He was struggling to turn himself in the air as the colored masses of people seemed sweeping toward him, and he shot as a living pendulum, feet first, into the waiting heads.

He was on his feet in an instant and tearing at the

twisted wire that held him. About him was clamor and confusion, but beyond the nearer figures he saw the one who waited, and beside her a thing in scarlet that shrieked orders to his men.

He flung off one who leaped toward him, and ducked another to dash through and reach his man. And he neither saw nor felt the creature's ripping talons as he drove a succession of rights and lefts to the blood-red face.

The scarlet one went backward under the fusillade of blows; he was down, a huddle of color upon the pavement, and a horde of paralyzed soldiers had recovered from their stupefaction and were rushing upon the flyer. He turned to meet them, but their rush ended as quickly as it began: only a step or two they came, then stopped, to add their wild voices to the confusion of ear-splitting shrieks that rose from all sides.

McGuire crouched rigid, tense and waiting, nor did he sense for an instant that the assault was checked and that the faces of all about him were turned to the sky.

It was the voice of Althora that aroused him:

"Tommy! Tommy!" she was calling, and now she was at his side, her arms about him. "What is it, Tommy? Look! Look!" And she too was gazing aloft. And then, above all other sounds McGuire heard the roar—

The clouds were golden above with the brilliance of midday—and against them, hard and sharp of outline, was a shining shape. A cloud of vapor streamed behind it as it shot down from the clouds, and the thunder of its coming was like the roar of many cannon.

A ship of the red ones was in the air—a fighting ship, whose stripes showed red—and it drove at the roaring menace with its steel beak and a swirling cloud of gas. It seemed that they must crash, when to McGuire's eyes came the stabbing flash of heavy guns from the shining shape. A crashing explosion came down to them as the great beak parted and fell, and the body of the red-striped monster opened in bursting smoke and flame, tore slowly into fragments and fell swiftly to the earth.

It struck with a shattering crash some distance away, but one pair of eyes failed to follow it in its fall. For in the clear air above, with the golden light of distant clouds upon it, a roaring monster of silvery sheen had rolled and swept upward to the heights. And it showed, as it turned, a painted emblem on its bow, a design of clear-cut color, unbelievably familiar—a circle of blue, and within it a white star and a bull's eye of red—the mark of the flying service of the United States!

McGuire never knew how he got Althora and himself back to the building whence he had come. Nor did he see the struggling figures on a balcony, or the leap and fall of a maimed body, where Professor Sykes, when the door had yielded, found surcease and oblivion on the pavement below.

He was to learn that later, but now he had eyes only for a sight that could be but a dream, an unreal vision of a disordered brain. He held the slim form of Althora to him in a crushing grip, while he stared, dry-eyed, above, and his own voice seemed to shout from afar off: "They're ours!" that voice was

screaming in a frenzy of exultation. "They're our ships! They've come across!"

The fighting fleet of the red man-things of Venus was taking to the air! The ships rose in a swarm of speeding, darting shapes, and the great one of Torg was in the lead, climbing in fury toward the heights.

Far above them the clouds of gold silhouetted a strange sight, and the air was shaking with the thunder from on high, where, straight and true, a line of silver ships in the sharp V of battle formation drove downward in a deadly, swift descent.

And even afar off, the straining eyes of a half-crazed man could see the markings on their bow—a circle and a star—and the colors of his own lost fighters of the air.

Chapter 19

The Earth-fleet was a slanting line of swiftness that swept downward from the clouds. A swarm of craft was rising from below. The red-striped fighters met the attack first with a cloud of gas.

The scarlet monster—the flagship of Torg, the Emperor—was in the lead, and they shot with terrific speed across the bows of the oncoming fleet to leave a whirlwind of deadly vapor as they passed. McGuire held his breath in an agony of fear as the cloud enveloped the line of ships, but their bow guns roared staccato crashes in the thunder of their exhausts as they entered the cloud. And they were firing from the stern as they emerged, while two falling cylinders of red and white proved the effectiveness of their fire.

The formation held true as it swept upward and back where the swarming enemy was waiting. They were outnumbered three to one, McGuire saw, and his heart sang within him as he watched the sharp, speeding V that climbed upward to the enemy's level then swung to throw itself like a lance of light at the

massed ships that awaited the attack.

Another cloud of gas!—and a shattered ship!—and again the line emerged to correct its broken formation and drive once more toward the circling swarm.

They came to meet them now, the clusters of red-striped fighting ships, and they tore in from all sides upon the American line, their hooked beaks gleaming in the sun.

And now, at an unseen signal, the formation broke. Each ship fought for its life, and the stabbing flashes of their guns made ceaseless jets of light against the smoke and gas clouds that were darkening the sky.

"A dog-fight!" breathed Lieutenant McGuire; "and what a dog-fight!" His words were lost in the terrific thunder from above: the roar of the ships and the dull thuds of the guns engulfed them in a maelstrom of noise that battered like physical blows on the watchers below. He swore unconsciously and called down curses upon the enemy as he saw two fighters

meet while the shining beak of a ship of the reds crashed through the body of an opposing craft.

The red ship dipped at the bow; it backed off with terrific force; and from the curved beak a ship with the insignia of the red, white and blue slid downward in a swift fall to the death that waited.

They had fought themselves clear, and the Americans, by what must have been arrangement or wireless order, went roaring to the heights. There were some who followed, but the guns of the speeding ships drove them off. Red-and-white shapes fell swiftly from the clouds where the fighting had been, and McGuire knew that his fellows had given an account of themselves in the fighting at close range.

Again the thundering line was sharp and true, and another unswerving attack was launching itself from above. And again the deadly formation, with ever-increasing speed, drove into the enemy with flashing guns, then parted to close with the ones that drove crushingly upon them, while the sharper clatter of rapid-firing guns came to shatter the air.

The fighting craft had been rising from their level field in a succession that seemed endless. They were all in the air now, and only the great transports remained on the paved field.

A red-striped fighter swept downward in retreat, and, from the smoke clouds, a silvery shape followed in pursuit. It reached the red and white one with its shells, and the great mass crashed with terrific impact on the field. Its pursuer must have seen the monsters still on the ground, and it swung to rake them with a shower of small-caliber shells.

There were machine-guns rattling as it passed above the thronged reds—the troops who were huddled in terror in the open court. It tore on past them—past a figure in khaki who raced forward with the golden form of a girl within his arms, then released her to wave frantically as the silver ship shot by.

Unobserved, McGuire and Althora had been, where they stood beside the buildings: the eyes of their enemies, like their own, were on the monstrous battle above. But now they had called themselves to the

attention of the reds, and there were some who rushed upon them with faces livid with rage.

McGuire reached for a weapon from a victim of the machine-gun fire and prepared to defend himself, but the weapon was never used. He saw the silvery shape reverse itself in the air; it turned sharply to throw itself back toward the solitary figure in uniform of their service and the golden-clad girl beside him.

The flyer raised his weapon, but the jostling swarm that rushed upon him melted: the ripping fire of machine guns was deafening in his ears. Their deadly tattoo continued while the great ship sank slowly to touch and rest its huge bulk upon the pavement. A door in the ship's curved side opened that the blocky figure of a man might leap forth.

He was grimy of face, and his uniform was streaked with the smoke and sweat of battle, but the face beneath the grime, and the hands that reached to embrace and pound the flyer upon the back, could be only those of one he had known as his captain—Captain Blake.

"You son-of-a-gun!" the shouting figure was repeating. "You damned Irish son-of-a-gun! A. W. O. L.—but you can't get away with it! Come on—get in here! I'm needed up above!"

McGuire was struggling to speak from a throat that was suddenly tight and voiceless. Then—

"Althora," he gasped; "take Althora!" and he motioned toward the girl. And then he remembered the companion he had left in the room above. The battle that had flashed so suddenly had blasted from his mind all other thoughts.

"My God!" he said. "—Sykes! I—must get Sykes!"

He turned to run back to the building, only to stop in consternation where a huddle of clothing lay beneath the balcony of their prison room.

It was Sykes—Sykes who had sacrificed himself to make possible the escape of his friend—and McGuire dropped to his knees to touch the body that he knew was shattered beyond any hope of life. He raised the

limp burden in his arms and staggered back where more khaki-clad figures had gathered. Two came quickly out to meet him, and he let them take the body of his friend.

"*C'est fini!*"—he repeated the words that Sykes had said; "the end of our little journey!" The arms of Althora were about him as Blake hurried them into the waiting ship, and the roar of enormous power marked the rising of this space ship to throw itself again into the fray.

A small room with a dome of shatter-proof glass; a pilot who sat there to look in all directions, a control-board beneath his hands. Beside him on his elevated station was room for Captain Blake, and McGuire and Althora, too. The ship was climbing swiftly. McGuire saw where flashing shapes circled and roared in a swelling cloud of smoke and gas.

Blake spoke sharply to an aide: "General orders! All ships climb to resume formation!"

An enemy ship was before them: it flashed from

nowhere to bear down with terrific speed. The floor beneath them shook with the jarring of heavy guns, and McGuire saw the advancing shape bursting with puffs of smoke, while their own ship shot upward with a sickening twist. A silver ship was falling!—and another!

"Two more of ours gone," said Captain Blake through set teeth. "How many of them are there, Mac? Tell me what you know: we've got a hell of a fight on our hands."

"They're all here," McGuire told him, in jerky, breathless speech. "These are transports on the ground. Their weapons are gas and speed, and the rams on their beaked ships. There are other weapons—deadlier ones!—but they haven't got them: they belong to another race. I'll tell you all that later!"

"Keep them at a distance, Blake," he said. "Make them come to you—then nail them as they come."

"Right!" was the answer; "that's good dope. We didn't know what they had; expected some devilish things

that could down us before we got within effective range; had to mix it with them to find out what they could do, and get in a few solid cracks before they did it.

"How high are we?" He glanced quickly at an instrument. "Ten thousand. Order all ships to withdraw," he instructed his aide. "Rendezvous at fifty thousand feet for echelon formation."

Another brush with an enemy craft that slipped quickly to one side—then the smoke clouds were behind them, and a score, of silvery shapes were climbing in vertical flight for the level at fifty thousand.

They were fewer now than they had been, and the line that formed behind the flagship of Blake was shorter than the one that had made the V which shot down so bravely to engage with an unknown foe.

The enemy was below; an arrangement of mirrors showed this from the commander's station. They were emerging from the clouds of smoke to swarm in

circling flight through the sky. And now the bow of their own craft was depressed at an order from Blake, and the others were behind them as they drove to renew the attack.

"They're ganging up on us again," said Blake. "We'll fool them this time; we'll just kid them a little."

The flagship swerved before reaching the enemy, and the others followed in what looked like frightened retreat. Again they were in the heights, and some few of the enemy were following. Blake led in another descent.

No waiting swarm to greet them now! Blake gave a quick order. The roaring column shifted position as it fell: the flagship was the apex of a great V whose arms flung out and backward on either side—a V formation that curved and twisted through space and thundered upon the smaller formations that scattered before the blasting guns.

"Our bow guns are the effective weapons," Blake observed; his casual tone was a sedative to McGuire's

tense nerves. "We can use a broadside only of lighter weight; the kick of the big 'sights' has to be taken straight back. But we're working, back home, on recoil-absorbing guns: we'll make fighting ships of these things yet."

He spoke quietly to the pilot to direct their course toward a group that came sweeping upon them, and the massed fire of the squadron was squarely into the oncoming beaks that fell beneath them where the mirrors showed them crashing to the earth.

They were scattered now; the enemy was in wild disorder; and Blake spoke sharply to his aide.

"Break formation," he ordered; "every ship for itself. Engage the enemy where they find them; shoot down anything they see; prevent the enemy reforming!" He was taking quick advantage of the other's scattered forces, and he scattered his own that he knew could take care of themselves while they engaged the enemy only by ones or twos or threes.

"Clear the air of them!" he ordered. "Not one of them

must escape!"

The skies were a maze of darting shapes that crossed and recrossed to make a spider's web of light. Ship drove at ship, to swerve off at the last, while the air quivered and beat upon them with the explosion of shells and guns.

"There's our meat!" Blake directed the pilot, and pointed ahead where a monster in scarlet was swelling into view.

It came swiftly upon them, darting down from above, and McGuire clutched at the arm of the man beside him to shout: "It's the leader; the flagship! It's the Emperor—Torg, himself! Give him hell, Blake, but look out—he's fast!"

The ship was upon them like a flash of fire; no time for anything but dodging, and the pilot threw his craft wildly aside with a swerve that sent the men sprawling against a stanchion. Then up and back, where the other had turned to come up from below.

"Fast!" McGuire had said, but the word was inadequate to describe the speed of the fiery shape.

Another leap in the air, as their pilot swung his controls, and the red shape brushed past them in a cloud of gas, while the quick-firers ripped futilely into space where the great ship had been.

"Get your bow guns on him!" Blake roared. The ship beneath them strained and shuddered with the incredible thunder of the generator that threw them bodily in the air. The pilot had opened in full force the ports that blasted their bows aside.

No time to gather new speed; they were motionless as the scarlet monster came upon them, but they were in position to receive him. The eight-inch rifles of the forward turret thundered again and again, to be answered by flashes of flame from the scarlet ship.

McGuire crouched over the bent form of the pilot, whose steady fingers held the ship's bow straight upon the flashing death that bore down upon them. Another salvo!—and another!—hits all of them....

Smoke bursting from ripping plates, and flaming fire more vivid than the scarlet shape itself!—and the floor beneath McGuire's feet drove crushingly upward as their pilot pulled a lever to the full.

The great beak flashed beneath—and the mirrors, where McGuire's eyes were fastened, showed the terrific drive continue down and down, where a brilliant cylinder that marked the power of Venus tore shriekingly on to carry an Emperor to his crashing death.

The skies were clear of the red-striped ships: only the survivors of the attacking force showed their silvery shapes as they gathered near their flagship. There were two that pursued a small group of the enemy, but they were being outdistanced in the race.

"We have won," said Blake in a tone of wonder that showed how only now had come a realization of what the victory meant. "We have won, and the earth—is saved!"

And the voice of McGuire echoed his fervent "Thank

God!" while he gripped the soft hand that clung tightly to his, as if Althora, this radiant creature of Venus, were timid and abashed among the joyful, shouting men-folk from another world.

"And now what, Captain?" asked McGuire of his command. "Will you land? There is an army of reds down there asking for punishment."

Blake had turned away; his hand made grimy smears across his face where he wiped away the tears that marked a brave man's utter thankfulness. He covered his emotion with an affectation of disapproval as he swung back toward McGuire.

"Captain?" he inquired. "Captain? Where do you get that captain stuff?"

He pointed to an emblem on his uniform, a design that was unfamiliar to the eyes of McGuire.

"You're talking to an admiral now!—the first admiral of the newest branch of your country's fighting service—commanding the first fleet of the Space ships

of the United States of America!" He threw one arm about the other's shoulders. "We'll have to get busy, Mac," he added, "and think up a new rank for you.

"And, yes, we are going to land," he continued in his customary tones; "there may be survivors of our own crashes. But we'll have to count on you, Mac, to show us around this little new world of yours."

There was an army waiting, as McGuire had warned, but it was waiting to give punishment and not to take it. The vast expanse of the landing field was swarming with them, and the open country beyond showed columns of marching troops.

They had learned, too, to take shelter; barricades had been hastily erected, and the men had shields to protect them from the fire of small arms.

Their bodies were enclosed in their gas-tight uniforms whose ugly head-pieces served only to conceal the greater ugliness beneath. They met the ships as they landed with a showering rain of gas that was fired from huge projectors.

"Not so good!" Blake was speaking in the safety of his ship. "We have masks, but great heavens, Mac!—there must be a million of those brutes. We can spray them with machine-gun fire, but we haven't ammunition enough to make a dent in them. And we've got to get out and get to our crashed ships."

He waited for McGuire's suggestions, but it was Althora who replied.

"Wait!" she said imperatively. She seemed to be listening to some distant word. Then:

"Djorn is coming," she exclaimed, and her eyes were brilliantly alight. "He says to you"—she pointed to McGuire—"that you were right, that we must fight like hell sometimes to deserve our heaven—oh, I told him what you said—and now he is coming with all his men!"

"What the devil?" asked Blake in amazement. "How does she know?"

"Telepathy," McGuire explained: "she is talking with

her brother, the leader of the real inhabitants of Venus."

He told the wondering man briefly of his experience and of the people themselves, the real owners of this world.

"But what can they do?" Blake demanded.

And McGuire assured him: "Plenty!"

He turned to Althora to ask, "How are they coming? How will they get here?"

"They are marching underground; they have been coming for two days. They knew of our being captured, but the people have been slow in deciding to fight. Djorn dared not tell me of their coming; he feared he might be too late.

"They will come out of that building," she said, and indicated the towering structure that had been their prison. "It has the old connection with the underground world."

"Well, they'd better be good!" said Blake incredulously.

He was still less optimistic when the building before them showed the coming of a file of men. They poured forth, in orderly fashion and ranged themselves in single file along the walls.

There must be a thousand, McGuire estimated, and he wondered if the women, too, were fighting for their own. Then, remembering Althora's brave insistence, he knew his surmise was correct.

Each one was masked against the gas; their faces were concealed; and each one held before him a tube of shining metal with a larger bulbous end that rested in their hands.

"Electronic projectors," the lieutenant whispered.

"Keep your eye on the enemy, Blake; you are going to learn something about war."

The thin line was advancing now and the gas billowed about them as they came. There were some few who

dropped, where masks were defective, but the line came on, and the slim tubes were before them in glittering menace.

At a distance of a hundred feet from the first of the entrenched enemy there was a movement along the line, as if the holders of the tubes had each set a mechanism in operation. And before the eyes of the Earth-men was a spectacle of horror like nothing in wars they had known.

The barricades were instantly a roaring furnace; the figures that leaped from behind them only added to the flames. From the steady rank of the attackers poured an invisible something before which the hosts of the enemy fell in huddles of flame. Those nearest were blasted from sight in a holocaust of horror, and where they had been was a scattering of embers that smoked and glowed; even the figures of distant ones stumbled and fell.

The myriad fighters of the army of the red ones, when the attackers shut off their invisible rays, was a screaming mob that raced wildly over the open lands

beyond.

Althora's hands were covering her eyes, but McGuire and Blake, and the crowding men about them, stared in awe and utter astonishment at the devastation that was sweeping this world. An army annihilated before their eyes! Scores of thousands, there must be, of the dead!

The voice of Blake was husky with horror. "What a choice little bit out of hell!" he exclaimed. "Mac, did you say they were our friends? God help us if they're not!"

"They are," said McGuire grimly. "Those are Althora's people who had forgotten how to fight; they are recapturing something that they lost some centuries ago. But can they ever destroy the rest of that swarm? I don't think they have the heart to do it."

"They do not need." It was Althora speaking. "My people are sickened with the slaughter. But the red ones will go back into the earth, and we will seal them in!—it is Djorn who tells me—and the world will be

ours forevermore."

A matter of two short days, crammed to the uttermost with the realization of the astounding turn of events—and McGuire and Althora stood with Blake and Djorn, the ruler, undisputed, of the beautiful world of Venus. A fleet of great ships was roaring high in air. One only, the flagship, was waiting where their little group stood.

The bodies of the fallen had been recovered; they were at rest now in the ships that waited above. McGuire looked about in final wonder at the sparkling city bathed in a flood of gold. A kindly city now—beautiful; the terrors it had held were fading from his mind. He turned to Althora.

"We are going home," he said softly, "you and I."

"Home?" Althora's voice was vibrant with dismay.

"We need you here, friend Mack Guire," the voice of Djorn broke in, in protest. "You have something that we lack—a force and vision—something we have lost."

"We will be back," the flyer assured him. "You befriended me: anything I can do in return—" The grip of his hand completed the sentence.

"But there is a grave to be made on the summit of Mount Lawson," he added quietly. "I think he would have preferred to lie there—at the end of his journey—and I must return to the service where I have not yet been mustered out."

"But you said—you were going home," faltered Althora. "Will that always be home to you, Tommy?"

"Home, my dear," he whispered in words that reached her only, "is just where you are." His arm went about her to draw her toward the waiting ship. "There or here—what matter? We will be content."

Her eyes were misty as they smiled an answer. Within the ship that was lifting them, they turned to watch a city of opal light grow faintly luminous in the distance ... an L-shaped continent shrunk to tiny size ... and the nebulous vapors of the cloudland that enclosed this world folded softly about.

"We will lead," the voice of Blake was saying to an aide: "same formation that we used coming over. Give the necessary orders. But," he added slowly to himself, "the line will be shorter; there are fewer of us now."

An astronomical officer laid a chart before the commander. "We are on the course, sir," he reported.

"Full speed," Blake gave the order, and the thundering generator answered from the stern. The Space Fleet of America was going home.

#57 The Destroyer, By William Merriam Rouse:

Slowly, insidiously, there stole over Allen Parker something uncanny. He could no longer control his hands—even his brain!

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

The connection is made



- - -

The pencil in the hand of Allen Parker refused to obey his will. A strange unseen force pushed his will aside and took possession of the pencil point so that what he drew was not his own. It was the same when he turned from drawing board to typewriter. The sentences were not of his framing; the ideas were utterly foreign to him. This was the first hint he received of the fate that was drawing in like night upon him and his beautiful wife.

Slowly, insidiously, there stole over Allen Parker something uncanny. He could no longer control his hands—even his brain!

Parker, a young writer of growing reputation who illustrated his own work, was making a series of pencil sketches for a romance partly finished. The story was as joyous and elusive as sunlight, and until to-day his sketches had held the same quality. Now he could not tap the reservoir from which he had taken the wind-blown hair and smiling eyes of Madelon, his heroine.

When he drew or wrote he seemed to be submerged in the dark waters of a measureless evil pit. The face that mocked him from the paper was stamped with a world-old knowledge of forbidden things.

Parker dropped his pencil and leaned back, tortured. He and his wife, Betty, had taken this house in Pine Hills, a small and extremely quiet suburban village, solely for the purpose of concentration on the book which was to be the most important work he had done. He went to the door of the room that he used for a studio and called:

"Betty! Can you come here a moment, please?"

There was a patter of running feet on the stairs and then a girl of twenty, or thereabout, came into the room. Any man would have said she was a blessing. Her hair "was yellow like ripe corn," and her vivid blue eyes held depth and character and charm.

"Look!" exclaimed Parker. "What do you think of this stuff?"

For a moment there was silence. Then Allen Parker saw something he had never before seen in his wife's face for him or his work—a look of complete disgust.

"I wouldn't have believed you capable of doing anything so ... so horrid!" she said coldly. "How could you?"

"I don't know!" His arms, which had been ready to take her to him for comfort, dropped. "The work has been ... difficult, lately. As though something were pulling at my mind. But not like this! It isn't *me*!"

"It must be you, since it came out of you!" She turned away and moved restlessly to one of the windows.

"Through me!" muttered Parker. "Ideas *come*!"

"You'll have to do something!"

"But what? I don't know what to do!"

"Why not go to see that new doctor?" asked Betty, over her shoulder. "Dr. Friedrich von Stein?"

"Von Stein?" repeated Parker, vaguely. "Don't know him. Anyhow, I don't need a doctor. What in the world made you think of that?"

"Nothing, except that I can see his house from here. He's taken what they call 'the old Reynolds place.' You know—opposite the church. We looked at it and thought it was too large for us. He's made a lot of alterations."

"Oh, yes!" Parker had placed the newcomer, more recent than himself. "I had an idea that he was a doctor of philosophy, not medicine."

"He has half a dozen degrees, they say. Certainly he's a stunning looking man. I saw him on the street."

"Maybe he doesn't practice." The artist was gazing, baffled and sick at heart, upon what he had wrought. "And what could he do, unless it's my liver?"

"He might be a psycho-analyst, or something like that," she replied, slowly.

"But why the wild interest in this particular doctor?" Parker roused himself and looked at her. He felt irritable, and was ashamed of it.

"Only for your work," said Betty. A faint pink touched her cheeks.

Allen Parker had a sudden feeling of certainty that his wife was lying to him. To one who knew the Parkers it would have been equally impossible to think of Betty as lying, or of her husband as believing such a thing. Parker was outraged by his own suspicion. He sprang up and began to pace the floor.

"All right, then!" he exploded. "My work is going to the dogs! Why, there's an appointment with Cartwright to-morrow to show him these sketches, and the last few chapters I've done! We'll go now! If this man can't do anything for me I'll try somebody else!"

In ten minutes they were walking up the quiet street toward the present home of Dr. Friedrich von Stein. Despite his self-absorption Parker could not help

noticing that his wife had never looked more attractive than she did at this moment. Her color had deepened, little wisps of hair curled against her cheeks, and there was a sparkle in her eyes which he knew came only on very particular occasions.

Even from the outside it was apparent that many strange things had been done to the staid and dignified house of Reynolds. A mass of aërials hung above the roof. Some new windows had been cut at the second floor and filled with glass of a peculiar reddish-purple tinge. A residence had been turned into a laboratory, in sharp contrast to the charming houses up and down the street and the church of gray stone that stood opposite.

Beside the door, at the main entrance, a modest plate bore the legend: "Dr. Friedrich von Stein." Parker pressed the bell. Then he squared his broad shoulders and waited: a very miserable, very likeable young man, with a finely shaped head and a good set of muscles under his well cut clothes. He had brought his sketches, but he was uncomfortable with the portfolio under his arm. It seemed to contaminate

him.

The door opened to reveal a blocky figure of a man in a workman's blouse and overalls. The fellow was pale of eye, towheaded; he appeared to be good natured but of little intelligence. The only remarkable thing about him was a livid welt that ran across one cheek, from nose to ear. Beside him a glossy-coated dachshund wagged furiously, after having barked once as a matter of duty.

"May we see Dr. von Stein?" asked Parker. "If he is in?"

"I will ask the Herr Doktor if he iss in," replied the man, stiffly.

"*Dummkopf!*" roared a voice from inside the house. An instant later man and dog shrank back along the hall and there appeared in their place one of the most striking personalities Allen Parker had ever seen.

Dr. Friedrich von Stein was inches more than six feet tall and he stood perfectly erect, with the

unmistakable carriage of a well drilled soldier. He was big boned, but lean, and every movement was made with military precision. More than any other feature his eyes impressed Parker: they were steady, penetrating, and absolutely black. But for a thread of gray here and there his well-kept beard and hair were black. He might have been any age from forty to sixty, so deceptive was his appearance.

"Come in, if you please," he said, before Parker could speak. Von Stein's voice was rich and deep, but with a metallic quality which somehow corresponded with his mechanical smile. Except for the guttural r's there was hardly a hint of the foreigner in his speech. "It is Mr. and Mrs. Parker, I believe? I am Dr. von Stein."

He stood aside for them to pass into the hallway, and while they murmured their thanks he shot a volley of German at the man, whom he called Heinrich. The frightened servant vanished; and the Parkers were taken into a living room furnished carelessly, but in good enough taste. Betty took her place on a couch, to which the doctor led her with a bow. Parker sank into an overstuffed chair not far from a window.

"I learned your names because of the beauty of madame," said Von Stein, as he stood looming above the mantel. Again he bowed. "One could not see her without wishing to know how such a charming woman was called. You are my neighbors from down the street, I believe."

"Yes," replied Allen. He wanted to be agreeable, but found it difficult. "And I think Mrs. Parker has developed a great admiration for you. She persuaded me to come here to-day. Are you, by chance, a psychoanalyst? I don't even know that you are a doctor of medicine, but—"

"I know a very great deal about the human mind," interrupted Dr. von Stein calmly. "I know a great deal about many things. I am not going to practice medicine here in Pine Hills because I have research work to do, but I will help you if I can. What is your trouble?"[201]

The question brought back to Parker the mood of half an hour ago. Almost savagely he snapped the portfolio open and spread out a few of his recent drawings,

with some of the earlier ones for comparison.

"Look!" he cried. "These vicious things are what I am doing now! I can't help myself! The pencil does not obey me! Apparently I have no emotional control. It's as though my normal ideas were shouldered aside, like people in a crowd. And my writing to-day was as bad as these illustrations. I'm doing a book. Consider these things carefully, Doctor. They are not obscene, except by inference. They can't be censored. The book would go through the mails. Yet they are deadly! Look at my heroine in these two pictures. In one she is like—like violets! In the other she looks capable of any crime! What is she? A vampire, if there is such a thing? A witch? I can almost believe in demonology since I made these last drawings!"

Parker, in spite of his excitement, tried to read the face of Dr. Friedrich von Stein. He found nothing but the automatic smile upon that mask. Yet it seemed to the artist that this time there was a hint of real pleasure in the curve of the lips. Was it possible that anyone could like those drawings? Parker began to think that he was going insane.

"This is most unfortunate for you," rumbled the doctor. "I understand. But I trust that the condition can be remedied, if it persists. You, Mr. Parker, and you, Madame, do you understand something of physics, of psychology, of metaphysics?"

"I fear that I'm rather ignorant," answered Betty. "Certainly I am in comparison with a man of your attainments."

Dr. von Stein bowed. He turned his black eyes upon Parker.

"And you, sir? I must adjust my explanation to—what shall I say? To your knowledge of the higher reaches of scientific thought?"

"Why, I majored in philosophy in college," said Parker, hesitatingly. "But that's quite a time ago, Herr Doktor. Of course I've tried to keep up with the conclusions of science. But a writer or a painter doesn't have any too much opportunity. He has his own problems to concern him."

"Yes, indeed!" Dr. von Stein was thoughtful. "So, and especially for the benefit of madame, I shall speak in terms of the concrete."

"Please consider me stupid!" begged Betty. "But I want to understand!"

"Certainly, except that you are not stupid, Madame. I will proceed. Both of you, I assume, know something of the radio? Very good! You know that an etheric wave transmits the message, and that it is received and amplified so that it is within the range of the human ear. These waves were there when paleolithic man hunted his meat with a stone-tipped club. To use them it was necessary to invent the microphone, and a receiving instrument.

"What I have said you already know. But here is what may startle you. Human thought is an etheric wave of the same essential nature as the radio wave. They are both electrical currents external to man. Thoughts sweep across the human mind as sound currents sweep across the aerials of a radio—"

"I told you!" Allen Parker turned a triumphant face to his wife. "Pardon me, Herr Doktor! I have tried to convince Mrs. Parker that my idea came from outside!"

"Exactly!" Dr. von Stein took no offense. "And a difference between the mind and the radio set is that with the radio you tune in upon whatever you choose, and when you choose. The mind is not under such control, although it should be. It receives that to which it happens to be open. Or that thought which has been²⁰² intensified and strengthened by having been received and entertained by other minds. In India they say: 'Five thousand died of the plague and fifty thousand died of fear.' Do you both follow me?"

It was unnecessary to ask. Betty sat on the edge of the couch, intent upon every word. Parker, although more restrained, was equally interested. Moreover he was delighted to have what he had felt instinctively confirmed, in a way, by a man of science.

"Herbert Spencer said," continued the doctor, "that no thought, no feeling, is ever manifested save as the

result of a physical force. This principle will before long be a scientific commonplace. And Huxley predicted that we would arrive at a mechanical equivalent of consciousness. But I will not attempt to bolster my position with authorities. I know, and I can prove what I know.

"You, Mr. Parker, have been receiving some particularly annoying thoughts which have been intensified, it may be, by others, or another. Human will power can alter the rate of vibration of the line of force, or etheric wave. So-called good thoughts have a high rate of vibration, and those which are called bad ordinarily have a low rate. Have you, perhaps, an enemy?"

"Not that I know of," replied Parker, in a low voice.

"Then it would follow that this is accidental."

"Good heavens! Do you mean to say that someone could do this to me maliciously?"

"So far my experiments leave something to be

desired," said Dr. von Stein, without answering directly. "No doubt you are peculiarly susceptible to thoughts which bear in any way on your work."

"But isn't there any help for it?" asked Betty. She was regarding her husband with the eyes of a stranger.

"I believe I can do something for Mr. Parker."

There was a knock at the door. The doctor boomed an order to come in. Heinrich, with the dachshund at his heels, entered bearing a tray with a bottle of wine and some slices of heavy fruit cake. He drew out a table and placed the tray.

"Do not bring that dog in when I have guests," said Von Stein. He spoke with a gleam of white teeth. "You know what will happen, Heinrich?"

"*Ja*, Herr Doktor! I take Hans out!" The man was terrified. He gathered the dog into his arms and fairly fled from the room. Dr. von Stein turned with a smile.

"I have to discipline him," he explained. "He's a stupid

fellow, but faithful. I can't have ordinary servants about. There are scientific men who would be willing to bribe them for a look at my laboratory."

"I did not know such things were done among scholars," said Betty, slowly.

"What I have accomplished means power, Madame!" exclaimed the doctor. "There are jackals in every walk of life. If an unscrupulous man of science got into my laboratory, a physicist for instance, he might ... find out things!"

Dr. von Stein turned to his duties as host. He filled their glasses, and watched with satisfaction Betty's obvious enjoyment of the cake. A box of mellow Havanas appeared from a cabinet: imported cigarettes from a smoking stand. But Parker, in spite of a liking for good wine and tobacco, was far too much concerned about his work to forget the errand that had brought him there.

"So you think," he said, when there was opportunity, "that you can help me, Dr. von Stein?"

"I can," replied von Stein, firmly; "but before attempting anything I'd like to wait a day or two. The attacking thoughts may become less violent, or your resistance greater, in either of which cases the condition will fade[203] out. You will either get better or much worse. If you are worse come to see me again, and I promise you that I will do something!"

"I'll come, and thank you!" Parker felt better, and more cheerful than he had since the beginning of the disturbance. "Few things could make me suffer so much as trouble with my work."

"That is what I thought," agreed Dr. von Stein.

Betty rose. Her husband caught the look in her eyes as they met the bright, black gaze of Dr. von Stein, and he went cold. That look had always been for him alone. Her feet seemed to linger on the way to the door.

"He's wonderful!" she breathed, as they started down the uneventful street. "Scientific things never interested me before. But he makes them vital,

living!"

"And yet," said Parker, thoughtfully, "there's something uncanny about that man!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Betty. "It's because he's a genius! Don't be small, Allen!"

Parker gasped, and remained silent. He could not remember that his wife had ever spoken to him in quite that way. They finished the little journey home without speaking again and Parker went directly to studio. He sat down, with drooping shoulders, and considered the mess he had made of his book. Well, there was nothing to do but see Cartwright to-morrow and face the music!

Dinner that night was a mournful affair. The soft footsteps of the servant going in and out of the dining room, the ticking of the clock, were almost the only sounds. Betty was deep in her own thoughts; Parker was too miserable to talk. He went to bed early and lay staring into the darkness for what seemed like an eternity of slow moving hours.

The tall, deep voiced clock in the hall downstairs had just struck one when suddenly Parker's room was flooded with light. He sat up, blinking, and saw Betty standing near his bed. Her fingers twisted against each other; her face was drawn and white.

"Allen!" she whispered. "I'm afraid!"

Instantly he was on his feet; his arms went around her and the yellow head dropped wearily against his shoulder.

"Afraid of what?" he cried. "What is it, sweetheart?"

"I don't know!" All at once her body stiffened and she pulled away from him. Then she laughed—"What nonsense! I must have been having a bad dream ... it's nothing. Sorry I bothered you, Allen!"

She was gone before his could stop her. Bewildered, he did not know whether to follow. Better not, he thought. She would sleep now, and perhaps he would. But he was worried. Betty was becoming less and less like herself.

At last Parker did sleep, to awake shortly after daylight. He got a hasty breakfast and took an early train to New York. When John Cartwright, a shrewd and kindly man well advanced in years, arrived at his office Allen Parker was right there waiting for him.

Cartwright had shown a real affection for the younger man, a paternal interest. He beamed, as usual, until he sat down with the new drawings. Slowly the smile faded from his face. He went over them twice, three times, and then he looked up.

"My boy," he said, "did you do these?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that you are turning a delicate and beautiful romance into a lascivious libel on the human race?"

"It is being done," replied Parker, in a low voice. "And I—I can't help myself!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that when I start to draw[204] Madelon my hand produces that woman of Babylon! The writing is just as bad. It's full of sneering hints, double meanings ... I shall destroy the stuff. I've been to see a psycho-analyst."

"Ah!" thoughtfully. "Perhaps you're tired, Allen. Why not take Betty for a sea trip? There'll still be time for fall publication."

"I'm going to try everything possible. I'd rather be dead than do work like this!"

When Parker left his friend he was somewhat encouraged. After the first shock Cartwright had been inclined to make light of the difficulty, and by the time Allen Parker reached Pine Hills his stride had the usual swing and snap.

He ran up the steps of his house and burst into the living room with a smile. Betty was sitting by one of the windows, her hands lying relaxed in her lap. She turned a somber face toward her husband, and spoke before he had time to say a word of greeting.

"You knew that Cordelia Lyman died a short time ago, didn't you?"

"What's that?" exclaimed Parker, bewildered. "Lyman? Oh, the old lady down the street who left her money to found a home for aged spinsters? What about it?"

"But she didn't leave her money to found a home for aged spinsters, Allen. She had said she was going to, and everybody thought so. Her will was admitted to probate, or whatever they call it, yesterday. She left half a million, all she had, to Dr. Friedrich von Stein, to be used as he thinks best for the advancement of science!"

"Good heavens!" Parker stared. "Why, I didn't know she knew him. He'd only been here a week or so when she died."

"There isn't a flaw in the will, they say. You can imagine that Pine Hills is talking!"

"Well," said Parker philosophically, "he's lucky. I hope he does something with it."

"He will," replied Betty, with conviction. "He'll do a great many things!"

Parker told her of his interview with Cartwright, but she seemed little interested. He did not try to work that day but, after he had put the offending drawings and manuscript out of sight, he wandered, read, smoked, and in the evening persuaded Betty to take a moonlight walk with him.

They passed the house of Dr. von Stein, from which came a faint humming that sounded like a dynamo. Across the street the church was alight for some service. Triumphant music drifted to them. The moon hung above the spire, with its cross outlined darkly against the brilliant sky. The windows were great jewels. Betty drew a deep breath.

"Sometimes, Allen," she said, "I feel like praying!"

"You *are* a beautiful prayer," whispered Parker.

She walked close to him, holding his arm, and repeated softly:

"Are not two prayers a perfect strength? And shall I feel afraid?"

But that was the end of that mood. By the time they arrived home Betty was again the strange, aloof, cold, slightly hard woman of the past few days. Again depression settled upon Allen Parker.

The next morning he breakfasted alone and went directly to the studio, without seeing Betty. Sun streamed into the room; the pencil moved swiftly. For a brief time Parker thought that he was himself again, as Madelon grew upon the block of paper. But the end was terrible. The last few strokes made her grotesque. This time the woman he had drawn was not merely evil; she was a mocking parody of his heroine. He threw drawing and pencil across the room.

But no real artist can be discouraged[205] short of death. He went to work again and labored until luncheon time. The results were no better, although they varied. Now it seemed that some malevolent power was playing with him, torturing him to the

accompaniment of devilish laughter. He was haggard and actually stooped of body when he bathed his face and went down to the dining room. From across the table Betty regarded him curiously.

"Fleming Proctor shot himself last night," she announced, calmly. "This morning they found him dead in his office."

"Proctor? You don't mean the president of the Pine Hills National Bank?"

"Yes." The expression of Betty's face did not change. "There was a note saying that he was sorry. It seems he'd made a large loan without security to an unknown person, and the bank examiner was coming to-day. Proctor said he couldn't help what he did. The note was confused as though he were trying to tell something and couldn't. They think his mind must have given way, particularly as they can't trace the loan, although the money is undoubtedly gone."

"That kind of thing doesn't happen!" Parker was stunned. He had known Fleming Proctor, and liked

him. They met often at the country club. "Proctor was honest, and a fine business man!"

"It did happen, Allen!"

"I'd like to know more about it. That would have been a case for Dr. von Stein to take in hand."

"Perhaps," said Betty, in a voice like ice. "But I'm more interested in finding out how soon you are going to return to normal. Frankly, I'm beginning to get bored."

Without a word Parker rose and left the room. Never before had his wife hurt him like this. Doubly sensitive just now, he was suffering alone in the studio when the telephone rang.

"Dr. von Stein speaking. Are you better, Mr. Parker?"

"Worse! Much worse!"

"Then come to my house this evening at nine. May I expect you? And alone?"

"Yes." There was much Parker wanted to say, but he choked the words back. "I'll be there, and alone."

"I shall be ready for you. Good-by."

Allen Parker hung up the receiver. He did not leave the studio again until evening.

As Parker approached the house of Dr. Friedrich von Stein he saw that the church was lighted as it had been the night before. In a clear sky the moon rode above the spire. He paused to let his glance sweep up along the beautiful line that ran from earth to the slender cross. That was how he felt. He wanted to rise, as that line rose, from cumbering earth to clarity and beauty.

He mounted the steps and rang. Dr. von Stein met him, with eyes and teeth agleam in the hall light. Wearily Parker stepped inside. His mood of the moment before was fading.

"Go upstairs to my laboratory, if you please," said the doctor. "It is best that I see you there, for it may be

that you will need treatment."

"I need something," replied Parker as he went up a long flight of stairs. "I'm in a bad way."

Without answer von Stein led him down a short corridor and held open a door. Allen Parker stepped into a room that bewildered him with its strange contrasts.

At a glance he saw that nearly the whole upper floor of the building had been converted into one gigantic room. Near a big stone fireplace, where burning driftwood sent up its many tinted flames, Heinrich stood rigidly at attention. Hans, the dachshund, crouched at his feet. When the dog started to meet Parker a guttural command stopped him.

Here there were bearskins on the floor, huge stuffed chairs, footrests, little tables, humidors, pipe racks, all that[206] one could desire for comfort. Two German duelling swords were crossed above the mantel.

But beyond this corner everything was different. Parker saw the massed windows of reddish-purple glass; he saw apparatus for which he had no name, as well as some of the ordinary paraphernalia of the chemical laboratory. There was wiring everywhere, and a multitude of lighting fixtures. Utilitarian tables, desks and chairs were placed about with mathematical precision. There were plates and strips of metal set into the glass smooth flooring, which was broken by depressions and elevations of unusual form.

The most striking thing in the room was a huge copper bowl that hung inverted from the ceiling. In it, and extending down below the rim, was what seemed to be a thick and stationary mist. It looked as though the bowl had been filled with a silver gray mist and then turned bottom side up. But the cloud did not fall or float away.

"I can think and speak best from my desk," Von Stein was saying. "Please sit down facing me in the chair which Heinrich will place for you. Then we will talk."

Heinrich rolled one of the overstuffed chairs noiselessly to a position about six feet from the desk. Parker noticed a long metal strip in the floor between him and the doctor.

Just then Hans wriggled forward and the artist scratched his ears, to be rewarded by a grateful tongue. Again a command from Heinrich brought the dog to heel, but the voice was not so gruff this time. Together they returned to the fireplace.

Von Stein let his hands rest upon the desk top—a surface covered with levers, electric switches, push buttons, and contrivances the nature of which Parker could not guess. The doctor leaned forward. He threw over a switch. The lights in the room became less bright. He pressed a button. The *Danse Macabre* of Saint-Saens floated weirdly upon the air, as though the music came from afar off.

"Is that part of the treatment?" asked Parker, with a faint smile. "It's not cheering, exactly."

"Merely an idiosyncrasy of mine," answered Von

Stein, showing his teeth. "Before anything is done I must, in order to aid the receptivity of your mind, go a little further with the explanation of certain things which I mentioned the other day. I promise not to bore you. More than that, Mr. Parker, I promise that you will be more interested than you have ever been in anything!"

It seemed to Parker that there was something sinister in the manner and speech of Dr. von Stein. The Dance of Death! Did that music have a meaning? Impossible! It was only his own sick mind that was allowing such thoughts to come to him.

"Anything that will help," he murmured.

"You have noticed that copper bowl?" Von Stein did not wait for a reply. "The misty appearance inside and underneath it is given by thousands upon thousands of minute platinum wires. When it is in use a slight electrical current is passed through it, varying in power according to the rate of vibration needed. That instrument, my dear sir, is a transmitter of thought. I may call it the microphone of the mind. I can tune in

on any mind in the world, by experimenting up and down the vibration range to determine the susceptibility of the particular person. The human mind does not need an amplifier, as the radio receiving set does. Rather, it acts as its own amplifier, once having received the thought. I invented one, however, to prove that it could be done. I equipped Heinrich with it and in half an hour by suggestion reduced him to his present state of docile stupidity. I have, Mr. Parker, the means of moving people to do my bidding!"[207]

Von Stein stopped abruptly, as though for emphasis and to allow his astounding statements to take effect. Parker sat stunned, struggling to grasp all the implications of what he had just heard. Suddenly they became clear. He saw events in order, and in relation to each other.

"So that's how it was with Cordelia Lyman!" he cried hoarsely, leaning forward. "And it was you who had that money from Fleming Proctor!"

"You are not unintelligent," remarked Dr. von Stein.

"Better that science should have the Lyman money than a few old women of no particular use. As for Proctor, he was a fool. I would have protected him."

"And my pictures ... my book...."

"I can cure you, Mr. Parker. *If I will!*"

"And anyone is at the mercy of this man!" groaned Parker.

"Not absolutely, I'm sorry to say," said the doctor.

"The action of thought on the human consciousness is exactly like that of sound on the tuning fork. When the mind is tuned right, we'll say for illustration, the lower vibrations are not picked out of the ether. But as few minds are tuned right, and as all vary from time to time, I'm practically omnipotent."

"You have changed the nature of my wife!" Parker was getting hold of himself and he could speak with a degree of calmness. "That is a worse crime than the one you've committed against me directly!"

"Mr. Parker," said the doctor, impressively, "you are in a web. I am the spider. You are the fly. I don't particularly desire to hurt you, but I want your wife. This is the crux of the matter. She is the woman to share my triumphs. Already I have aroused her interest. Give her up and you will continue your work as before. Refuse, and you will lose her just as certainly as though you give her to me. For, my dear sir, you will be insane in less than a month from now. I promise you that!"

Allen Parker was not one to indulge in melodrama. For a long moment he sat looking into the black eyes of Von Stein. Then he spoke carefully.

"If my wife of her own will loved you, and wanted freedom, I'd let her go. But this is a kind of hypnosis. It's diabolical!"

"Who but the devil was the father of magic?" asked the doctor, cheerfully. "Hypnosis is unconsciously based on a scientific principle which I have mastered. Repeated advertising of a tooth brush or a box of crackers is mild mental suggestion—hypnosis, if you

will. My dear fellow, be sensible!"

"Sophistry!" growled Parker.

Von Stein laughed. He moved a lever upon a dial and a sheet of blue flame quivered between them. With another movement of the lever it vanished.

"I could destroy you instantly," he said, "and completely, and no one could prove a crime! I shall not do it. I have no time to be bothered with investigations. Think of the fate I have promised you. Think, and you will give her up!"

"I shall not!" Parker wiped cold drops from his forehead. The doctor frowned thoughtfully.

"I'll intensify her desire to come here to-night," he said. "She herself will persuade you."

Parker set his fingers into the arms of his chair as Von Stein rose and walked to the copper bowl. He stood directly under it, and put on goggles with shields fitting close to his feet. At the pressure of his foot a

tablelike affair rose from the floor in front of him. This, like the desk, was equipped with numerous dials, buttons and levers. Von Stein manipulated them. The great cap of copper descended until his head was enveloped by the mist of platinum wires. A faint humming grew in the room. A tiny bell tinkled.

"The connection is made," murmured[208] Von Stein. He lifted a hand for silence: then his fingers leaped among the gadgets on the table. After that came a brief period, measured by seconds, of immobility. Then the table sank from view, the copper bowl lifted, and Dr. von Stein went back to his chair.

"She will be here shortly," he said. "If that does not change your mind...."

He shrugged. Parker knew what that shrug meant. He searched his mind for a plan and found none. Better die fighting than yield, or risk the vengeance of Friedrich von Stein. If he could get the doctor away from the desk where he controlled the blue-white flame there might be a chance to do something. Von Stein was by far the larger man, but Parker had been

an athlete all his life. If....

"That mass of copper and platinum," he said, tentatively, "will make you master of the world!"

"My brain, my intelligence, has made me master of the world!" corrected Von Stein, proudly. He was touched in the right spot now. "You have not seen all!"

He sprang up and went to one of the tables. From his pocket he took a piece of paper and crumpled it into a ball while, with the other hand, he made some electrical connections to a plate of metal set into the surface of the table. Next he placed the wad of paper on the plate. Then, standing at arm's length from the apparatus, he pressed a button. Instantly the paper disappeared behind a screen of the colors of the spectrum, from red to violet. The banded colors were there for a minute fraction of a second. Then there was nothing where the paper had been on the plate. Von Stein smiled as he stepped away from the table.

"The electron is formed by the crossing of two lines of force," he said, "and the interaction of positive and

negative polarity. The electron is a stress in the ether, nothing more, but it is the stuff of which all matter is made. Thought is vibration in one dimension; matter in two. You have just seen me untie the knot, dissociate the electrons, or what you will. In plain language I have caused matter to vanish utterly. That paper is not burned up. It no longer exists in any form. The earth upon which we stand, Parker, can be dissolved like mist before the sun!"

Appalled as he was at this man who boasted and made good his terrible boasts Allen Parker had not forgotten the purpose that was in him. Now was his chance, while Von Stein stood smiling triumphantly between table and desk.

Parker shot from his chair with the speed of utter desperation. He feinted, and drove a vicious uppercut to the jaw of Dr. Friedrich von Stein. The doctor reeled but he did not go down. His fists swung. Parker found him no boxer, and beat a tattoo upon his middle. Von Stein began to slump.

Then two thick muscled arms closed around the artist

from behind and he was lifted clear of the floor. He kicked, and tried to turn, but it was useless. The doctor recovered himself. His eyes blazed fury.

"Put him in the chair, Heinrich!" he roared. "For this I will show you what I can do, Herr Parker!"

At that instant little Hans, who had been yelping on the edge of the battle, dashed in. He leaped for the throat of Von Stein. The doctor kicked him brutally.

The shriek of agony from Hans loosened the arms of Heinrich. Parker got his footing again. He saw the clumsy serving man spring forward and gather his dog up to his breast. Again Parker rushed for his enemy.

It was clear now that Von Stein was cut off from the controls he wanted, and without Heinrich he could not master Parker in a fight. For an instant he stood baffled. Then he retreated the length of the room, taking what blows he could not beat off. He staggered upon a plate of metal set into the floor, righted himself, and failed in an attempt to catch hold of

Parker. Suddenly he bowed in the direction of the distant doorway.

Allen half turned. Betty was coming down the room, staring and breathless.

"*Leben sie wohl!*" cried Von Stein. "Farewell, Madame! I should like to take you with me!"[209]

A great flash of the colors of the spectrum sent Parker reeling back. Dr. Friedrich von Stein had gone the way of the crumpled ball of paper.

There was a long moment of silence. Then Allen Parker found his wife in his arms, clinging to him.

"Are not two prayers a perfect strength?" she murmured, sobbing against his heart.

#58 The Gray Plague, By Lloyd Arthur Eshbach:

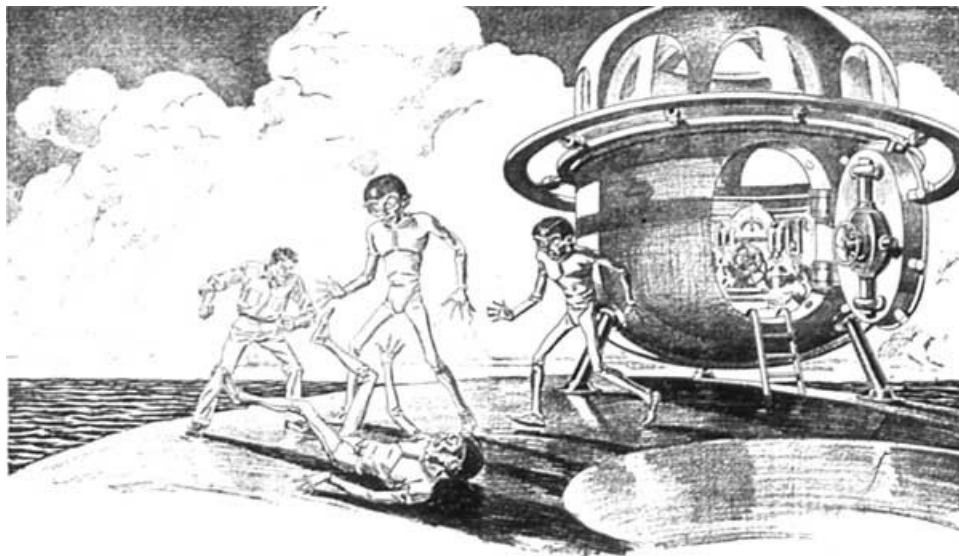
Maimed and captive, in the depths of an interplanetary meteor-craft, lay the only possible savior of plague-ridden earth.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

they were almost upon him



- - -

Chapter 1

Five months before the beginning of that period of madness, that time of chaos and death that became known as the Gray Plague, the first of the strange meteors fell to Earth. It landed a few miles west of El Paso, Texas, on the morning of March 11th.

Maimed and captive, in the depths of an interplanetary meteor-craft, lay the only possible savior of plague-ridden Earth.

In a few hours a great throng of people gathered around the dully smoldering mass of fire-pitted rock, the upper half of which protruded from the Earth where it had buried itself, like a huge, roughly outlined hemisphere. And then, when the crowd had assumed its greatest proportions, the meteor, with a mighty, Earth-shaking roar, exploded.

A vast flood of radiance, more brilliant than the light of the sun, lit up the sky for miles around. One moment, a throng of curious people, a number of scientists, newspaper men—a crashing explosion—

and then a great, yawning pit sending forth a blinding radiance! Destruction and death where life had been.

The brilliant light streamed from the pit for about ten minutes; then like a snuffed-out candle flame, it vanished.

The second of the strange meteors landed on the evening of March 13th, in the city of Peking, China. It demolished several buildings, and buried itself beneath the ruins. The Chinese, unaware of the tragedy at El Paso, gathered in the vicinity, and when the meteor exploded at about ten o'clock that night, were instantly destroyed. As in Texas, the great pit emitted a cloud of dazzling light for about ten minutes, throwing a brilliant glow over the city and its surroundings; then was extinguished.

The people of the world awoke to the fact that events worthy of more than passing interest were occurring. The press of every nation began giving the strange meteors more and more publicity. Statements of different pseudo-scientists were published in explanation of the meteor's origin, statements that

aroused world wide conjecture.

Approximately twenty-four hours after the falling of the second missile, the third one fell, landing near Madrid, Spain. The Spaniards, having received news of the El Paso and Peking tragedies, avoided the ugly mass of rock as though it were a dreaded pestilence. In every way its action was similar to that of its two predecessors.

The interest of the world was doubled now. The unusual similarity of the action of the meteors, and the regularity of their landings, seemed indicative of a definite, hostile purpose behind it all. A menace from the unknown—a peril from the skies!

Scientists began giving serious consideration to the unusual phenomenon, pottering around in the pits, wearing airs of puzzlement. But their investigations were of no avail, for nothing of any great significance came to light through their efforts.

At about that time, an announcement was made that created a furor. Astronomers in different parts of the

United States reported that they had observed a bright flare of light leaping up from the darkened portion of the planet Venus. The astronomers had no definite idea of anything of importance in back of what they had seen; but not so the masses. The flare, they said, was caused by the release of another meteor!

From Venus! Missiles, hurled by Venerians, menacing the Earth! The silver planet became the subject of universal discussion; innumerable fantastic articles about it appeared in magazine sections of Sunday newspapers. And the astronomers of Earth turned their telescopes toward Venus with an interest they had never felt before.

Four days of expectant waiting passed by after the third meteor had fallen, while interest continued mounting at an accelerating pace. And then, at about two o'clock in the morning of the 18th, three great observatories, two in North America and one in England, recorded the falling of an extraordinarily large and unusually brilliant meteor that glowed with an intense, bluish-white light as it entered the Earth's

atmosphere. And, unlike most meteors, this one was not consumed by its intense heat, but continued gleaming brilliantly until it vanished below the horizon. Simultaneous with the falling of the meteor, the Earth was rocked by one of the worst quakes in history.

Seismographs in all parts of the world recorded the tremors of the Earth, each indicating that the disturbance had occurred somewhere beneath the Atlantic ocean. Evidently the fourth meteor had fallen into the ocean, for the shaking of the Earth was obviously the result of the collision. That quakes had not followed the landing of the first three was due to the fact that they had been far smaller than the fourth.

And then, a short time after the earthquake, the worst storm in two hundred years broke over the Atlantic. Waves, mountain high, piled themselves upon each other in a wild frenzy; a shrieking wind lashed the waters into a liquid chaos. Great ocean-liners were tossed about like tiny chips; an appalling number of smaller ships were lost in that insane storm.

Nor was the destruction confined to the sea, for all along the Atlantic coast of North America and Europe, mighty walls of water rushed in, and wrecked entire towns and cities.

Fortunately the storm was of short duration; a few hours after it began, it subsided.

For a number of weeks public attention was centered upon the meteors and storm; but gradually, when nothing further occurred, the fickle interest of the masses began to wane. A month after the storm, the strange meteors were no longer mentioned by the press, and consequently, had passed from the public mind. Only the astronomers remembered, keeping their telescopes trained on Venus night after night.

Four months passed by during which nothing of an unusual nature came to the attention of the world. But at the end of that time, it suddenly dawned upon those nations whose shores touched the Atlantic ocean, that something extraordinary was happening. It was taking place so insidiously, so quietly, that it had attracted no great attention.

A series of inexplicable sea disasters had begun. Every ship that had traveled over a certain, regular steamship route, had disappeared, leaving no trace. Mysteriously, without warning, they had vanished; without a single S O S being sent, seven freighters had been lost. The disappearances had been called to the world's attention by the shipping companies, alarmed at the gradual loss of their boats.

Then other mysterious vanishings came to the attention of the world. Ships in all parts of the Atlantic were being lost. When this fact became known, trans-Atlantic commerce ceased almost overnight. With the exception of a few privately owned yachts and freighters, the Atlantic became deserted.

And finally, a few days after the world became aware of the strange disappearances on the Atlantic, the Gray Plague introduced itself to humanity. Attempts were made to repress the facts: but the tragedy of the freighter, *Charleston*, in all its ghastrliness and horror, became known in spite of all attempts at secrecy.

On the morning of August 3rd, the *Charleston* was

found, half buried in the sand of a beach on the coast of Florida, cast there, evidently, by a passing storm. The freighter had been one of the first boats to disappear.

When the ship's discoverers boarded her, their eyes were greeted by a sight whose ghastliness filled them with a numbing horror. Indeed, so terrifying was the spectacle on the *Charleston*, that the discoverers, four boys of adolescent age, left in fear-stricken haste. Nor could they be induced to return to the ship's deck.

Later, a group of men from a nearby town boarded the freighter to investigate the boys' amazing report. In the group was a newspaper reporter who chanced to be in the vicinity on a minor story. It was through the reporter's account that the facts became known as quickly as they did.

When the men clambered up the side of the *Charleston* to her deck, they saw a spectacle the like of which had never before been seen on Earth. Although they had been prepared for the horror to

some extent by the story of the boys, the sight on the *Charleston* exceeded their description to such a degree that, for the moment, the men were rendered speechless.

The deck of the *Charleston* was a shambles—a scene of sudden, chilling death. All about were strewn gray, lifeless bodies. Death had overtaken the crew in the midst of their duties, suddenly, without warning, it seemed. Bodies strewn about—yet nowhere was there sign of decay! Bodies, lifeless for days, or weeks—yet intact!

The men were fearfully impressed by the strangely grotesque positions of the corpses. With a few exceptions, they lay on the deck in abnormal, twisted masses of gray covered flesh. Somehow, they seemed flattened, as though they had been soft, jellylike, and had flowed, had settled, flat against the deck. Some were no more than three inches thick, and had spread out to such an extent that they looked like fantastic caricatures of human bodies. That unnatural change in their structure, and the ghastly, dead-gray color of their skins gave the corpses a horrifying, utterly

repulsive appearance that made the flesh of the men crawl.

The bodies had a strangely soft aspect, as though they were still jellylike. One of the men, bolder than the rest, touched a body—and withdrew his hand in revulsion and surprise. For the ugly mass was cold, and as hard as bone: the tissues of the flesh seemingly replaced by a solid, bony substance. Later investigation revealed that all the dead on the *Charleston* had assumed a similar, bonelike solidity.

When the men left the freighter to report the tragedy to the proper authorities, their faces were blanched, and their nerves badly shaken. Yet their horror was nothing when compared with what it would have been, had they known what was to follow.

Rapidly the story of the *Charleston* spread. By means of the press, over the radio, even by word of mouth, the story of the horror on the freighter was given publicity. All over the United States and Canada it spread, and from thence to the rest of the world. Eagerly was the story accepted: here, at last, was the

explanation of the sea disasters! And then, more than ever before, was the Atlantic ocean shunned.

The bodies of the seamen on the freighter were turned over to scientists for experimentation and research. It was thought that they might be able to discover the cause of the Gray Death, and with a knowledge of its cause, create something with which to free the Atlantic from its scourge.

The scientists' investigations only served to mystify the world to a greater degree. The only thing that came to light was the cause of the bodies' bonelike rigidity. In some inexplicable way the bones in the seamen had dissolved, and according to appearances, while the bodies were plastic, had flattened out. And then, strange and unnatural though it seemed, the calcium from the dissolved bones had gathered at the surface of each body, and combining with the flesh and skin, had formed the hard, bony shell that gave them their ghastly grayness, and their appearance of petrification. Aside from this, the scientists learned nothing; the cause of this amazing phenomenon was a complete mystery to them.

Slowly, methodically, step by step, the unusual had been taking place. From the time of the landing of the first strange meteor, up to the discovery of the *Charleston*, there had been a gradual increase in the significance of each succeeding event.

Then finally came the climax: the Gray Plague itself. All that preceded it faded into significance before the horror of the dread pestilence that seized the world with its destroying talons.

A short time after the discovery of the *Charleston*, the Plague made its first appearance on land. Slowly, pitilessly, inexorably, it began, taking its toll all along the Atlantic coast. From Newfoundland to Brazil; from the British Isles to Egypt, wherever people lived near the ocean, thousands were stricken with the dread malady.

The old and infirm were the most quickly affected; their weakened bodies could not withstand the ravage of the Plague as could those of younger people. An old man, walking along a large thoroughfare in Savannah, Georgia, suddenly uttered a fearful shriek and sank to

the pavement. While the pedestrians watched with bulging eyes, he seemed to shrink, to flatten, to flow liquidly, turning a ghastly gray. Within an hour he was as hard as the men of the *Charleston*. Of all the millions, perhaps he was the first.

Others followed in the wake of the first victim, young as well as old; three hours after the death in Savannah, every channel of communication was choked with news of a constantly increasing number of casualties. A Boston minister, preaching a funeral sermon, collapsing beside the coffin; a lineman on a telegraph pole, overcome, falling—and splashing! A thousand incongruous tragedies shocking humanity.

In Europe the action of the Plague was the same as in North America. Death stalking the sea-coast, destroying thousands; ignorant fishermen, men of learning, women and children of every age—all were grist to be ground in the mill of the Gray Plague.

Before a week had gone by, no one remained alive in the villages, towns and cities all along the Atlantic. New York, London, all the large coast cities were

deserted by the living, left to the rigid dead. From the largest metropolis to the smallest hamlet, all became body-glutted tombs.

And then, on the morning of October 12th, news was given to the world that threw mankind into a panic. The Plague was moving inland! Slowly, yet relentlessly it spread, no longer confining its effect to the sea-coast, but moving farther and farther inland toward the heart of the two continents, driving mankind before it. For people fled in insane terror before the advancing death. Nor was there escape from the menace—no antidote to counteract, no sanctuary wherein to hide.

To North and South, to East and West, the pestilence spread, destroying as it went. Unless there were some miraculous intervention, the human race would be destroyed!

Officials of the world were at their wits' end; scientists threw up their hands in despair. The Plague was an insoluble puzzle—enigmatical, utterly inexplicable, beyond the knowledge of Earth.

Scientists and doctors were brutally slain during that period by fear-crazed mobs, because of their inability to rescue the world from the grip of the Plague. Thousands of people died while striving to escape from the Gray Death, crushed by passing motor vehicles, or starving in the congested areas. Gone was the boasted civilization of man—humanity sinking rapidly to the level of the beast; gone, destroyed in a few weeks!

And then one day when the end seemed perilously close, there was ushered into the presence of the remnant of the United States officials who had gathered in San Francisco, a twisted monstrosity of a man, fearfully scarred and deformed. He was closeted with them for two hours. At the end of that time an excited official communicated with the leader of the American scientists.

"A cure for the Plague has been discovered!" he cried in joyful tones. "Man still has a chance!"

Before an hour had passed by, scientists were in possession of cultures of germs that would destroy

the bacilli of the Gray Death. The hope of salvation restored some semblance of order; and in a very short time the development of the germs was going forward as rapidly as skilled bacteriologists could carry it. Forces of doctors were marshalled to administer the cure, inoculating all who were untouched by the Plague.

At about that time, a small, bronze-colored sphere arose into the air above San Francisco, and sped eastward with amazing velocity. It flashed over the United States, over the Atlantic ocean, and over western Europe, finally landing in the midst of the European hordes. There its operator, a deformed cripple, left bacteria similar to those he had given to the United States.

In a short time Europe, too, was busily engaged in developing the bacteria, and inoculating her people.

Many others died before the world was rendered immune, but at last mankind let its labors cease. The Gray Plague was overcome.

Then the work of reclaiming the deserted areas was begun; then, too, was started the ghastly task of disposing of the countless, rigid dead. And finally, a great steamer left New York harbor, and started across the Atlantic. It was the purpose of the men on board to destroy utterly the source of the Plague.

But long before that occurred, humanity had heard the story of Phillip Parkinson, the man who saved the world—had heard, and had honored the deliverer of mankind.

Parkinson's story follows:

Chapter 2

The steam yacht, Diana, bound for the Azores and points south, was two days out from Miami when the great meteor fell into the Atlantic. On the after deck, leaning over the rail, watching the moonlit waters, stood Phillip Parkinson, owner of the yacht. A bacteriologist of international fame was Parkinson, on an early vacation to recuperate from the effects of a strenuous winter of research. Nervous, rather high-strung, he had been unable to sleep; at about one in the morning of the 18th of March, he had come up on deck.

He had stood there for about an hour when suddenly there appeared in the sky above him, a meteor, a great disc of blue-white incandescence. It seemed to be rushing straight down toward him; instinctively he leaped back, as though to avoid the fiery missile.

As the constantly expanding disc flashed through the hundred miles of Earth's atmosphere, the ocean, as far as eye could see, became as light as day. Bathed in that baleful, white glare, Parkinson, bewildered,

dazed, half-blinded, watched the approaching stellar visitant.

In a few moments it struck—no more than two miles away. In the last, bright flare of blue-white light, Parkinson saw a gigantic column of steam and boiling water leap up from the sea. Then thick, impenetrable darkness fell—darkness that was intensified by its contrast with the meteor's blinding light.

For ten tense, breathless seconds utter silence hung over the sea ... then, for those on the yacht, the world went mad! A shrill, unearthly shriek—the sound of the meteor's passage through the atmosphere; an ear-splitting roar, as of the simultaneous release of the thunder-drums of ages; a howling demon of wind; a solid wall of raging, swirling water of immeasurable height—all united in an indescribable chaos that bewildered those on board the Diana, and that lifted the yacht and—threw it upon its side!

When the first rushing mountain of lathering, thundering water crashed upon the yacht, Parkinson felt himself hurtling through the roaring air. For a

moment he heard the infernal pandemonium of noise ... then the strangling, irresistible brine closed over his head.

A blackness deeper than that of the night—and Parkinson knew no more....

Slowly consciousness returned to the bacteriologist. It came under the guise of a dull, yet penetrating throbbing coming from beneath the surface on which he lay. Vaguely he wondered at it; he had not yet entirely cast off the enshrouding stupor that gripped him.

Gradually he came into full possession of his faculties—and became aware of a dull aching throughout his entire body. In his chest it seemed to be intensified; every breath caused a sharp pang of pain.

Faltering and uncertain, he arose and peered around. Before, lay the open sea, calm now, and peaceful. Long, rolling swell swept in and dashed themselves against the rocks a few feet away. Rocks? For a moment Parkinson stared at the irregular shore-line

in dazed wonder. Then as his mind cleared, the strangeness of his position flashed upon him.

Solid earth was under his feet! Although he must be hundreds of miles from shore, in some way he had drifted upon land. So far as he knew, there were no islands in that part of the Atlantic; yet his very position belied the truth. He could not have drifted to the mainland; the fact that he was alive precluded all possibilities of that, for he would have drowned in far less time than the latter thought implied.

He turned and inspected the land upon which he had been cast. A small, barren island, bleak and inhospitable, and strangely metallic, met his gaze. The rays of the sun beating down upon it were thrown back with an uncomfortable intensity; the substance of the island was a lustrous, copperlike metal. No soil softened the harshness of the surface; indescribably rugged and pitted was the two hundred-foot expanse. It reminded Parkinson of a bronze relief-map of the moon.

For a moment he puzzled over the strangeness of the

unnatural island; then suddenly he realized the truth. This was the meteor! Obviously, this was the upper side of the great sphere from space, protruding above the sea.

Fortunate for him that the meteor had not been completely covered by water, he thought—but was it fortunate? True, he was alive now, thanks to the tiny island, but how long would he remain alive without food or water, and without hope of securing either? Unless he would be picked up by a passing steamer, he would die a far more unpleasant death than that of drowning. Some miracle had saved him from a watery grave; it would require another to rescue him from a worse fate.

Even now he was beginning to feel thirsty. He had no way of determining how long he had been unconscious, but that it was at least ten hours, he was certain, for the sun had been at its zenith when he had awakened. No less than fifteen hours had gone by since water—other than that of the sea—had passed his lips. And the fact that it was impossible for him to quench his thirst only served to render it more acute.

In order to take his mind from thoughts of his thirst and of the immediate future, he rapidly circled the island. As he had expected, it was utterly barren. With shoulders drooping in despair he settled wearily to a seat on the jagged mass of metal high up on top of the meteor.

An expression of sudden interest lit up his face. For a second time he felt that particular throbbing, that strange pulsing beneath the surface of the meteor. But now it was far more noticeable than before. It seemed to be directly below him, and very close to the surface.

Parkinson could not tell how long he sat there, but from the appearance of the sun, he thought that at the very shortest, an hour passed by while he remained on that spot. And during that time, the throbbing gradually increased until the metal began vibrating under his feet.

Suddenly the bacteriologist leaped aside. The vibrating had reached its height, and the meteor seemed to lurch, to tilt at a sharp angle. His leap

carried him to firm footing again. And then, his thirst and hopeless position completely forgotten, Parkinson stared in fascination at the amazing spectacle before him.

An eighteen-foot disc of metal, a perfect circle, seemed to have been cut out of the top of the meteor. While he watched, it began turning slowly, ponderously, and started sinking into the meteor. As it sank, Parkinson fancied that it grew transparent, and gradually vanished into nothingness—but he wasn't sure.

A great pit, eighteen feet wide, but far deeper, lay before him in the very place where, not more than ten minutes before, he had stood. Not a moment too soon had he leaped.

Motionless he stood there, waiting in tense expectation. What would happen next, he had not the least idea, but he couldn't prevent his imagination from running riot.

He hadn't long to wait before his watching was

rewarded. A few minutes after the pit appeared, he heard a loud, high-pitched whir coming from the heart of the meteor. As it grew louder, it assumed a higher and still higher key, finally rising above the range of human ears. And at that moment the strange vehicle arose to the surface.

A simple-appearing mechanism was the car, consisting of a twelve-foot sphere of the same bronze-like metal that made up the meteor, with a huge wheel, like a bronze cincture, around its middle. It was the whirling of this great wheel that had caused the high-pitched whirring. The entire, strange machine was surrounded by a peculiar green radiance, a radiance that seemed to crackle ominously as the sphere hovered over the mouth of the pit.

For a moment the car hung motionless, then it drifted slowly to the surface of the meteor, landing a few feet away from Parkinson. Hastily he drew back from the greenly phosphorescent thing—but not before he had experienced an unpleasant prickling sensation over his entire body.

As the bacteriologist drew away, there was a sharp, audible click within the interior of the sphere; and the green radiance vanished. At the same moment, three heavy metal supports sprang from equi-distant points in the sides of the car, and held the sphere in a balanced position on the rounded top of the meteor.

There was a soft, grating sound on the opposite side of the car. Quickly, Parkinson circled it—and stopped short in surprise.

Men were descending from an opening in the side of the sphere! Parkinson had reasoned that since the meteor had come from the depths of space, any being in its interior, unnatural as that seemed, would have assumed a form quite different from the human. Of course, conditions on Earth could be approximated on another planet. At any rate, whatever the explanation, the sphere was emitting men!

They were men—but there was something queer about them. They were very tall—seven feet or more—and very thin; and their skins were a delicate, transparent white. They looked rather ghostly in their

tight-fitting white suits. It was not this that made them seem queer, however: it was an indefinite something, a vague suggestion of heartless inhumanity, of unearthliness, that was somehow repulsive and loathsome.

There were three of them, all very similar in appearance and bearing. Their surprise at the sight of Parkinson, if anything, was greater than the start their appearance had given him. He, at least, had expected to see beings of some sort, while the three had been taken completely by surprise.

For a moment they surveyed him with staring, cold-blue eyes. Then Parkinson extended his hand, and as cordially as he could, exclaimed:

"Hello! Welcome to Earth!"

The visitors from space ignored his advances and continued staring at him. Their attitude at first was quizzical, speculative, but slowly a hostile expression crept into their eyes.

Suddenly, with what seemed like common consent, they faced each other, and conversed in low tones in some unintelligible tongue. For almost a minute they talked, while Parkinson watched them in growing apprehension.

Finally they seemed to have reached some definite conclusion; with one accord they turned and moved slowly toward the bacteriologist, something distinctly menacing in their attitudes. The men from the meteor were tall, but they were thin; Parkinson, too, was large, and his six-foot length was covered with layers of solid muscle. As the three advanced toward him, he doubled his fists, and crouched in readiness for the expected attack.

They were almost upon him when he leaped into action. A crushing left to his stomach sent the first one to the meteor-top, where he lay doubled up in pain. But that was the only blow that Parkinson struck; in a moment he found himself lying prone upon his back, utterly helpless, his body completely paralyzed. What they had done to him, he did not know; all that he could remember was two thin bodies

twining themselves around him—a sharp twinge of pain at the base of his skull; then absolute helplessness.

One of the tall beings grasped Parkinson about the waist, and with surprising strength, threw him over his shoulder. The other assisted his groaning fellow. When the latter had recovered to some extent, the three ascended the ladder that led into the metal sphere.

The interior of the strange vehicle, as far as Parkinson could see, was as simple as its exterior. There was no intricate machinery of any sort in the square room; probably what machinery there was lay between the interior and exterior walls of the sphere. As for controls, these consisted of several hundred little buttons that studded one of the walls.

When they entered the vehicle, Parkinson was literally, and none too gently, dumped upon the floor. The man who had carried him stepped over to the controls. Like those of a skilled typist, his long, thin fingers darted over the buttons. In a moment the

sphere was in motion.

There were no more thrills for Parkinson in that ride than he would have derived from a similar ride in an elevator. They sank very slowly for some minutes, it seemed to him; then they stopped with a barely noticeable jar.

The door of the car was thrust aside by one of the three, and Parkinson was borne from the sphere. A bright, coppery light flooded the interior of the meteor, seeming to radiate from its walls. In his helpless state, and in the awkward position in which he was carried, with his head close to the floor, he could see little of the room through which they passed, in spite of the light. Later, however, he learned that it was circular in shape, and about twice the diameter of the cylindrical tube that led into it. The wall that bound this chamber was broken at regular intervals by tall, narrow, doorways, each leading into a different room.

Parkinson was carried into one of these, and was placed in a high-backed metal chair. After he had

been strapped fast, one of the men placed his hands at the base of the bacteriologist's skull; he felt a sudden twinge of pain; and his strange paralysis left him suddenly.

He knew it was useless to struggle; without resisting, he let them place upon his head a cap-like device that seemed lost in a tangled maze of machinery. Each meteor-man grasped one of the instruments resembling old-time radio head-phones that were fastened to Parkinson's head-gear, and clamped it over his ears.

The bacteriologist heard a steady, humming drone, like a swarm of angry bees—felt a peculiar, soothing warmth about his head; and then he slept.

Only a moment or two seemed to have passed when he awoke. The strange device on his head was removed and put away; and then, to Parkinson's amazement, one of the three men, evidently the leader, spoke—in English!

"Now that you have recovered consciousness," he

remarked in a cold, expressionless voice, "you had better realize at the very beginning that you are completely in our power. Any effort to escape will be futile, for there is only one way to reach the outside; the opening through the top; and only one means of travel through that opening: the sphere. And since you know nothing about the operation of the machine, any attempt to run it would be disastrous to you.

"If you promise to refrain from violence, we'll release you, and give you some measure of freedom. We'll do this because you can be of assistance to us in one of our tasks here on your planet."

Parkinson assented readily; he knew he could gain nothing by rejecting their offer. "Of course I'll promise. But—but, how did you learn English?" he asked in bewilderment.

"You taught us," the leader replied. "That device we placed upon your head created a duplicate of your knowledge in our minds. We knew your language, your world, indeed, yourself, as well as you do."

Parkinson shook his head in amazement. Another question came to his mind as the men released him. He was interrupted before he could give it expression.

"Don't ask," the leader exclaimed. "I'll tell our entire story so that you'll have no occasion to annoy us with your questions.

"We're Venerians," he began, "inhabitants of the planet you call Venus. For ages our world has been overcrowded. A short time ago, the conditions became so acute that something had to be done. It was suggested that we seek another habitable planet to which our people could migrate.

"Your Earth was thought to be the world with physical conditions most closely resembling those of Acor, or Venus. Our scientists set to work immediately, using forces and devices with which you are totally unfamiliar, and constructed several missiles which they hurled at Earth. These missiles, spherical masses closely resembling meteors, were set to explode after a certain period of contact with an atmosphere similar to our own. By their explosion we on Venus

could determine whether or not this world had a breathable atmosphere.

"Upon our deciding that the Earth was habitable, we built this great machine. It is chiefly composed of our greatest heat-resister, a metal we call thoque; I see no corresponding word in your vocabulary; evidently you are unfamiliar with the element, or else it is unknown on Earth.

"After our flight through space, automatically controlled, by the way, on Venus, we landed here. With our thoque disintegrator, we bored a passageway to the surface of this great sphere. Then we entered the car, rose to the top of the passageway, and discovered you.

"That is a brief synopsis of our actions—and it must suffice! Ask no questions; we do not wish to be disturbed by the blind gropings of your primitive mind!"

There was a cold finality in the Venerian's voice that convinced Parkinson that for the moment, at least, he

had better forget the many questions that had surged up in his mind.

The Venerian leader spoke again. "From our observations of your mind, we know that you have not had food or water for a rather lengthy period of time. It is not our purpose to starve you: you shall eat and drink."

A minute later Parkinson sat at a very high table in one of the rooms, drinking water from Venus, and eating the fare of an alien world.

Days passed by, merging into weeks, while Parkinson lost all track of time. The bacteriologist's existence became a ceaseless round of toil. The Venerian had said that he would be given some measure of freedom, because he would be of use to them; he had not been with them long ere he learned what that use was.

One of the rooms was filled with great slabs of thoque; it was Parkinson's task to carry the slabs to the vehicle at the base of the shaft, one by one; to rise

to the surface with them, accompanied by two of the men—the third was working on the surface—and there unload them. Day after day this continued.

Hope of escaping was almost dead in Parkinson's breast, because he was constantly under the surveillance of those hard, blue eyes. Only one thing kept hope alive: by watching the Venerians operate the car, he was slowly gaining a knowledge of the meaning of the many buttons in the wall. Some day, if an opportunity came, he meant to be ready to take advantage of it.

Once, shortly after his monotonous toil began, Parkinson experienced a great flare of hope for deliverance. They had just brought another slab to the surface, when a steamer appeared above the horizon. It was far away, but its crew must surely have seen the island.

But his expectations were short-lived. One of the three drew from beneath his tight-fitting, white garments a little, metal object, a long tube, with a handle at one end, and pointed it at the vessel. For a

moment he held it thus, moving it slowly backward and forward: then he returned it to its place of concealment, and turned away with an air of indifference. And Parkinson saw the ship burst suddenly into flame, a few minutes later to sink beneath the waves.

Shaken to the depths of his being, Parkinson resumed his work. The inhumanity of these saturnine Venerians filled him with a dread so great that he refused to admit it to himself. That that had not been the first time that they had destroyed a ship, he felt sure; his heart sank, and grew more hopeless.

At last his task of carrying slabs was finished. The room was empty, and the work completed. A great tower, entirely covering the island, reared its head into the sky. In appearance, it resembled a very tall lighthouse. This resemblance held true only until its top was reached; there it ended. From the tower's top extended four long, hollow arms, so constructed that they whirled about the tower at a mad pace when the machinery with which they were connected was started. In addition, arrangement was made for a

powerful blast of air to be sent through the tubes when the Venerians so desired.

What the purpose of this great edifice was, Parkinson could not guess: later, he learned the horrible significance of it all.

After the tower was finished, the bacteriologist was left to his own devices to a great extent, though always closely watched by one of his captors. They let him eat all the food he desired, and let him lie around as much as he wished, regaining his health and strength. This was a pleasant surprise for him: he took full advantage of his privileges.

Then, one day when Parkinson had fully recovered from the effects of his grueling labors, the leader of the Venerians approached him from behind, and before he could raise a hand in defense, had rendered him helplessly paralyzed.

"You will now be given a second opportunity to help the cause of Venus on Earth," he said in his expressionless voice. And so saying, he lifted

Parkinson, and bore him into one of the rooms.

Chapter 3

At no time while he was held captive by the Venerians was Parkinson as hopeless, or as completely filled with despair as when he was carried into this room. There was something depressing about the chamber, something that gripped his heart with the chill hand of dread. He had a feeling of impending evil.

The few momentary glimpses of the chamber that he had gotten while he was being carried, sufficed to convince Parkinson that this was a laboratory, or—he shuddered at the thought—an operating room. The walls, floor and ceiling were composed of a white porcelainlike substance: from these walls, strangely, streamed the same coppery light that filled the entire meteor.

Entirely concealing one wall was a long, glass case, constructed to form countless little niches, each of which held a small, transparent vessel. At the back of the room was a high table, covered with transparent cases which were filled with complex instruments of every description, some similar to those on Earth;

others entirely different.

The thing that brought the thought of an operating room to Parkinson's mind was the long, white slab that rested on metal uprights in the room's center—an operating table. A moment after they entered the room, he had his theory substantiated: the Venerian leader placed him on the white slab, stretching him to full length. It was an operating table—and he was to be the subject of their operation!

He had lain there but a moment when two of the Venerians approached, one on either side, and began removing his clothing. It was not long before he lay on the cold slab, entirely nude.

While he was being stripped, he heard the leader of the Venerians moving about, heard the click of glass, the rasp of metal upon metal. But, unable to move his eyes, he had seen none of his activities, except to note that several of the little vessels had been taken from their resting places.

When the two had finished disrobing him, and had

replaced him upon his back, the leader appeared. He looked down at Parkinson, a queer expression in his hard, blue eyes. He seemed to hesitate a moment: then he spoke.

"Earthling," he said in his toneless voice, "I have decided to tell you of our intentions. You are going to play a very important part in our scheme, and it is only fitting that you should know. You can do nothing to hinder our plans: you are giving us incalculable aid: and it affords me some degree of satisfaction to tell you this.

"As you know, Earthling, we purpose to have the people of Acor to come to Earth to live, to relieve the congested conditions of our own world. Obviously, there is no room for two types of intelligent beings on one planet—your race must go! It is our intention to destroy all human life on Earth!

"We intend accomplishing this with Venerian microbes. From the record of your knowledge, I've learned that diseases of various kinds are common on Earth. We expected that such would be the case, and

thus, you would not be immune to germs, so we came prepared. Each of the small compartments in that case that you may have seen, contains a culture of a different germ. After we have determined which Venerian bacilli will be the most effective, we will develop them in great quantities, and loose them upon your world.

"In the selecting process, you will play your part. Since our germs may have a different effect upon your bodies than they do upon Venerians, we will inoculate you with different diseases, and watch their effects upon you.

"Of course, you yourself will be in no great danger, for we will have the diseases under our constant control. On Acor we have abolished disease entirely, having a reagent or an antitoxin for every malady; we will use our cures upon you immediately after we have seen how you react to each disease.

"What we desire is a bacillus that will take effect when it is breathed in through the lungs. If the disease is of such a nature as to instill fear in the

minds of observers, so much the better; but that is unnecessary. When we discover a microbe of that nature, we will be ready to act.

"By the way, our work has been lessened to a great degree by the fact that you are a bacteriologist. The knowledge we gain from you has enabled us to eliminate at least half of our microbes. All Venerian germs that are duplicated on Earth will be left out of our calculations. Only those unknown to your planet will be tried upon you."

When the Venerian had finished his explanation, each word of which had sounded like a death knell to Parkinson, the bacteriologist lay on the slab in the grip of a nightmare of horror. The cold-blooded brutality of these Venerian beasts, and the thought of lying there helpless with his body the prey of unknown diseases, filled him with a maddening fear and dread.

Mightily he struggled to break the uncanny bonds that held him paralyzed, but it was of no avail. His body retained its helpless rigidity.

Only for a moment was Parkinson left to his fearful musings; then the Venerians begin their work. A tall table on wheels was brought from somewhere, and drawn to the side of the slab. Upon this various instruments were placed, side by side with numerous flat vessels containing germ cultures. Parkinson saw none of this, but from the sounds that came to his ears he could infer what was taking place.

Finally, everything seemed to be in readiness. The Venerian leader bent over Parkinson for a moment: and the latter felt a sharp pain in his side. Then the Venerian withdrew.

Slowly, interminably, the time dragged by while the microbes that had been introduced into his body were at their work. How long he lay there with the Venerians watching, he could not tell, but it seemed to be hours. During that time he felt himself gripped by an increasingly violent fever. Unbearable heat flooded his body. And because of his helplessness, he could do nothing to relieve his pain and discomfort. It was maddening!

When he thought he had reached the limit of his endurance, and felt that he would go insane in another moment, the Venerian leader injected something into his side. He became aware of an immediate sense of relief; in an unbelievably short time the fever had left him and he was himself again.

There followed for Parkinson hours of nightmare agony, while the Venerians experimented with his living body. Time after time he was inoculated with strange bacilli that wracked him with tortures indescribable. Hideous diseases covered him with festering sores; twisted his flesh into a repellent mass of scars; left him weakened and deformed. Had it not been for the incredible curative powers of the Venerians, he would have died then; but always, when the end seemed at hand, they brought him back to life, only to subject him to other horrors.

After what seemed countless ages, the Venerians left him alone. Under the powerful effects of their cures, Parkinson began to recover. Hope welled up in his heart; perhaps the terrible experiments were ended.

When he was almost certain that the torture was over, his hopes were suddenly destroyed. The three Venerians approached again, each bearing a number of vessels containing germ cultures. These they placed on the table at Parkinson's side; then two of them withdrew, leaving the leader to continue his work. Uttering a few words in the Venerian tongue, he occupied himself with something on the table, and a moment later turned toward the bacteriologist, a long needle in his hands.

Parkinson felt a great burning pain in his left arm, as though a searing, hot needle had been thrust into his flesh. In a moment this vanished. Then a feeling of irresistible lassitude overwhelmed him; an unbearable weariness filled him with longing for rest, peace—death. This, too, was of short duration.

With the passing of the weariness, Parkinson became aware of a sharp throbbing in his arm. Rapidly this increased in violence, until suddenly an unbearable, excruciating agony seized him. Far greater was this than any pain he had suffered before. For a moment he struggled to scream, to move, to do anything to

relieve his agony. There seemed to be a sudden snap—a cry of anguish burst from his lips—and his senses left him. Just as the bonds of paralysis had broken, he had lost consciousness.

Life returned to Parkinson very slowly. In a daze he stared around, uncomprehending. Then suddenly he realized that he was no longer paralyzed: nor was he in the operating room. The bed on which he lay was soft, comfortable; the room, unfamiliar. But not for long did his mind dwell upon this; in a few moments his eyelids closed, and he slept the sleep of complete mental and physical exhaustion.

During the weeks that followed, Parkinson did little other than sleep. Occasionally he arose, either to stretch himself, or to secure food, but for the greater part of the time he remained in bed. His body was a mere shadow of its former self as the result of his terrible experience on the white slab: his incessant sleeping, necessary because of his weakened condition, served to bring him back to his former health. The Venerians seemed glad to have it thus: asleep, he did not disturb their activities.

When he had awakened from his first period of natural slumber, he had received a terrible shock. His left arm was gone, amputated at the shoulder. Strangely, the wound had healed while he slept, probably the result of the Venerian doctoring, so there was no pain: but the shock had been terrible.

After he had recovered from the effects of that shock, he had resolved to make the Venerians pay for what they had done. And then he had realized that the inhuman brutes must be destroyed for a greater reason: unless he interfered, he believed that they would carry out their intention of destroying all human life.

As the weeks passed by, while strength was returning to Parkinson, he learned in a general way what the invaders were doing. They were engaged in developing vast quantities of microbes to be spread over Earth. When these were ready, a great amount of fine dust that the Venerians had brought with them, was impregnated with the bacilli. This was then taken up into the tower, where, as Parkinson learned later, it was blown out through the four tubes that spun

around the tower's top, to drift through the air—to enter human bodies—to destroy life.

The Venerians worked with the cultures and impregnated dust without protection of any sort: evidently they were immune to the disease. Later Parkinson learned that he was likewise immune; they had rendered him so after trying the germs upon him.

Gradually the bacteriologist's health returned—so gradually that his captors seemed not to notice it. He was glad of this, for their vigilance had relaxed, and he did not want it renewed. Even when he was as strong and well as ever, he spent much time in bed, shamming illness. And when he could do so without danger of detection, he kept a close watch upon the three, waiting for a time when he would be entirely alone.

At last his opportunity came. The three Venerians rose to the surface together, leaving him in his room, to all outward appearances, asleep. But sleep was far from him at that moment; he had been watching.

Shortly after the sphere had vanished up the shaft, Parkinson emerged from his room. For a moment he surveyed the circle of doors: then he shrugged his shoulders. They all looked alike to him. Quickly he crossed the room, and pressed a button that mechanically opened a door. It was his purpose, first of all, to secure a weapon; one room would do as well as another for a beginning.

At first glance Parkinson was struck by the strange familiarity of this chamber: then, after a moment, he recognized it. A tall, high-backed metal chair in its center was its mark of identification. This was the chamber wherein the Venerians had transferred a record of his knowledge to their minds.

Carefully he looked around in search of a weapon, but the room held nothing but the chair and the thought transference device. In a moment he withdrew, closing the door behind him.

In the next room he entered, he was fortunate. This chamber was filled with strange devices of various kinds. While curiously inspecting the intricate

machines, he saw something that brought a smile of satisfaction to his lips.

Against one wall stood a tall, glass case, one of the shelves of which held several metal devices that Parkinson immediately recognized as being the Venerians' weapons. Poignantly he remembered how a similar device had destroyed a ship.

Leaving the door slightly ajar, he crossed to the case and secured one of the weapons. For a moment he studied it. There was nothing complex about the mechanism; a cursory examination sufficed to reveal how it was operated. Pressure on a little knob at the back of the handle released the devastating ray.

He was about to slip the device into his pocket when he stiffened involuntarily. There was a sound of movement outside the room—he heard a step on the metal floor—then he whirled.

One of the Venerians stood in the doorway, a menacing frown on his face. He was crouching, ready to spring upon Parkinson.

Quick as thought, the bacteriologist leveled his newly-acquired weapon, and pressed on the knob. There was a sudden spurt of flame from the Venerian's body; then it crumpled, sagging, shrinking together.

Hastily Parkinson released the pressure on the little knob, aghast at the destructive power of his little weapon. Then, as he remembered the torture he had endured at their hands, he directed the ray upon the ashes, until they, too, were consumed, leaving naught but a dark patch on the floor.

For several minutes Parkinson stood there in deep thought. There was no immediate danger from the two remaining Venerians, for they were up in the tower, while the sphere was in the meteor; so he could think with utmost safety. Deep thought and careful planning were necessary now, for he had taken the step that must mean either his death or the death of the Venerians.

Suddenly he leaped into action; he had decided upon his next move. Crossing to the case he secured another weapon. He wasn't sure that they could be

effectively discharged without re-loading; handicapped as he was with one arm gone, he had to be certain of the reliability of his means of defense. Then he left the room, and crossed to the huge thoque sphere.

It was the work of a moment to enter this, and prepare to ascend. This done, he turned his attention to the numerous knobs on the wall. He had not seen them for quite a while; it was with difficulty that he recalled which knobs controlled the car's ascent. At last, hesitantly, but correctly, he pressed on the knobs, and the sphere rose slowly toward the surface.

At the proper moment, Parkinson, brought the vehicle to a halt, and slid back the door. Furtively he peered around. The Venerians were on the other side of the tower. Quickly he lowered the ladder and descended.

As he stepped to the floor, a sudden cry of dismay fell upon his ears. One of the Venerians, coming around the car, had discovered him. Without a moment's hesitation, Parkinson aimed his little weapon, and pressed upon the knob. Like his fellow, the Venerian

fell to the floor, a heap of charred ashes.

With the second Venerian destroyed, Parkinson dashed around the sphere, metal cylinder held in readiness. The leader of the Venerians was stealing stealthily around the other side of the car, his hand fumbling beneath his garment.

"Stop!" Parkinson cried. "Raise your hands above your head—empty!" A cylinder clattered to the metal floor as the Venerian's hands moved skyward.

"Keep your back turned!" Parkinson snapped as the invader began about. "I won't hesitate to press on this little knob, at your first hostile move! I'd thoroughly enjoy burning you to a crisp, so be very careful."

While talking, Parkinson had moved slowly toward the man from Venus; now, almost upon him, he quickly dropped his weapon into a pocket, and swung a terrible blow at the base of his skull. The Venerian fell to the floor without a groan, unconscious.

Parkinson stared at the recumbent figure rather

dubiously for a moment. If only he had his other arm! But it was gone; with an impatient shake of his head he stooped and raised the senseless invader.

It was anything but an easy task for the bacteriologist to carry his seven-foot burden up the ladder and into the sphere, but finally, he succeeded in doing so. Then, without delay, he lowered the car into the meteor again.

As he bore the Venerian from the vehicle, he tried to decide upon his next move. Obviously, he had to secure the one surviving invader, so that he would not be a menace to Parkinson when he revived. And then the logical thing to do would be, in some way, to secure information from him as to how to cure the disease that was spreading over the world.

The logical thing to do, yes—but how? With only one arm, the simple task of binding the Venerian presented considerable difficulty. How much more difficult would it be to force anything from him?

Then the solution of the first problem presented itself

to Parkinson. What was to prevent his strapping this being into the high-backed chair to which he had been secured some time before? Quickly he crossed the circular room to the door he had first passed through while searching for a weapon.

Ten minutes later, when the Venerian regained his senses, he was fastened securely to the tall, metal chair.

"Well," Parkinson addressed him, "conditions seem to be reversed now, and you're the underdog. I've nipped your invasion in the bud. All your elaborate preparations are wasted."

Something resembling a sneer wreathed the Venerian's thin lips; a mocking gleam lit his cold, blue eyes.

"So our efforts have been wasted, have they? I'm afraid I can't agree with you. Already, enough bacteria have been released to destroy all life, though it will take longer than we desire. Even though you kill me, our goal will still be reached. The human race

will die!"

A cloud of gloom fell upon Parkinson. He had expected this; but he had been hoping that he was wrong.

"Then there's only one thing for me to do, and that is: I'll have to force you to tell me how to undo the damage you've done."

The Venerian smiled mirthlessly. "You have absolutely no chance of accomplishing that," he said. "We've done our work too well to allow any interference now.

"You do not know this, but we have released upon your world the worst malady ever known to Venus. There is only one remedy; and I'm the only one who knows it, or who has the means wherewith to accomplish it. And I certainly won't tell!"

The worried expression on Parkinson's face increased in intensity. There was something in the Venerian's voice that convinced him that he meant what he said.

Then suddenly his countenance cleared, and a happy smile replaced his frown.

"Perhaps you won't tell, but I think you will. There are more ways than one of forcing you."

Parkinson had hit upon a solution to his problem. The Venerians had reproduced his knowledge in their brains; why wouldn't it be possible for him to reverse the operation?

In a moment he secured the thought-transference apparatus from a case in the rear of the room, and bore it to the chair, and in spite of the Venerian leader's struggles, placed it upon his head. He put the head-phones over his own ears, and began fumbling with the controls.

Suddenly he seemed to strike the right combination. There was a faint, humming drone in his ears; after a moment this was replaced by a loud crackling—and the knowledge of the man from Venus was becoming his own.

Somewhat dazed, Parkinson shut off the current. His mind was in a turmoil. He was in possession of knowledge of such an amazing character that, for the moment he had lost his mental equilibrium. Indeed, so strange was his new-found knowledge, that he could not grasp the significance of even half of the facts in his mind.

But already, he knew how, with animal electricity, they had paralyzed him; knew what had happened to him on the operating table; knew the nature of the dread disease that destroyed his arm; the Gray Plague—and knew the cure!

A sudden thought arrested this review of his new knowledge. The Gray Plague! At that very moment incalculable quantities of the deadly bacilli were being cast into the air. And he was doing nothing about it!

He glanced at the Venerian. He was still unconscious, and would remain so for some minutes to come. And even if he did recover his senses, he was securely fastened to the chair; Parkinson dashed out of the

room, crossed to the sphere, and passed through the open doorway.

Without hesitation he manipulated the controls, directed by his Venerian knowledge. Rapidly the sphere rose to the surface.

As it came to rest on the floor of the tower, Parkinson sprang from the car, and headed toward a mass of intricate machinery that filled fully a quarter of the great building.

Even this caused him no great concern; he was as familiar with it as he would have been had he constructed it. For some moments he was busy with numerous dials and levers; then the release of the germs was stopped.

Parkinson spent several minutes in examining the contents of the tower, his Earthly mind lost in wonder at the strange things his Venerian knowledge revealed to him. Then he entered the sphere again, and sank into the meteor.

As he moved toward the room that held the Venerian, his mind was busy with conjectures as to what he would do with his prisoner. It was necessary for the bacteriologist to reach the mainland as quickly as possible, and make use of his knowledge of the cure for the Gray Plague. He didn't want to kill the man; he couldn't free him; yet if he left him strapped to the chair, he'd surely die of starvation.

Still undecided, he thrust open the door. With a startled gasp he stopped short. Somehow the Venerian had freed himself; at that moment he leaped toward Parkinson.

Instinctively the bacteriologist flung up his hand in a defensive attitude. The onrushing Venerian caught Parkinson's out-thrust fist in the pit of his stomach, and doubled up in pain. While he was thus defenseless, Parkinson placed a well-directed blow on the side of the Venerian's jaw, a blow carrying every ounce of his strength.

So great was the force of the punch, that it lifted the man from Venus and cast him headlong upon the

floor. His head landed with a sickening thud. Unmoving, he lay where he had fallen.

Parkinson knelt over him for a moment, then arose. Without question, the man was dead. The Venerian had solved the bacteriologist's last problem; he was free to return to the United States with his means of saving mankind.

Drawing the little metal cylinder from his pocket, he burned the body of the Venerian leader to a heap of ashes, ridding the world of the last invader. Then he turned and entered the glass-lined operating room.

Following the dictates of his Venerian knowledge, he crossed to one of the walls, and drew therefrom a flat, glass vessel, somewhat like a petri dish. This contained bacteria that were harmless in themselves, and were hostile to those of the Gray Plague. These germs, brought from Venus, were the only cure for the terrible disease.

The work of the English bacteriologist Twort, in 1915, and the Frenchman, d'Herelle, in 1917, brought to the

attention of the scientific world the fact that many bacteria are subject to attack and destruction by some unknown active agent with which they are associated in infected material. This agent, whatever its character, changed growing germ cultures to a dead, glassy substance.

Twort advanced the thought that the agent might be a living, filtered virus, although he favored the theory that it was an enzyme derived from the bacteria themselves.

D'Herelle, on the contrary, believed that this phenomenon was due to a living, multiplying, ultra-microscopic microbe that destroyed certain bacteria.

Evidence favoring both theories has come to light, with the result that, at present, controversy is rife. Up to date, the contention of neither side has been proved.

Parkinson's adventure was almost at an end. He had not emerged unscathed, but he had won!

The details of his further actions need not be recorded. Suffice it to say that he entered the sphere, carrying his precious, curative germs, arose to the top of the tower, and passed through a round opening in its side. His borrowed knowledge revealed that the car possessed abilities that he had not suspected; with amazing speed he caused it to flash across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States.

There he saw the frightful carnage that the Plague had caused, saw the deserted cities—and was filled with self-reproach because he had not acted sooner.

Across the miles and miles of deserted country he sped, following the fleeing hordes, finally passing over the stragglers and landing in the heart of the congested areas. After making a few inquiries, he returned to the sphere, and continued on toward the West. He landed, finally, outside the city of San Francisco.

A short time later, twisted, deformed, yet triumphant, he was ushered into the presence of the United States government as—the man who had saved the human

race.

Chapter 4

The terrible days of the Gray Plague ended in mystery. Much that had puzzled the world, Parkinson, with his Venerian knowledge, explained; but there was one thing, the final, enigmatical act in the strange drama, that was as much of a mystery to him as it was to the rest of the world.

Enigma! Of what significance, of what portent—who could tell?

When the great vessel from the United States, equipped to destroy the meteor of the Venetians, neared the great thoque sphere, they came upon a scene quite different from what they had expected. Parkinson, who was on the ship, was more surprised than the rest, for he had definite knowledge of what, in the natural course of events, they should see. For the others there was nothing so very strange in what they saw; Parkinson had lied, that was all.

When the bacteriologist had left the meteor, there had been a high, bronze-colored tower, a burnished

lighthouse, covering its entire top. It had been there—but now it was gone! Only the jagged, arched surface of the meteor remained.

They lowered boats and rowed to the strange island. There they saw something that filled them—Parkinson especially—with a very definite uneasiness. The entire top of the meteor was a twisted, fire-blasted mass of bronze-like metal. Where the tower had been, where the shaft had led into the remarkable interplanetary vehicle, there was now a broken expanse of thoque that flashed fire under the rays of the sun.

Something seemed to have melted, to have fused the tower, until it had crumpled, and had run, filling the entrance of the meteor. There was irrefutable evidence to that effect; no one thought otherwise.

But what agency had done this strange thing?

Someone suggested that it might have been the work of some prearranged mechanism. Parkinson shook his head. Had such been the case, his Venerian knowledge would have told him so.

Obviously, nothing of Earth had done it, nothing of Earth—then something of Venus! Inconclusive conjecture, perhaps, but no other explanation offered itself. Something had sealed the contents of the meteor from the sight of man, something with a purpose. From Venus? The thought was logical, to say the least.

Not for long did they remain there beside the Venerian vehicle; there was naught for them to do, so they turned about and headed toward the United States. They bore tidings that were vaguely disturbing, tidings that none were glad to hear. For, according to all indications, something alien to Earth was still within her confines.

Behind it all—the meteors, the Plague, the sealing of the Venerian vehicle—is one fact of great significance. No longer is man alone in the universe; no longer is he in isolation! Out of space came a menace, an intelligence striving to wrest from him his right to rule over Earth. No longer can man in his smug complacency think of himself as being secure in his strength. He has been shown the utter folly of such

thinking.

The menace—the invaders from Venus—came, and were destroyed, their purposes defeated. Yet—in the vast reaches of space, in worlds of other dimensions, in the cosmic crucible of life that embodies all creation, there may be other forms of life, other menaces, hovering clouds of death, preparing to sweep down upon Earth to snuff out her life. Who can tell?

And who may say that man is free from the Venerian danger? The strange sealing of the meteor implies that the menace is still present. Who knows but what those inhuman Venerian brutes may even now be planning some new invasion, may be preparing to renew their attack upon Earth?

Time alone will tell.

#59 Vagabonds Of Space, By Harold Vincent Schoepflin:

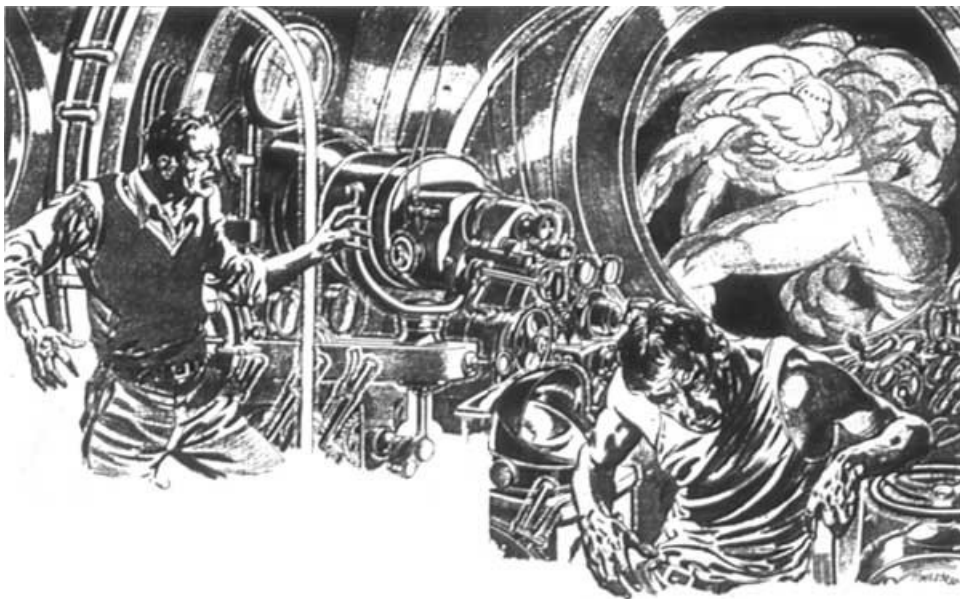
From the depths of the Sargasso Sea of space came the thought-warning, "Turn back!" but Carr and his Martian friend found it was too late!

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

went mad with fury



Chapter 1: The Nomad

Gathered around a long table in a luxuriously furnished director's room, a group of men listened in astonishment to the rapid and forceful speech of one of their number.

From the depths of the Sargasso Sea of Space came the thought-warning, "Turn back!" But Carr and his Martian friend found it was too late!

"I tell you I'm through, gentlemen," averred the speaker. "I'm fed up with the job, that's all. Since 2317 you've had me sitting at the helm of International Airways and I've worked my fool head off for you. Now—get someone else!"

"Made plenty of money yourself, didn't you, Carr?" asked one of the directors, a corpulent man with a self-satisfied countenance.

"Sure I did. That's not the point. I've done all the work. There's not another executive[245] in the outfit

whose job is more than a title, and you know it. I want a change and a rest. Going to take it, too. So, go ahead with your election of officers and leave me out."

"Your stock?" Courtney Davis, chairman of the board, sensed that Carr Parker meant what he said.

"I'll hold it. The rest of you can vote it as you choose: divide the proxies pro rata, based on your individual holdings. But I reserve the right to dump it all on the market at the first sign of shady dealings. That suit you?"

The recalcitrant young President of International Airways had risen from the table. The chairman attempted to restrain him.

"Come on now, Carr, let's reason this out. Perhaps if you just took a leave of absence—"

"Call it anything you want. I'm done right now."

Carr Parker stalked from the room, leaving eleven

perspiring capitalists to argue over his action.

He rushed to the corridor and nervously pressed the call button of the elevators. A minute later he emerged upon the roof of the Airways building, one of the tallest of New York's mid-town sky-scrapers. The air here, fifteen hundred feet above the hot street, was cool and fresh. He walked across the great flat surface of the landing stage to inspect a tiny helicopter which had just settled to a landing. Angered as he was, he still could not resist the attraction these trim little craft had always held for him. The feeling was in his blood.

His interest, however, was short lived and he strolled to the observation aisle along the edge of the landing stage. He stared moodily into the heavens where thousands of aircraft of all descriptions sped hither and yon. A huge liner of the Martian route was dropping from the skies and drifting toward her cradle on Long Island. He looked out over the city to the north: fifty miles of it he knew stretched along the east shore of the Hudson. Greatest of the cities of the world, it housed a fifth of the population of the United

States of North America; a third of the wealth.

Cities! The entire world lived in them! Civilization was too highly developed nowadays. Adventure was a thing of the past. Of course there were the other planets, Mars and Venus, but they were as bad. At least he had found them so on his every business trip. He wished he had lived a couple of centuries ago, when the first space-ships ventured forth from the earth. Those were days of excitement and daring enterprise. Then a man could find ways of getting away from things—next to nature—out into the forests; hunting; fishing. But the forests were gone, the streams enslaved by the power monopolies. There were only the cities—and barren plains. Everything in life was made by man, artificial.

Something drew his eyes upward and he spotted an unusual object in the heavens, a mere speck as yet but drawing swiftly in from the upper air lanes. But this ship, small though it appeared, stood out from amongst its fellows for some reason. Carr rubbed his eyes to clear his vision. Was it? Yes—it was—surrounded by a luminous haze. Notwithstanding the

brilliance of the afternoon sun, this haze was clearly visible. A silver shimmering that was not like anything he had seen on Earth. The ship swung in toward the city and was losing altitude rapidly. Its silvery aura deserted it and the vessel was revealed as a sleek, tapered cylinder with no wings, rudders or helicopter screws. Like the giant liners of the Interplanetary Service it displayed no visible means of support or propulsion. This was no ordinary vessel.

Carr watched in extreme interest as it circled the city in a huge spiral, settling lower at each turn. It seemed that the pilot was searching for a definite landing stage. Then suddenly it swooped with a rush. Straight for the stage of the Airways building! The strange aura reappeared and the little vessel halted in mid-air, poised a moment, then dropped gracefully and lightly as a feather to the level surface not a hundred feet from where he stood. He hurried to the spot to examine the strange craft.

"Mado!" he exclaimed in surprise as a husky, bronzed Martian squeezed through the quickly opened manhole and clambered heavily to the platform. Mado

of Canax—an old friend!

"Devils of Terra!" gasped the Martian, his knees giving way, "—your murderous gravity! Here, help me. I've forgotten the energizing switch."

Carr laughed as he fumbled with a mechanism that was strapped to the Martian's back. Mado, who tipped the scales at over two hundred pounds on his own planet, weighed nearly six hundred here. His legs simply couldn't carry the load!

"There you are, old man." Parker had located the switch and a musical purr came from the black box between the Martian's broad shoulders. "Now stand up and tell me what you're doing here. And what's the idea of the private ship? Come all the way from home in it?"

His friend struggled to his feet with an effort, for the field emanating from the black box required a few seconds to reach the intensity necessary to counteract two-thirds of the earth's gravity.

"Thanks Carr," he grinned. "Yes, I came all the way in that bus. Alone, too—and she's mine! What do you think of her?"

"A peach, from what I can see. But how come? Not using a private space-flier on your business trips, are you?"

"Not on your life! I've retired. Going to play around for a few years. That's why I bought the Nomad."

"Retired! Why Mado, I just did the same thing."

"Great stuff! They've worked you to death. What are you figuring on doing with yourself?"

Carr shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "Usual thing, I suppose. Travel aimlessly, and bore myself into old age. Nothing else to do. No kick out of life these days at all, Mado, even in chasing around from planet to planet. They're all the same."

The Martian looked keenly at his friend. "Oh, is that so?" he said. "No kick, eh? Well, let me tell you, Carr

Parker, you come with me and we'll find something you'll get a kick out of. Ever seen the Sargasso Sea of the solar system? Ever been on one of the asteroids? Ever seen the other side of the Moon—Uranus—Neptune—Planet 9, the farthest out from the sun?"

"No-o." Carr's eyes brightened somewhat.

"Then you haven't seen anything or been anywhere. Trouble with you is you've been in the rut too long. Thinking there's nothing left in the universe but the commonplace. Right, too, if you stick to the regular routes of travel. But the *Nomad's* different. I'm just a rover when I'm at her controls, a vagabond in space—free as the ether that surrounds her air-tight hull. And, take it from me, there's something to see and do out there in space. Off the usual lanes, perhaps, but it's there."

"You've been out—how long?" Carr hesitated.

"Eighty Martian days. Seen plenty too." He waved his arm in a gesture that seemed to take in the entire universe.

"Why come here, with so much to be seen out there?"

"Came to visit you, old stick-in-the-mud," grinned Mado, "and to try and persuade you to join me. I find you footloose already. You're itching for adventure; excitement. Will you come?"

Carr listened spellbound. "Right now?" he asked.

"This very minute. Come on."

"My bag," objected Carr, "it must be packed. I'll need funds too."

"Bag! What for? Plenty of duds on the *Nomad*—for any old climate. And money—don't make me laugh! Vagabonds need money?" He backed toward the open manhole of the *Nomad*, still grinning.

Carr hesitated, resisting the impulse to take Mado at his word. He looked around. The landing stage had been deserted, but people now were approaching. People not to be tolerated at the moment. He saw Courtney Davis, grim and determined. There'd be

more arguments, useless but aggravating. Well, why not go? He'd decided to break away. What better chance? Suddenly he dived for the[248] manhole of Mado's vessel; wriggled his way to the padded interior of the air-lock. He heard the clang of the circular cover. Mado was clamping it to its gasketed seat.

"Let's go!" he shouted.

Chapter 2: Into the Heavens

The directors of International Airways stared foolishly when they saw Carr Parker and the giant Martian enter the mysterious ship which was a trespasser on their landing stage. They gazed incredulously as the gleaming torpedo-shaped vessel arose majestically from its position. There was no evidence of motive power other than a sudden radiation from its hull plates of faintly crackling streamers of silvery light. They fell back in alarm as it pointed its nose skyward and accelerated with incredible rapidity, the silver energy bathing them in its blinding luminescence. They burst forth in excited recrimination when it vanished into the blue. Courtney Davis shook his fist after the departing vessel and swore mightily.

Carr Parker forgot them entirely when he clambered into the bucket seat beside Mado, who sat at the Nomad's controls. He was free at last: free to probe the mysteries of outer space, to roam the skies with this Martian he had admired since boyhood.

"Glad you came?" Mado asked his Terrestrial friend.

"You bet. But tell me about yourself. How you've been and how come you've rebelled, too? I haven't seen you for a long time, you know. Why, it's been years!"

"Oh, I'm all right. Guess I got fed up with things about the same way you did. Knew last time I saw you that you were feeling as I did. That's why I came after you."

"But this vessel, the *Nomad*. I didn't know such a thing was in existence. How does it operate? It seems quite different from the usual ether-liners."

"It's a mystery ship. Invented and built by Thrygis, a discredited scientist of my country. Spent a fortune on it and then went broke and killed himself. I bought it from the executors for a song. They thought it was a pile of junk. But the plans and notes of the inventor were there and I studied 'em well. The ship is a marvel, Carr. Utilizes gravitational attraction and reversal as a propelling force and can go like the Old Boy himself. I've hit two thousand miles a second with her."

"A second! Why, that's ten times as fast as the regular liners! Must use a whale of a lot of fuel. And where do you keep it? The fuel, I mean."

"Make it right on board. I'm telling you Carr, the *Nomad* has no equal. She's a corker."

"I'll say she is. But what do you mean—make the fuel?"

"Cosmic rays. Everywhere in space you know. Seems they are the result of violent concentrations of energy that cause the birth of atoms. Thrygis doped out a collector of these rays that takes 'em from their paths and concentrates 'em in a retort where there's a spongy metal catalyst that never deteriorates. Here there is a reaction to the original action out in space and new atoms are born, simple ones of hydrogen. But what could be sweeter for use in one of our regular atomic motors? The energy of disintegration is used to drive the generators of the artificial gravity field, and there you are. Sounds complicated, but really isn't. And nothing to get out of whack either."

"Beats the rocket motors and bulky fuel of the regular liners a mile, doesn't it? But since when are you a navigator, Mado?"

"Don't need to be a navigator with the *Nomad*. She's automatic, once the controls are set. Say we wish to visit Venus. The telescope is sighted on that body and the gravity forces adjusted so we'll be attracted in that[249] direction and repelled in the opposite direction. Then we can go to bed and forget it. The movement of the body in its orbit makes no difference because the force follows wherever it goes. See? The speed increases until the opposing forces are equal, when deceleration commences and we gradually slow down until within ten thousand miles of the body, when the *Nomad* automatically stops. Doesn't move either, until we awaken to take the controls. How's that for simple?"

"Good enough. But suppose a wandering meteor or a tiny asteroid gets in the way? At our speed it wouldn't have to be as big as your fist to go through us like a shot."

"All taken care of, my dear Carr. I told you Thrygis was a wiz. Such a happenstance would disturb the delicate balance of the energy compensators and the course of the *Nomad* would instantly alter to dodge the foreign object. Once passed by, the course would again be resumed."

"Some ship, the *Nomad*!" Carr was delighted with the explanations. "I'm sold on her and on the trip. Where are we now and where bound?"

Mado glanced at the instrument board. "Nearly a million miles out and headed for that Sargasso Sea I told you about," he said. "It isn't visible in the telescope, but I've got it marked by the stars. Out between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, a quarter of a billion miles away. But we'll average better than a thousand miles a second. Be there in three days of your time."

"How can there be a sea out there in space?"

"Oh, that's just my name for it. Most peculiar thing, though. There's a vast, billowy sort of a cloud. Twists

and weaves around as if alive. Looks like seaweed or something; and Carr, I swear there are things floating around in it. Wrecks. Something damn peculiar, anyway. I vow I saw a signal. People marooned there or something. Sorta scared me and I didn't stay around for long as there was an awful pull from the mass. Had to use full reversal of the gravity force to get away."

"Now why didn't you tell me that before? That's something to think about. Like the ancient days of ocean-going ships on Earth."

"Tell you? How could I tell you? You've been questioning me ever since I first saw you and I've been busy every minute answering you."

Carr laughed and slid from his seat to the floor. He felt curiously light and loose-jointed. A single step carried him to one of the stanchions of the control cabin and he clung to it for a moment to regain his equilibrium.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "No internal gravity

mechanism on the *Nomad*?"

"Sure is. But it's adjusted for Martian gravity. You'll get along, but it wouldn't be so easy for me with Earth gravity. I'd have to wear the portable G-ray all the time, and that's not so comfortable. All right with you?"

"Oh, certainly. I didn't understand."

Carr saw that his friend had unstrapped the black box from his shoulders. He didn't blame him. Glad he wasn't a Martian. It was mighty inconvenient for them on Venus or Terra. Their bodies, large and of double the specific gravity, were not easily handled where gravity was nearly three times their own. The Venusians and Terrestrials were more fortunate when on Mars, for they could become accustomed to the altered conditions. Only had to be careful they didn't overdo. He remembered vividly a quick move he had made on his first visit to Mars. Carried him twenty feet to slam against a granite pedestal. Bad cut that gave him, and the exertion in the rarefied atmosphere had him gasping painfully.

He walked to one of the ports and peered through its thick window. Mado was fussing with the controls. The velvety blackness of the heavens;[250] the myriad diamond points of clear brilliance. Cold, too, it looked out there, and awesomely vast. The sun and Earth had been left behind and could not be seen. But Carr didn't care. The heavens were marvelous when viewed without the obstruction of an atmosphere. But he'd seen them often enough on his many business trips to Mars and Venus.

"Ready for bed?" Mado startled him with a tap on the shoulder.

"Why—if you say so. But you haven't shown me through the *Nomad* yet."

"All the time in the universe for that. Man, don't you realize you're free? Come, let's grab some sleep. Need it out here. The ship'll be here when we wake up. She's flying herself right now. Fast, too."

Carr looked at the velocity indicator. Seven hundred miles a second and still accelerating! He felt suddenly

tired and when Mado opened the door of a sleeping cabin its spotless bunk looked very inviting. He turned in without protest.

Chapter 3: A Message

The days passed quickly, whether measured by the Martian chronometer aboard the *Nomad* or by Carr's watch, which he was regulating to match the slightly longer day of the red planet. He was becoming proficient in the operation of all mechanisms of the ship and had developed a fondness for its every appointment.

Behind them the sun was losing much of its blinding magnificence as it receded into the ebon background of the firmament. The Earth was but one of the countless worlds visible through the stern ports, distinguishable by its slightly greenish tinge. They had reached the vicinity of the phenomenon of space Mado had previously discovered. Carr found himself seething with excitement as the *Nomad* was brought to a drifting speed.

Mado, who had disclaimed all knowledge of navigation, was busy in the turret with a sextant. He made rapid calculations based on its indications and hurried to the controls.

"Find it?" Carr asked.

"Yep. Be there in a half hour."

The nose of the vessel swung around and Mado adjusted the gravity energy carefully. Carr glued his eye to the telescope.

"See anything?" inquired Mado.

"About a million stars, that's all."

"Funny. Should be close by."

Then: "Yes! Yes! I see it!" Carr exulted. "A milky cloud. Transparent almost. To the right a little more!"

The mysterious cloud rushed to meet them and soon was visible to the naked eye through the forward port. Their speed increased alarmingly and Mado cut off the energy.

"What's that?" Mado stared white-faced at his friend.

"A voice! You hear it too?"

"Yes. Listen!"

Amazed, they gazed at each other. It was a voice; yet not a sound came to their ears. The voice was in their own consciousness. A mental message! Yet each heard and understood. There were no words, but clear mental images.

"Beware!" it seemed to warn. "Come not closer, travelers from afar. There is danger in the milky fleece before you!"

Mado pulled frantically at the energy reverse control. The force was now fully repelling. Still the billowing whiteness drew nearer. It boiled and bubbled with the ferocity of one of the hot lava cauldrons of Mercury. Changing shape rapidly, it threw out long streamers that writhed and twisted like the arms of an octopus. Reaching. Searching for victims!

"God!" whispered Carr. "What is it?"

"Take warning," continued the voice that was not a voice. "A great ship, a royal ship from a world

unknown to you, now is caught in the grip of this[251] mighty monster. We can not escape, and death draws quickly near. But we can warn others and ask that our fate be reported to our home body."

A sudden upheaval of the monstrous mass spewed forth an object that bounced a moment on the rippling surface and then was lost to view. A sphere, glinting golden against the white of its awful captor.

"The space-ship!" gasped Mado. "It's vanished again!"

They hurtled madly in the direction of this monster of the heavens, their reverse energy useless.

"We're lost, Mado." Carr was calm now. This was excitement with a vengeance. He'd wished for it and here it was. But he'd much rather have a chance to fight for his life. Fine ending to his dreams!

"Imps of the canals! The thing's alive!" Mado hurled himself at the controls as a huge blob of the horrible whiteness broke loose from the main body and wobbled uncertainly toward them. A long feeler

reached forth and grasped the errant portion, returning it with a vicious jerk.

"Turn back! Turn back!" came the eery warning from the golden sphere. "All is over for us. Our hull is crushed. The air is pouring from our last compartment. Already we find breathing difficult. Turn back! The third satellite of the fifth planet is our home. Visit it, we beseech you, and report the manner of our going. This vile creature of space has power to draw you to its breast, to crush you as we are crushed."

The *Nomad* lurched and shuddered, drawn ever closer to the horrid mass of the thing. A gigantic jellyfish, that's what it was, a hundred miles across! Carr shivered in disgust as it throbbed anew, sending out those grasping streamers of its mysterious material. As the *Nomad* plunged to its doom with increasing speed, Mado tried to locate some spot in the universe where an extreme effect could be obtained from the full force of the attracting or repulsive energies. They darted this way and that but always found themselves closer to the milky billows

that now were pulsating in seeming eagerness to engulf the new victim.

Once more came the telepathic warning, "Delay no longer. It is high time you turned back. You must escape to warn our people and yours. Even now the awful creature has us in its vitals, its tentacles reaching through our shattered walls, creeping and twining through the passages of our vessel. Crushing floors and walls, its demoniac energies heating our compartment beyond belief. We can hold out no longer. Go! Go quickly. Remember—the third satellite of the fifth planet—to the city of golden domes. Tell of our fate. Our people will understand. You—"

The voice was stilled. Mado groaned as if in pain and Carr saw in that instant that each knob and lever on the control panel glowed with an unearthly brush discharge. Not violet as of high frequency electricity, but red. Cherry red as of heated metal. The emanations of the cosmic monster were at work on the *Nomad*. A glance through the forward port showed they had but a few miles to go. They'd be in the clutches of the horror in minutes, seconds, at the

rate they were traveling. Mado slumped in his seat, his proud head rolling grotesquely on his breast. He slid to the floor, helpless.

Carr went mad with fury. It couldn't be! This thing of doom was a creature of his imagination! But no—there it was, looming close in his vision. By God, he'd leave the mark of the *Nomad* on the vicious thing! He remembered the ray with which the vessel was armed. He was in the pilot's seat, fingering controls that blistered his hands and cramped his arms with an unnameable force. He'd fight the brute! Full energy—head on—that[252] was the way to meet it. Why bother with the reversal? It was no use.

A blood-red veil obscured his vision. He felt for the release of the ray; pulled the gravity energy control to full power forward. In a daze, groping blindly for support, he waited for the shock of impact. The mass of that monstrosity must be terrific, else why had it such a power of attraction for other bodies? Or was it that the thing radiated energies unknown to science? Whatever it was, the thing would know the sting of the *Nomad's* ray. Whatever its nature, animate or

inanimate, it was matter. The ray destroyed matter. Obliterated it utterly. Tore the atoms asunder, whirling their electrons from their orbits with terrific velocity. There'd be some effect, that was certain! No great use perhaps. But a crater would mark the last resting place of the *Nomad*; a huge crater. Perhaps the misty whiteness would close in over them later. But there'd be less of the creature's bulk to menace other travelers in space.

His head ached miserably; his body was shot through and through with cramping agonies. The very blood in his veins was liquid fire, searing his veins and arteries with pulsing awfulness. He staggered from the control cabin; threw himself on his bunk. The covers were electrified and clung to him like tissue to rubbed amber. The wall of the sleeping cabin vibrated with a screeching note. The floors trembled. Madness! That's all it was! He'd awaken in a moment. Find himself in his own bed at home. He'd dreamed of adventures before now. But never of such as this! It just couldn't happen! A nightmare—fantasy of an over-tired brain—it was.

There came a violent wrench that must have torn the hull plates from their bracings. The ship seemed to close in on him and crush him. A terrific concussion flattened him to the bunk. Then all was still. Carr Parker's thoughts broke short abruptly. He had slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 4: Europa

When Carr opened his eyes it was to the normal lighting of his own sleeping cabin. The *Nomad* was intact, though an odor of scorched varnish permeated the air. They were unharmed—as yet. He turned on his side and saw that Mado was moving about at the side of his couch. Good old Mado! With a basin of water in his hand and a cloth. He'd been bathing his face. Brought him to. He sat up just as Mado turned to apply the cloth anew.

"Good boy, Carr! All right?" smiled the Martian.

"Little dizzy. But I'm okay." Carr sprang to his feet where he wobbled uncertainly for a moment. "But the *Nomad*?" he asked. "Is she—are we safe?"

"Never safer. What in the name of Saturn did you do?"

Carr passed his hand across his eyes, trying to remember. "The D-ray," he said. "I turned it on and dived into the thing with full attraction. Then—I forget. Where is it—the thing, I mean?"

"Look!" Mado drew him to the stern compartment.

Far behind them there shone a misty wreath, a ring of drifting matter that writhed and twisted as if in mortal agony.

"Is that it?"

"What's left of it. You shot your way through it; through and out of its influence. D-ray must have devitalized the thing as it bored through. Killed its energies—for the time, at least."

Already, the thing was closing in. Soon there would be a solid mass as before. But the *Nomad* was saved.

"How about yourself?" asked Carr anxiously. "Last time I saw you you were flat on the floor."

"Nothing wrong with me now. A bit stiff and sore, that's all. When I came to I put all the controls in neutral and came looking for you. I was scared,[253] but the thing's all over now, so let's go."

"Where?"

"Europa."

"Where's that?"

"Don't you remember? The third satellite of the fifth planet. That's Europa, third in distance from Jupiter, the fifth planet. It is about the size of Terra's satellite—your Moon. We'll find the city of the golden domes."

Carr's eyes renewed their sparkle. "Right!" he exclaimed. "I forgot the mental message. Poor devils! All over for them now. But we'll carry their message. How far is it?"

"Don't know yet till I determine our position and the position of Jupiter. But it's quite a way. Jupiter's 483 million miles from the Sun, you know."

"We're more than half way, then."

"Not necessarily. Perhaps we're on the opposite side of the sun from Jupiter's present position. Then we'd

have a real trip."

"Let's figure it out." Carr was anxious to be off.

Luck was with them, as they found after some observations from the turret. Jupiter lay off their original course by not more than fifteen degrees. It was but four days' journey.

Again they were on their way and the two men, Martian and Terrestrial, made good use of the time in renewing their old friendship and in the study of astronomy as they had done during the first leg of their journey. Though of widely differing build and nature, the two found a close bond in their similar inclinations. The library of the *Nomad* was an excellent one. Thrygis had seen to that, all of the voice-vision reels being recorded in Cos, the interplanetary language, with its standardized units of weight and measurement.

The supplies on board the *Nomad* were ample. Synthetic foods there were for at least a hundred Martian days. The supply of oxygen and water was

inexhaustible, these essential items being produced in automatic retorts where disassembled electrons from their cosmic-ray hydrogen were reassembled in the proper structure to produce atoms of any desired element. Their supply of synthetic food could be replenished in like manner when necessity arose. Thrygis had forgotten nothing.

"How do you suppose we'll make ourselves understood to the people of Europa?" asked Carr, when they had swung around the great orb of Jupiter and were headed toward the satellite.

"Shouldn't have any trouble, Carr. Believe me, to a people who have progressed to the point of sending mental messages over five hundred miles of space, it'll be a cinch, understanding our simple mental processes. Bet they'll read our every thought."

"That's right. But the language. Proper names and all that. Can't get those over with thought waves."

"No, but I'll bet they'll have some way of solving that too. You wait and see."

Carr lighted a cigar and inhaled deeply as he gazed from one of the ports. He'd never felt better in his life. Always had liked Martian tobacco, too. Wondered what they'd do when the supply ran out. One thing they couldn't produce synthetically. The disc of the satellite loomed near and it shone with a warmly inviting light. Almost red, like the color of Mars, it was. Sort of golden, rather. Anyway, he wondered what awaited them there. This was a great life, this roaming in space, unhampered by laws or conventions. The *Nomad* was well named.

"Wonder what they'll think of our yarn," he said.

"And me. I wonder, too, what that ungodly thing was back there. The thing that is now the grave of some of their people. And what the golden sphere was doing so far from home. It's a mystery."

They had gone over the same ground a hundred times and had not reached a satisfactory conclusion.[254] But perhaps they'd learn more in the city of golden domes.

"Another thing," said Carr, "that's puzzled me. Why is it that Europa has not been discovered before this; that it's inhabited, I mean?"

"Rocket ships couldn't carry enough fuel. Besides, our astronomers've always told us that the outer planets were too cold; too far from the sun."

"That is something to think about. Maybe we'll not be able to stand the low temperature; thin atmosphere; low surface gravity."

"We've our insulated suits and the oxygen helmets for the first two objections. The G-rays'll hold us down in any gravity. But we'll see mighty soon. We're here."

They had entered the atmosphere as they talked and the *Nomad* was approaching the surface in a long glide with repulsion full on. It was daytime on the side they neared. Pale daylight, but revealing. The great ball that was Jupiter hung low on the horizon, its misty outline faintly visible against the deep green of the sky.

The surface over which they skimmed was patchworked with farm-lands and crisscrossed by gleaming ribbons. Roadways! It was like the voice-vision records of the ancient days on Mars and Terra before their peoples had taken to the air. Here was a body where a person could get out in the open; next to nature. They crossed a lake of calm green water fringed by golden sands. At its far side a village spread out beneath them and was gone; a village of broad pavements and circular dwellings with flat rooms, each with its square of ground. A golden, mountain range loomed in the background; vanished beneath them. More fields and roads. Everywhere there were yellows and reds and the silver sheen of the roads. No green save that of the darkening sky and the waters of the streams and ponds. It was a most inviting panorama.

Occasionally they passed a vessel of the air—strange flapping-winged craft that soared and darted like huge birds. Once one of them approached so closely they could see its occupants, seemingly a people similar to the Venusians, small of stature and slender.

"How in time are we to find this city of golden domes?" Carr ejaculated.

As if in answer to his question there came a startling command, another of the mental messages.

"Halt!" it conveyed to their mind. "Continue not into our country until we have communed with you."

Obediently Mado brought up the nose of the *Nomad* and slowed her down to a gradual stop. They hovered at an altitude of about four thousand feet, both straining their ears as if listening for actual speech.

"It is well," continued the message. "Your thoughts are good. You come from afar seeking the city of golden domes. Proceed now and a fleet of our vessels will meet you and guide you to our city."

"Now wouldn't that jar you?" whispered Carr. "Just try to get away with anything on this world."

Mado laughed as he started the generators of the propelling energy. "I'd hate to have a wife of Europa,"

he commented. "No sitting-up-with-sick-friend story could get by with her!"

Chapter 5: The City of Golden Domes

With the *Nomad* cruising slowly over the surface of the peaceful satellite, Mado sampled the atmosphere through a tube which was provided for that purpose. The pressure was low, as they had expected; about twenty inches of mercury in the altitude at which they drifted. But the oxygen content was fairly high and the impurities negligible. A strange element was somewhat in evidence, though Mado's analysis showed this to be present in but minute quantity. They opened the ports and drew their first breath of the atmosphere of Europa.[255]

"Good air, Carr." Mado was sniffing at one of the ports. "A bit rare for you, but I think you'll get along with it. Temperature of forty-five degrees. That's not so bad. The strangest thing is the gravity. This body isn't much more than two thousand miles in diameter, yet its gravity is about the same as on Venus—seven eighths of that of Terra. Must have a huge nickel-iron core."

"Yes. It'll be a cinch for me. But you, you big lummoX

—it's the G-ray for you as long as we're here."

"Uh-huh. You get all the breaks, don't you?"

Carr laughed. He was becoming anxious to land.

"What sort of a reception do you suppose we'll get?"
he said.

"Not bad, from the tone of that last message. And here they come, Carr. Look—a dozen of them. A royal reception, so far."

Suddenly they were in the midst of a flock of great birds; birds that flapped their golden wings to rise, then soared and circled like the gulls of the terrestrial oceans. And these mechanical birds were fast. Carr and Mado watched in fascination as they strung out in V formation and led the way in the direction of the setting sun. Six, seven hundred miles an hour the *Nomad's* indicator showed, as they swung in behind these ships of Europa.

They crossed a large body of water, a lake of fully five hundred miles in width. More country then, hardly

populated now and with but few of the gleaming roadways. The sun had set, but there was scarcely any diminution of the light for the great ball that was Jupiter reflected a brilliance of far greater intensity than that of the full Moon on a clear Terrestrial night. A marvelous sight the gigantic body presented, with its alternate belts of gray-blue and red and dazzling white. And it hung so low and huge in the heavens that it seemed one had but to stretch forth a hand to touch its bright surface.

Another mountain range loomed close and was gone. On its far side there stretched the desolate wastes of a desert, a barren plain that extended in all directions to the horizon. Wind-swept, it was and menacing beneath them. Europa was not all as they had first seen it.

A glimmer of brightness appeared at the horizon. The fleet was reducing speed and soon they saw that their journey was nearly over. At the far edge of the desert the bright spot resolved itself into the outlines of a city, the city of golden domes. Cones they looked like, rather, with rounded tops and fluted walls. The

mental message had conveyed the most fitting description possible without words or picture.

The landing was over so quickly that they had but confused impressions of their reception. A great square in the heart of the city, crowded with people. Swooping maneuvers of hundreds of the bird-like ships. An open space for their arrival. The platform where a committee awaited them. The king, or at least he seemed to be king. The sea of upturned faces, staring eyes.

Mado fidgeted and opened his mouth to voice a protest but Carr nudged him into silence. The king had risen from his seat in the circle on the platform and was about to address them. There was no repetition of the telepathic means of communication.

"Welcome, travelers from the inner planets," said the king. He spoke Cos perfectly! "Cardos, emperor of the body you call Europa, salutes you. Our scientists have recorded your thoughts with their psycho-ray apparatus and have learned that you have a message for us, a message we fear is not pleasant. Am I

correct?"

Carr stared at the soft-voiced monarch of this remarkable land. It was incredible that he spoke in the universal language of the inner planets!

"Your Highness," he replied, "is correct. We have a message. But it[256] amazes us that you are familiar with our language."

"That we shall explain later. Meanwhile—the message!"

"The message," Carr said, "is not pleasant. A golden sphere out in space. Helpless in the clutches of a nameless monster, a vast creature of jellylike substance but possessed of enormous destructive energy. A mental message to our vessel warning us away and bidding us to come here; to tell you of their fate. We escaped and here we are."

The face of Cardos paled. He reached for an egg-shaped crystal that reposed on the table; spoke rapidly into its shimmering depths. Hidden amplifiers

carried his voice throughout the square in booming tones. It was a strange tongue he spoke, with many gutturals and sibilants. A groan came up from the assembled multitude.

Cardos tossed the crystal to the table with a resigned gesture, then tottered and swayed. Instant confusion reigned in the square and the emperor was assisted from the platform by two of his retainers. They never saw him again.

One of the counsellors, a middle-aged man with graying russet hair and large gray eyes set in a perfectly smooth countenance, stepped from the platform and grasped the two adventurers as the confusion in the square increased to an uproar.

"Come," he whispered, in excellent Cos; "I'll explain all to you in the quiet of my own apartments. I am Detis, a scientist, and my home is close by."

Gently he clung to them as the larger men forced their way between the milling groups of excited Europeans. No one gave them much attention. All

seemed to be overcome with grief. A terrible disaster, this loss of the golden sphere must be!

They were out of the square and in one of the broad streets. The fluted sides of the unpointed cones shone softly golden on all sides. Alike in every respect were these dwellings of the people of Europa, and strangely attractive in the light of the mother planet.

Not a word was spoken when they reached the abode of their guide. They entered an elaborate hall and were whisked upward in an automatic elevator. Detis ushered them into his apartment when they alighted. He smiled gravely at their looks of wonder as they cast eyes on the maze of apparatus before them. It was a laboratory rather than a living room in which they stood.

Detis led them to an adjoining room where he bid them be seated. They exchanged wondering glances as their host paced the floor vigorously before speaking further.

"Friends," he finally blurted, "I hope you'll excuse my

emotion but the news you brought is a terrible blow to me as to all Europa. Carli, our prince, beloved son of Cardos, was commander of the ship you reported lost. We deeply mourn his loss."

Carr and Mado waited in respectful silence while their host made effort to control his feelings.

"Now," he said, after a moment, "I can talk. You have many questions to ask, I know. So have I. But first I must tell you that Carli's was an expedition to your own worlds. A grave danger hangs over them and he was sent to warn them. He has been lost. Our only space-ship capable of making the journey also is lost. Six Martian years were required to build it, so I fear the warning will never reach your people. Already the time draws near."

"A grave danger?" asked Mado. "What sort of a danger?"

"War! Utter destruction! Conquest by the most warlike and ambitious people in the solar system."

"Not the people of Europa?" asked Carr.

"Indeed not. There is another inhabited satellite of Jupiter, next farthest from the mother planet.

Ganymede, you call it. It is from there^[257] that these conquerors are to set forth."

"Many of them?" inquired Mado.

"Two million or so. They're prepared to send an army of more than a tenth of that number on the first expedition."

"A mere handful!" Carr was contemptuous.

"True, but they are armed with the most terrible of weapons. Your people are utterly unprepared and, unless warned, will be driven from their cities and left in the deserts to perish of hunger and exposure. This is a real danger."

"Something in it, Carr, if what he says is true. We've no arms nor warriors. Haven't had for two centuries. You know it as well as I do."

"Bah! Overnight we could have a million armed and ready to fight them off."

Detis raised his hand. "You offend me," he said gravely. "I have told you this in good faith and you reward me with disbelief and boastful talk. Your enemies are more powerful than you think, and your own people utterly defenceless against them."

"I'm sorry," Carr apologized, "and I'll listen to all you have to say. Surely your prince has not given his life in vain." He was ashamed before this scientist of Europa.

A tinkling feminine voice from the next room called something in the European tongue.

Detis raised his head proudly and his frown softened at the sound of dainty footsteps. His voice was a caress as he replied.

A vision of feminine loveliness stood framed in the doorway and the visitors rose hastily from their seats. Carr gazed into eyes of the deepest blue he had ever

seen. Small in stature though this girl of Europa was —not more than five feet tall—she had the form of a goddess and the face of an angel. He was flushing to the roots of his hair. Could feel it spread. What an ass he was anyway! Anyone'd think he'd never seen a woman in all his thirty-five years!

"My daughter, Ora, gentlemen," said Detis.

The girl's eyes had widened as she looked at the huge Martian with the funny black box on his back. They dropped demurely when turned to those of the handsome Terrestrial.

"Oh," she said, in Cos, "I didn't know you had callers."

Chapter 6: Vlor-uridin

The time passed quickly in Pala-dar, city of the golden domes. Detis spent many hours in the laboratory with his two visitors and the fair Ora was usually at his side. She was an efficient helper to her father and a gracious hostess to the guests.

The amazement of the visitors grew apace as the wonders of European science were revealed to them. They sat by the hour at the illuminated screen of the rulden, that remarkable astronomical instrument which brought the surfaces of distant celestial bodies within a few feet of their eyes, and the sounds of the streets and the jungles to their ears. It was no longer a mystery how the language of Cos had become so familiar to these people.

They learned of the origin of the races that inhabited Europa and Ganymede. Ages before, it was necessary for the peoples of the then thickly populated Jupiter to cast about for new homes due to the cooling of the surface of that planet. Life was becoming unbearable. In those days there were two dominant races on the

mother body, a gentle and peaceful people of great scientific accomplishment and a race of savage brutes who, while very clever with their hands, were of lesser mental strength and of a quarrelsome and fighting disposition.

Toward the last the population of both main countries was reduced to but a few survivors, and the intelligent[258] race had discovered a means of traversing space and was prepared to leave the planet for the more livable satellite—Europa. Learning of these plans, the others made a treaty of perpetual peace as a price for their passage to another satellite—Ganymede. The migration began and the two satellites were settled by the separate bands of pioneers and their new lives begun.

The perpetual treaty had not been broken since, but the energies of the warlike descendants of those first settlers of Ganymede were expended in casting about for new fields to conquer. Through the ages they cast increasingly covetous eyes on those inner planets, Mars, Terra and Venus. Not having the advantage of the Rulden, they knew of these bodies only what

could be seen through their own crude optical instruments and what they had learned by word of mouth from certain renegade Europeans they were able to bribe.

While their neighbors of the smaller satellite were engaged in peaceful pursuits, tilling the soil and making excellent homes for themselves, the dwellers on Ganymede were fashioning instruments of warfare and building a fleet of space-ships to carry them to their intended victims. It was a religion with them; they could think of nothing else. An unscrupulous scientist of Europa sold himself to them several generations previously and it was this scientist who had made the plans for their space-fliers and had contrived the deadly weapons with which they were armed. He likewise taught them the language of Cos and it now was spoken universally throughout Ganymede in anticipation of the glorious days of conquest.

"You honestly believe them able to do this?" asked Carr, still skeptical after two days of discussion.

"I know it as a certainty," Detis replied solemnly. "It is only during the past generation we have learned of the completeness and awfulness of their preparations. Your people can not combat their sound-ray. With it they can remain outside the vision of those on the surface and set the tall buildings of your cities in harmonic vibrations that will bring them down in ruins about the ears of the populace."

"There'll be nothing left for them to take if they destroy all our cities: nowhere for them to live. I don't get it."

"Only a few will be destroyed completely, to terrify the rest of the inhabitants of your worlds. Others will be depopulated by means of vibrations that will kill off the citizens without harming the cities themselves—vibrations which are capable of blanketing a large area and raising the body temperature of all living things therein to a point where death will ensue in a very few minutes. Other vibrations will paralyze all electrical equipment on the planet and make it impossible for your ships of the air to set out to give battle, even were they properly armed."

"Looks bad, Carr," said Mado glumly.

"It does that. We've got to go back and carry the warning."

"I fear it is too late," said Detis. "Much time will be needed in which to develop a defense and surely it can not be done within the three isini before they set forth—about four of your days."

"They leave that soon?" Carr was taken aback.

"Yes, with their one hundred and twenty vessels; forty to each of your three planets; seventeen hundred men to a vessel."

Carr jumped to his feet. "By the heat devils of Mercury!" he roared, "we'll go to their lousy little satellite and find a way to prevent it!"

Ora gazed at his flushed face with unconcealed admiration.

"You're crazy!" exploded Mado. "What can we do with

the *Nomad*?"[259]

"Her D-ray can do plenty of damage."

"Yes, but they'd have us down before we could account for five of their vessels. It's no use, I tell you."

But Carr was stubborn. "We'll pay them a call anyway. I'll bet we can dope out some way of putting it over on them. Are you game?"

"Of course I'm game. I'll go anywhere you will. But it's a fool idea just the same."

"Maybe so. Maybe not. Anyway—let's go."

"Just a moment, gentlemen," Detis interposed. "How about me?"

Carr stared at him and saw that his eyes shone with excitement. "Why, I believe you'd like to go with us!" he exclaimed admiringly.

"I would, indeed."

"Come on then. We're off." He was impatient to be gone.

Detis busied himself with a small apparatus that folded into a compact case, explaining that it was one that might prove useful. Ora left the room but quickly returned. She too carried a small case, and she had donned a snug fitting leather garment that covered her from neck to knees.

"What's this?" demanded Carr. "Surely Miss Ora does not intend to come with us?"

"She never leaves my side," said Detis proudly.

"Nothing doing!" Carr stated emphatically. "There'll be plenty of danger on this trip. Well have no woman along—least of all your charming daughter."

Mado was leaving everything to his friend, but he grinned in anticipation when he saw the look of anger on the girl's face.

She stamped her little foot and faced Carr valiantly.

"See here, Mr. Carr Parker!" she stormed. "I'm no weakling. I'm the daughter of my father and where he goes I go. You'll take me or I'll never speak to you again."

Carr flushed. He was accustomed to his own way in most things and entirely unused to the ways of the gentler sex. He could have shaken the little vixen! But now she was standing before him and there was something in those great blue eyes besides anger; something that set his heart pounding madly.

"All right!" he agreed desperately, "have your own way."

He turned on his heel and strode to the door. Giving in to this slip of a girl! What a fool he was! But it would be great at that to have her along in the *Nomad*.

They found the public square deserted, the gilded dwellings hung with somber colors in mourning for Carli. Ora and Detis were very quiet and preoccupied when they entered the *Nomad*. The five isini of

lamentation for the young prince had not yet passed.

The two Europeans were delighted with the appointments and mechanisms of the little vessel from Mars. They investigated every nook and cranny of its interior during the journey and were voluble in their praise of its inventor and builder. Neither had ever set foot in a space-flier and each was seized with a longing to explore space with these two strangers from the inner planets. They would make a couple of good vagabonds along with Mado and himself, Carr thought as they expressed their feelings. But there was more serious business at hand. They were nearing Ganymede.

"Where'll we land, Detis?" Mado called from the control cabin.

"Vlor-uridin. That is their chief city. I'll guide you to the location."

They took up their places at the ports and scanned the surface of the satellite as Mado dropped the ship into its atmosphere. A far different scene was

presented than on Europa. The land was seamed and scarred, the colors of the foliage somber. Grays and browns predominated and the jungles seemed impenetrable. A river swung into view and its waters were black as[260] the deepest night, its flow sluggish. A rank mist hung over the surface.

"The river of Charis!" exclaimed Detis. "Follow it, Mado. No, the other direction. There! It leads directly to Vlor-uridin."

By good chance they had entered the atmosphere at a point not far from their destination. In less than an hour by the *Nomad's* chronometer the towers of Vlor-uridin were sighted.

It was a larger city than Pala-dar and of vastly different appearance. A hollow square of squat buildings enclosed the vast workshops and storage space of the fleet of war vessels. Their huge spherical bulks rose from their cradles in tier after tier that stretched as far as the eye could reach when the *Nomad* had dropped to a level but slightly above the tips of the highest spires. The spires were

everywhere, decorative towers at the corners of the squat buildings. Everything was black, the vessels of the fleet, the squat buildings and the spires of Vlorurdin. Death was in the air. Rank vapor drifted in through the opened ports. There was silence in the city below them and silence in the *Nomad*.

Ora shuddered and drew closer to him. Carr was aware of her nearness and a lump rose in his throat. A horrible fear assailed him. Fear for the safety of the dainty European at his side. He found her hand; covered it protectingly with his own.

Chapter 7: Rapaju

Detis was setting up and adjusting the complicated mechanisms of his little black case. A dozen vacuum tubes lighted, and a murmur of throbbing energy came from a helix of shining metallic ribbon that topped the whole. Flexible cables led to a cap-like contrivance which Detis placed on his head. He frowned in concentration.

"The psycho-ray apparatus." Ora explained. "He's sending a message to the city."

Evidently the influence of the ray was directive. They had no inkling of the thoughts transmitted from the alert brain of the scientist but, from the look of satisfaction on his face, they could see that he was obtaining the desired contact.

"Rapaju," he exclaimed, switching off the power of his instrument, "commander of the fleet of the Llotta. I have advised him of our arrival. Told him that a Martian and a Terrestrial wish to treat with him concerning the proposed invasion of their planets. His

answering thought first was of fiercest rage, then conciliatory in nature. He'll receive you and listen to your arguments, though he promises nothing. Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes." Carr and Mado were agreed. At least it would give them a chance to look over the ground and to make plans, should any occur to them.

The *Nomad* circled over the heart of the city and soon Mado saw a suitable landing space. They settled gracefully in an open area close by the building indicated by Detis as that of the administration officials of the city.

A group of squat, sullen Llotta awaited them and, without speaking a word either of hatred or welcome, led them into the forbidding entrance of the building. Close-set, beady eyes; unbelievably flat features of chalky whiteness; chunky bowed legs, bare and hairy; long arms with huge dangling paws—these were the outstanding characteristics of the Llotta. Mado stared straight before him, refusing to display any great interest in the loathsome creatures, but Carr was

frankly curious and as frankly disapproving.

Rapaju leered maliciously when the four voyagers stood before him. He looked the incarnation of all that was evil and vile, a monster among monsters. Sensing him to be the more aggressive of the two visitors from doomed planets, he addressed his remarks to Carr.

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"You come to plead with Rapaju," he sneered, his Costinged with an outlandish accent, "to beg for the worthless lives of your compatriots; for the wealth of your cities?"

"We come to reason with you," replied Carr haughtily, "if you are capable of reasoning. What is this incredible thing you are planning?"

Mado gasped at the effrontery of his friend. But Carr was oblivious of the warning looks cast in his direction.

"Enough of that!" snapped Rapaju. "I'll do the talking—you the reasoning. I've a proposition to make to

you, and if you know what's best, you'll agree. Otherwise you'll be first of the Terrestrials to die. Is that clear?"

"Clear enough, all right," growled Carr. "What do you mean—a proposition?"

"Ha! I thought you'd listen. My offer is the lives of you and your companion in exchange for your assistance in guiding my fleet to the capital cities of your countries. Not that our plans will be changed if you refuse, but that much time will be saved in this manner and quick victory made certain without undue sacrifice of valuable property."

"You—you—!" Carr stammered in anger. But there was no use in raising a rumpus—now. They'd only kill him. Something might be accomplished if he pretended to accede. "Go on with your story," he finished lamely.

"In addition to sparing your lives I'll place you both in high position after we seize your respective planets. Make you chief officers in the prison lands we intend

to establish for your countrymen. What do you say?"

"Will you give us time to talk it over and think about it?"

"Until the hour of departure, if you wish."

Carr bowed, avoiding Mado's questioning eyes. He looked at Ora where she stood at the side of Detis. She flashed him a guarded smile. He knew that she understood.

Rapaju relaxed. He was confident he could bribe these puerile foreigners to help him in the great venture. And sadly he needed such help. The Llotta were not navigators. Their knowledge of the heavens was sadly incomplete. They had no maps of the surfaces of the planets to be visited. Their simultaneous blows would be far more effective and the campaign much shorter if they could choose the most vital centers for the initial attacks.

"Now," he said, "that we understand one another, let us talk further of the plans. Then you will be able to

consider carefully before making your decision."

Rapaju could be diplomatic when he wished. Carr longed to sink his fingers in the hairy throat. But he smiled hypocritically and found an opportunity to wink meaningly at Mado. This was going to be good! And who knew?—perhaps they might find some way to outwit these mad savages. To think of them in control of the inner planets was revolting.

They retired to a small room with Rapaju and four of his lieutenants, Detis and Ora accompanying them. Ora sat close to Carr at the circular table in Rapaju's council. Carr thought grimly of the board meetings in far away New York.

Rapaju talked. He told of the armament of his vessels, painting vivid pictures of the destruction to be wrought in the cities of Terra, of Mars and Venus. His great hairy paws clutched at imaginary riches when he spoke glowingly of the plundering to follow. He spoke of the women of the inner planets and Carr half rose from his seat when he observed the lecherous glitter in his beady eyes. Ora! Great God, was she safe

here? He stole a glance at the girl and a recurrence of the awful fear surged through him. In her leather garment, close fitting and severe, she looked like a boy. Perhaps they would not know. Besides, there was the perpetual treaty with Europa. It always had been observed, Detis said.[262]

As Rapaju expanded upon the glories to come he told perforce of many of the details of the plans. One thing stood out in Carr's mind: the vessels of the Llotta were not equal to the *Nomad* in many respects. They must carry their entire supply of fuel from the starting point and this was calculated as but a small percentage in excess of that required to carry them to their destinations. Their speed was not as great as the *Nomad's* by at least a third. If the *Nomad* led the fleet from Ganymede they might be able to get them off their course; cause them to run out of fuel out in the vacuum and absolute zero of space. He kicked Mado under the table and arose to ask a few leading questions.

Ora was whispering to her father and he nodded his head as if in complete agreement with what she was

saying. These two were not deceived by his apparent traitorous talk, but Mado was aghast. Carr wondered if Rapaju believed him as did his friend.

"We'll do it, Rapaju," he stated finally. "In our ship, the *Nomad*, we'll guide you across the trackless wastes of the heavens. We'll take you to our capital cities; point out to you the richest of the industrial centers. We have no love for our own worlds. Mado and I deserted them for a life of vagabondage amongst the stars. We ask no reward other than that we be permitted to leave once more on our travels, to roam space as we choose."

Mado attempted to voice an objection but Carr's hand was heavy on his shoulder. "Shut up, you fool!" he hissed in his ear. "Can't you trust me?"

Rapaju's eyes seemed to draw closer together as he returned Carr's unflinching stare. He walked around the table and stood at the side of the tall Terrestrial. Suddenly he grasped Ora's jacket, tore it open at the throat. He ran his hairy fingers over the bare shoulder of the shrinking girl and gurgled his delight

at the velvet smoothness of her skin.

With a roar like a wild animal Carr was upon him, bearing him to the floor. His fingers were in that hairy throat, where they had itched to twine.

"Dirty, filthy beast!" he was snarling. "Lay your foul hands on Ora, will you? Say your prayers, if you know any, you swine!"

Then his muscles went limp and he was jerked to his feet by a terrible force, a force that sent him reeling and gasping against the wall. One of Rapaju's lieutenants stood before him with a tiny weapon in his hand, the weapon which had released the paralyzing gas he breathed. He was choking; suffocating. A black mist rose before him. He felt his knees give way. Dimly, as in a dream, he saw that Ora was in Detis' arms. Rapaju was on his feet, fingering his neck and laughing horribly.

"The treaty, Rapaju!" Detis was shouting.

Ora was sobbing. Mado was in the hands of two of the

vile Llotta, struggling wildly to free himself. The Martian's eyes accused him. He shut his own and groaned. Opened them again. But it was no use. Everything in the room was whirling now, crazily. He fought to regain his senses, crawled weakly toward the squat figure of Rapaju where it swayed and twisted and spun around. Then all was darkness. The gas had taken its toll.

Chapter 8: The Expedition

Carr awakened to a sense of wordless disgust. Fool that he was to spill the beans as he had! All set to put one over on the leader of the Llotta, then to come a cropper like this! He knew he had been spared for a purpose. The gas was not intended to kill, only to render him helpless for a time. He opened his eyes to the light of a familiar room. He had awakened before in this bed. It was his own cabin on board the *Nomad*. What had happened? Had he dreamed it all. Europa, Ora, Rapaju—all[263] of it? He sat up and felt of his aching head.

"Oh, are you awake?" a soft voice greeted him.

"Ora!" he exclaimed. It was indeed she, beautiful as ever.

"Sh-h," she warned, placing the tip of a finger to his lips. "They'll hear us."

"Who?" he whispered.

"Rapaju—his two guards. They're in the control cabin with father and Mado."

"What? They've taken the *Nomad*?"

"Yes. We're under way. They've forced Mado to guide them but do not trust him. Rapaju spared you as he believes you more capable. He'll hold you to your word."

"Lord! But what are you doing here?"

Ora dropped her eyes. "He—Rapaju—" she said, "inferred from your action in assaulting him that you were very fond of me. He holds me as a hostage for your good behavior. Father volunteered to come along. He persuaded Rapaju to allow it. Swore allegiance to his cause. Of course he wouldn't leave me."

Carr gazed at her in admiration of her courage. She had been nursing him, too! What a girl she was!

"Ora," he said huskily, "Rapaju was right. I am fond of

you. More than fond: I love you. I never knew I could feel this way."

"Oh Carr, you mustn't!" She drew back as he scrambled to his feet. "They'll find us. We must not show that we care. Rapaju is a beast. He wants me for himself and is delaying the time only until you have brought the fleet safely to the inner planets and to their great cities. He—"

"The skunk! Wants you himself, does he? Why, why didn't I kill him? But Ora, you said—you do care—"

"Ha! I thought so!" Rapaju stood in the doorway, grinning mockingly at the pair. "The impetuous Terrestrial is up and about. Back at his old game!"

"Please, please, for my sake, Carr!" Ora pressed him back as he tensed his muscles for a spring.

"Sorry I was so slow," Carr grated, over her shoulder. "Another five seconds, Rapaju, and I'd have had your windpipe out by the roots."

Rapaju scowled darkly and fingered his throat. "But, my dear Carr, you were too slow," he said, "and I live—and shall live—while you shall die. Meanwhile you'll carry out your agreement. Come, Ora."

The girl hesitated a moment, then with a pleading glance at Carr stepped from the room.

"All right now, Parker," snapped Rapaju. "Into your clothes and into the pilot's seat. You'll stay there, too, till the journey's over. Get busy!"

One of his guards had appeared in the doorway. Carr knew that resistance was useless. Besides, seated at those controls, he might think of something. Rapaju'd never get Ora if he could help it!

Mado's shoulders drooped and his face was haggard and drawn, but he summoned a smile when he saw Carr.

"Hello, Carr," he said. "You all right?"

"Sure. Rapaju says I've got to take the controls."

"Very well." Mado shrugged his broad shoulders and slipped from the pilot's seat. Two ugly Llotta guards were watching, ray-pistols in hand. "The chart is corrected, Carr, and—"

"Never mind the conversation!" Rapaju snarled. "There'll be no talk between you at all. Beat it to your cabin, Mado."

The Martian glowered and made as if to retort hotly.

"But Rapaju," Detis interposed, speaking from his position at one of the ports, "they'll have to consult regarding the course of the vessel. Mado is more familiar than Carr with the navigation of space."

"Shut up!" roared Rapaju. "I know what I am doing. And, what's more,[264] you'll not converse with them, either! I'm running this expedition, and I'm not taking any chances."

Detis subsided and followed Mado through the passage to the sleeping cabins.

The ensuing silence was ominous. Carr could feel the eyes of the Llotta upon him as he examined the adjustments of the controls and peeped through the telescope. A glance at the velocity indicator showed him they were traveling at a rate of eight hundred miles a second. He studied the chart and soon made out their position. Jupiter was a hundred million miles behind them and they were heading almost due sunward. The automatic control mechanism was not functioning. Evidently Mado had kept this a secret—and for a purpose. He wished he could talk with his friend. They'd plan something.

"Like your job?" Rapaju was gloating over this Terrestrial who had dared to lay hands upon him.

"Yes, but not the company." Carr was disdainful.

"You'll like it less before I've finished with you. And get this straight. You think we're dependent on you to guide us to the inner planets, and that we'll not harm any of you until they are reached. Don't fool yourself! I've watched Mado and I've spent much time in the excellent library of the *Nomad*. I've learned plenty

about the navigation of space and can reach those planets as quickly and directly as you. But it pleases me to see you work, so work you shall. I'll check you carefully, and don't think you can deceive me. Don't try to depart from the true course. The sun is my check as it is yours, and I'll keep constant tab on our position. Get it?"

"A rather long speech, Rapaju." Carr grinned into the evil face of the commander.

"Still defiant, eh? Suits me, Carr Parker. We'll have some nice talks here, and then—when it pleases me—you'll suffer. You shall live to see your home city crash in utter ruin; your people slain, starved, beaten. And, above all, there's Ora—"

"Don't defile her name in your ugly mouth, you—!"

Carr bit his tongue to keep back the torrent of invectives that sprang to his lips. This would never do! He'd get himself bumped off before they were well started. And while there was life there was hope. He'd stick to his guns and think; think and plan. If

only he could have a few words with Mado. They must get out of this mess. There must be a way! There must!

Rapaju was laughing in triumph. Thought he had cowed him, did he? Boastful savage! If he could navigate the *Nomad* himself, why didn't he? Liar! He and Mado were godsend to him, and he knew it! His speech at the council table had been the real truth.

Foreign thoughts entered his mind. Detis, good old Detis, was using his thought apparatus in his own cabin! He paid no attention to the words of Rapaju when he left the control room. Detis was on the job! Between them they'd outwit this devil of Ganymede.

"Keep your courage," came the message. "I've read the thoughts of Mado and he bids you examine the chart carefully. He's made some notations in the ancient language of Mars. The automatic control of the *Nomad* can be used when necessary. He has not advised Rapaju of its existence."

Carr was encouraged and he concentrated on a

suitable reply. But, though he did not consciously will it, his thoughts were of Ora.

Instantly there came the reassurance of her father. "Ora is not in immediate danger. Rapaju is saving her for his revenge on you. And I'm watching her constantly. A ray-pistol is concealed in my clothing, its charge ready for the foul creature in case he should lay hands on her. But you must plan[265] an escape, and salvation for your worlds. Examine the chart at once."

He looked from the corner of his eye and saw that one of the Llotta guards was watching intently. He peered into the eye-piece of the telescope; made an inconsequential change in one of the adjustments. The guard stirred but did not arise. He looked at the chart with new interest, scanned its markings carefully. What had Mado marked for his attention? There were hundreds of notations, some in Cos and a few in the ancient Martian, all in Mado's painstaking chirography.

Ah, there it was! A tiny spot almost on their course,

with Mado's minute notation. Sargasso Sea! What did it mean? Did Mado intend to lead the fleet into the embrace of that dreadful monster they had so fortunately escaped? An excellent idea to save the inner planets. But suicide for them! He'd do it though, if it weren't for Ora. She was so sweet and innocent. She must not die; must not suffer. Another way must be found. He groaned aloud as he realized that her predicament was the result of his own bullheadedness. If only he hadn't insisted on the trip to Ganymede. But then there was the problem of preserving the civilization of the inner planets. It had to be met.

There was a commotion behind him; a feminine shriek from the after cabins; loud shoutings from the beast called Rapaju. Carr's heart skipped a beat. He was paralyzed with fear. But only for an instant. With a bellow of rage he whirled around and started for the door, charging the two guards with head down and arms flailing.

Chapter 9: Nemesis

The Llotta did not use their ray-pistols. They were too busy attempting to elude the mad rushes of the powerful Terrestrial. Besides, there were good reasons they should not kill him—yet. Carr drove one of them halfway down the passageway with a well-planted punch. The other was on his back, hairy legs twined around his waist, an arm under his chin, drawing his head back with a steady and terrible pressure. He whirled around, trying to shake off his beastly antagonist.

But these powerful legs and arms held fast. He tore at the hairy ankles where they crossed in the pit of his stomach; wrenched them free. Still the creature clung to him, twisting his head until it seemed his neck must break. He found a waving foot with his right hand; wrenched it mightily. There was a sharp snap and the foot dangled limp in his fingers. He had broken the ankle. With a howl of pain his assailant let go and dropped to the floor to crawl away like a whipped cur.

In a flash Carr saw that the brute was reaching for his ray-pistol where it had dropped during the encounter. He kicked it from the reach of that hairy paw and sprang after it. With one of those little weapons in his hands the odds would change! His fingers closed on its grip just as Ora rushed into the room, closely followed by Rapaju, whose distorted features were terrible to behold. The cabin was full of them now; the guard he had first knocked down; the lust-crazed commander—the one with the broken ankle. All but Detis and Mado. Carr faced them alone.

So close was Rapaju to the girl that he dared not use the pistol, and now the uninjured guard was circling him, trying to get in a position where he could use his ray-pistol without endangering his commander. Carr fumbled for the release of the weapon he held in his hand; found it. The guard threw himself to the floor when he saw it raised; shouted a warning. But it was too late. The deadly ray had sped on its mission of death; struck him full in the middle. The twisted body lay still a moment and then collapsed like a punctured balloon, leaving his scant[266] clothing in a limp heap

—empty. A worthy miniature of the D-ray, this little weapon!

He turned to face Rapaju and saw that he was shielding himself with Ora's body. She had fainted and now hung drooping in the arms of the beast. Where was Mado? Detis? Good God—he'd killed them! Carr thought of that little spot on the chart. Must be very close now. They'd pass so near there'd be no escape. But he could not reach the controls without taking his eyes from Rapaju. That would have to wait.

Rapaju was backing toward the door, still holding the limp figure of the girl before him. The injured guard lay moaning on the floor.

"Drop her, you devil!" Carr shouted desperately as he saw that Rapaju soon would reach the passageway.

Then suddenly he reached for the controls and pushed the energy lever to full speed forward. He braced himself for the shock of acceleration and saw Rapaju and Ora thrown backward into the passageway, the girl's body cushioned by that of her

captor as they were flung violently to the floor. Madly he rushed to the narrow entrance and tore at the hairy arms that encircled the slender waist of the girl. He jerked the snarling commander of the Llotta expedition to his feet and slammed him against the metal wall.

"Now, you damn pig," he grunted, "I'll finish the job. Dirty scum of a rotten world!"

He dragged his victim into the control cabin and threw him to the floor. But Rapaju was like an eel. He wriggled from under him and snatched from the heap of clothing the ray-pistol of the disintegrated guard. With a yelp of triumph he rose to his knees and leveled the weapon.

A well placed kick sent it spinning and Carr was upon him. He snapped back the head with a terrible punch; then lifted the dazed creature to his feet and stepped back.

"Stand up and take it like a man!" he roared.

Rapaju shook his head to clear it and rushed in with a bellow of rage. Just what Carr wanted! Starting almost from the floor, his right came up to meet the vicious jaw with a crack that told of the terrific power behind it. Lifted from his feet and hurled half way across the room by the impact, Rapaju lay motionless where he fell.

Carr was at the telescope. Their speed was close to fifteen hundred miles a second. The monstrous mass of Mado's Sargasso Sea loomed close in his vision. Off their course by a hundred miles or more. They'd miss it all right. He had the situation in hand now on board the *Nomad*. But how about the fleet behind them? He thought fast and furiously. Another two minutes and they'd pass the thing; the inexplicable horror which had accounted for the golden sphere of the Europeans. Could he use it? Suppose the fleet of the enemy—

The idea was full of possibilities.

He rushed to the stern compartment, and scanned the heavens for the massed body of spheres he knew would be the fleet of the Llotta. At this speed they

must have fallen far behind. Yes, there they were. Not so far behind at that. The battle in the control room must have been a shorter one than it had seemed. He returned quickly to the controls and reversed the energy, to give the fleet a chance to catch up to him.

Closer came that mass of whitish jelly. And now it was much larger than before. The terrible creature, for living matter it was, beyond doubt, was growing with the rapidity of a rising flood. Great tentacles of its horrid translucent substance reached in all directions for possible victims. He sickened at the sight. But what a fate for the fleet of the Llotta! If only he could maneuver them into its influence.[267]

He changed his course slightly and headed directly for the monster, again increasing speed. Perhaps—if he calculated the forces correctly—he could dive through it again with the D-ray to clear a path. But no. It was a miracle they had escaped before, and now the vicious thing was more than double its previous size. Once more he altered his course. He'd cross in front of the thing; skim it as close as he dared and shoot from its influence on the far side. The greater

mass of the enemy vessels and their lack of a quick-acting repulsive force would prove their undoing.

Full speed ahead. A rapid mental calculation—an educated guess, rather—and he set the automatic control. Turning around to start for the stern compartment, he saw that Ora had recovered from her swoon and now stood swaying weakly in the passageway.

"Ora!" he exclaimed delightedly. He rushed to her side and supported her in a tender embrace.

"Rapaju?" she questioned with horror in her eyes.

"Won't bother you for a while, dear. But your father—Mado?"

"He gassed them. They'll recover." The brave girl had regained her composure.

"Good! But, come! Time's short." He half carried her to the rear, berating himself the while for his inability to pay her closer attention. With arms still around her

he placed her at one of the stern ports.

"What is it, Carr?" She sensed his excitement.

"The fleet—see! We'll destroy them."

The spherical vessels were close behind, huddled together in mass formation and following the *Nomad* blindly.

"How, Carr?"

"Lead them into it. Wait till you see! There's a—"

The *Nomad* lurched, and changed direction. Cold fear clutched at his throat. That devil of a guard! Why hadn't he killed him? He dashed through the passage, Ora at his heels.

Sure enough, the crippled guard had dragged himself to the controls; was manipulating the energy director as he had seen Mado do. They were heading directly for the terrible monster of the heavens!

No need now to peer through the telescope. The thing was visible to the naked eye. No power could save them! Carr hurled himself at the guard and tore at the hairy paw which gripped the lever. The throbbing of strange energies filled the air of the room, and Carr's brain pulsed with the maddening rhythm. The red discharge appeared at the projections of the control panels. He forgot the fleet of the Llotta, forgot the menace to his own world. Only Ora mattered now, and he had not the power to save her!

As in a daze he knew he was wrenching mightily at the body of the powerful minion of Rapaju. His fingers encountered heated metal—one of the ray-pistols. He felt the intense vibration of the weapon as its charge was released. But he still lived. The beast who held it had missed! Dimly he was conscious of the screams of Ora; of the yielding of the creature who fought him. An animal cry registered on his consciousness and he shook the suddenly limp Llotta from him. He knew somehow that his last enemy was gone.

A quick glance showed him that Ora was still on her feet, braced against the wall. The red veil was before

his eyes. He grasped the controls, and fought desperately to keep his strength and senses. A streamer of horrid whiteness swung across his vision; slithered clammily over the glass of one of the forward ports. They were into the thing! It was the end! He groaned aloud as he fumbled with the mechanisms and strove to formulate a plan of escape.

The fleet, he knew, was just behind. An enormous mass. The repulsive energy astern would be terrific. He turned it full on. The whiteness obscured his vision. Then it was gone once more. A single streamer waved before him and encompassed them. The movement of these members must be inconceivably rapid, else they'd be invisible at the speed the *Nomad* was traveling. Full speed ahead. The repulsion full on in the direction of the center of the mass as well as astern. The framework of the *Nomad* creaked protestingly from the terrific forces that tore at her vitals.

Then suddenly they were released. The *Nomad* was shooting off into space. The resultant of those combined forces had done the trick. Only the edge of

that devil-fish of space, had they touched. Free—they were free of the monster! The red veil lifted. He rushed to Ora's side. She was kneeling at one of the floor ports, breathing heavily but unharmed.

Below them they saw the swiftly receding mass: the fleet of the Llotta diving headlong, drawn inexorably into the rapacious embrace of the vile creature of the heavens. An instant the awful whiteness of the thing closed in greedily about the many spheres of the fleet; swallowed them from sight and contorted madly and with seeming glee over the triumph. Then, in a burst of blinding incandescence, it was gone. The monster, the fleet—everything—blasted into nothingness. The fuel storage compartments of the vessels of Ganymede had exploded! The heavens were rid of the inexplicable growing menace; the inner planets were saved from a terrible invasion. And the *Nomad* was safe. Ora, Detis, Mado—all were safe!

At his side Ora was trembling. Gently he raised her to her feet, and took her into his arms.

Chapter 10: Vagabonds All

Together they cared for Detis and Mado; made them comfortable in their bunks until the time when the effects of the gas would wear off. Lucky it was that Rapaju had used the gas pistol rather than the ray. Perhaps it had been a mistake. Or perhaps he had needed the scientific knowledge of Detis, the familiarity with the inner planets that was Mado's. At any rate, they had no delusions regarding his designs on Ora or his hatred of Carr. By his own passions had the commander of the fleet been led to the error that cost him his life and made possible the destruction of his fleet.

Carr was torn by conflicting emotions. The delectable little European was most disturbing. He'd never had much use for the other sex—on Earth. Too dominating, most of them. And always thrown at his head by designing parents for his money. But Ora was different! Her very nearness set his pulses racing. And he knew that she cared for him as he did for her. Those moments in the control cabin after the explosion! But something had come over him since he

cut loose from the old life. Wanderlust—that was it. He'd never go back. Neither would he be content to settle down to a domestic life in Pala-dar. Wanted to be up and going somewhere.

"Oh, Carr, Carr!" Ora's voice called to him. "Mado is awake. He wants you."

Good old Mado! Why couldn't they just continue on their way as they had started out? Roaming the universe in search of other adventures! But the silvery tinkle of Ora's laughter reached his ears. She was irresistible! He forgot his doubts as he hurried to his friend's cabin.

Mado was staring at the European maiden with a ludicrous expression of astonishment—gawping, Carr called it. And Ora was laughing at him.

"Your friend," she gurgled, "doesn't believe he's alive, or that I am, or you. Tell him we are."

Carr grinned. Mado did look funny at that. "Hello, old sock," he said, "had a bad dream?"[269]

"Did I? Oh boy!" Mado rocked to and fro, his head in his hands. Then he displayed sudden intense interest. "Rapaju?" he asked. "His guards—the fleet—what's happened?"

"Ah ha! Now you know you're alive!" Carr laughed. "But the others are dead and gone. The fleet's gone to smash—and how!"

"But Carr. How did you do it? Tell me!"

Mado threw off his covers and clapped his friend on the back, a resounding thump that brought a gasp from Ora.

"Your Sargasso Sea did it. And it's a thing of the past, too. Wait till I tell you about it!"

Ora tripped from the room as Carr sat on the edge of the bunk to spin his yarn.

"But man alive!" Mado exclaimed when the story was finished. "Don't you know you've done a miraculous thing? I'd never have had the nerve. That damn

creature out there had more than four times its former attracting energy. That's what made it impossible for the fleet to get away. And you—you lucky devil—you just doped it out right. The fleet of the Llotta gave you a tremendous push from astern when you used the repulsive energy. If they hadn't been there with their enormous mass to react against we'd all have been mincemeat now along with the Llotta. You Terrestrials sure can think fast! Me, now—Lord, if it had been me, I'd have thought of it after my spirit had departed to its reward—or punishment. Glory be! It's the greatest thing I ever heard of."

"Rats! You'd have done the same as I did. Probably would have missed it a mile instead of nearly getting caught as I did. A good thing the fleet's gone, though. Mars and Terra—Venus, too—they'll never know how close it was for them. Wouldn't have sense enough to appreciate it, anyway."

"They would if they ever got a taste of what the Llotta planned. But what's wrong with you Carr? You act sore. Want to go home?"

"Me? Don't be like that. No—I'd like to carry on as we planned. There's Saturn, Uranus and Neptune yet; Planet 9; a flock of satellites and asteroids. Oh, dammit!"

Mado looked his amazement. "Well, what's to prevent it?" he demanded. "The *Nomad's* still here, and so are we. I'm just as anxious to keep going as you are. Why not?"

But Carr did not reply. Why not, indeed? He strode from the cabin and into the control room. The *Nomad* was drifting in space, subject only to natural forces that swung it in a vast orbit around the sun. He started the generators and drove the vessel from her temporary orbit with rapid acceleration. Out—out into the jeweled blackness of the heavens. There was Jupiter out there, a bright orb that came suddenly very near when he centered it on the cross-hairs of the telescope.

The excited voices of Ora and Detis came to his ears. The booming speech of Mado. Why couldn't he be sensible and companionable as they were? But a

perverse demon kept him at the controls. They'd think him a grouch. Well, maybe he was! But the vastness of the universe beckoned. New worlds to explore; mysteries to be solved; a life of countless new experiences! Anyone'd think he was the owner of the *Nomad*, the way he planned for the future.

They were in the control cabin now—Mado and Detis and Ora. A moment he hesitated, eyes glued to the telescope. Then, with a petulant gesture, he reached for the automatic control; locked it. Shouldn't be this way. They'd think him an awful cad. And they'd be right! He whirled to face them.

Detis was smiling. Mado gazed owlishly solemn. Ora clung to the arm of her father, and her long lashes hid the blue eyes that had played such havoc[270] with the emotions of the Terrestrial.

"Carr," said Detis, gently, "we must thank you. You saved our lives, you know."

"Aw, forget it. Saved my own, too, didn't I? By a lucky break."

"It wasn't luck, Carr." Detis was gripping his hand now. "It was sheer grit and brains. You had them both. If you hadn't used them we'd all be corpses—or disintegrated—excepting Ora, perhaps. And you know the fate that awaited her. Instead, we are alive and well. The fleet is gone. Rapaju's body and that of his guard drift nameless in space where you disposed of them through the air-lock of the *Nomad*. The inner planets need fear no future invasion, for the resources of Ganymede have been expended in the one huge enterprise that has failed. All through your quick wit and bravery. No, it wasn't luck."

"Nonsense, Detis." Carr returned the pressure of the scientist's hand, smiling sheepishly. He pushed him away after a moment. He didn't want their gratitude or praise. Didn't know what he wanted. Ora still avoided meeting his gaze. "Nonsense," he repeated. "And now, please leave me. You, Detis. Mado, too. I'd like to be alone for a while—with Ora. Mind?"

Mado's owlish look broadened to a knowing grin as he backed into the passageway. Detis collided with the huge Martian in his eagerness to be out of the room.

They were alone and Carr was on his feet. Nothing mattered now—excepting Ora. Suddenly she was in his arms, the fragrance of her hair in his nostrils.

Star gazing, the two of them. It was ridiculous! But the wonders of the universe held a new beauty now for Carr. The distant suns had taken on added brilliance. Still they beckoned.

"Carr," the girl whispered, after a time, "where are we going?"

"To Europa. Your home."

"To—to stay?"

"No." Carr was suddenly confident; determined. "We'll stop there to break the news. Then we'll be wedded, you and I, according to the custom of your people. Our honeymoon—years of it—will be spent in the *Nomad*, roving the universe. Mado'll agree, I know. Wanderers of the heavens we'll be, Ora. But we'll have each other; and when we've—you've—had enough of it, I'll be ready to settle down. Anywhere

you say. Are you game?"

"Oh, Carr! How did you guess? It's just as we'd planned. Father and Mado and I. Didn't think I'd go, did you, you stupid old dear?"

"Why—why Ora." Carr was stammering now. He'd thought he was being masterful—making the plans himself. But she'd beat him to it, the adorable little minx! "I was a bit afraid," he admitted; "and I still can't believe that it's actually true. You're sure you want to?"

"Positive. Why Carr, I've always been a vagabond at heart. And now that I've found you we'll just be vagabonds together. Father and Mado will leave us very much to each other. Their scientific leanings, you know. And—oh—it'll just be wonderful!"

"It's you that'll make it wonderful, sweetheart."

Carr drew her close. The stars shone still more brightly and beckoned anew. Vagabonds, all of them! Like the gypsies of old, but with vastly more territory

to roam. The humdrum routine of his old life seemed very far behind. He wondered what Courtney Davis would say if he could see him now. Wordless happiness had come to him, and he let his thoughts wander out into the limitless expanse of the heavens. Star gazing still—just he and Ora.

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#60 Slaves Of The Dust, By Sophie Wenzel Ellis:

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Aproximate word count: 8,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

showed his teeth



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—*Carlyle.*

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The two *batalões* turned from the open waters of the
lower Tapajos River into the *igarapé*, the lily-
smothered shallows that often mark an Indian
settlement in the jungles of Brazil. One of the two
half-breed rubber-gatherers suddenly stopped his
batalõe by thrusting a paddle against a giant clump of
lilies. In a corruption of the Tupi dialect, he called
over to the white man occupying the other frail craft.

Fate's retribution was adequate. There emerged a rat with a man's head and face.

"We dare go no farther, master. The country of the Ungapuks is bewitched. It is too dangerous."

Fearfully he stared over his shoulder toward a spot in the slimy water where a dim bulk moved, which was only an alligator hunting for his breakfast.

Hale Oakham, as long and lanky and level-eyed as Charles Lindbergh, ran despairing fingers through his damp hair and groaned.

"But how can I find this jungle village without a guide?"

The *caboclo* shrugged. "The village will find you. It is bewitched, master. But you will soon see the path through the *matto*."

"Can't you stay by me until time to land? I don't like the looks of these alligators."

“It is better for a white man to face an alligator than for a *caboclo* to face an Ungapuk. Once they used to kill and eat us for our strength. Now—” Again his shrug was eloquent.

“Now?” Hale prompted impatiently.

“The white god who put a spell on these one-time cannibals will bewitch us and make us wash and rejoice when it is time to die.”

He shuddered and spat at a cayman that was lumbering away from his *batalõe*.

Hale Oakham laughed, a hearty boyish laugh for a rather learned young professor.

“Is that all they do to you?” he asked.

“No. All who enter this magic *matto* die soon, rejoicing. Before the last breath comes, it is said their bodies turn into a handful of silver dust—poof!—like

that.” He snapped his dirty fingers. “Then the life that leaves them goes into rocks that walk.”

Hale sighed resignedly. There wasn’t any use to argue.

“Unload your *batalõe*,” he ordered testily, “and get your filthy carcasses away.”

The half-breeds obeyed readily. As the departing *batalõe* turned from the *igarapé* into the open water of the river, the young man repressed a sudden lifting of his scalp. He was in for it now!

His long body sprawled out in the *batalõe*, he paddled about aimlessly for several minutes until he found an aisle through the jungle—the path that led to the jungle village which he was visiting in the name of science, and for a certain award.

Before plunging into that waiting tangle where life and death carried on a visible, unceasing struggle, he hesitated. Instinctively he shrank from losing himself in that mad green world.

He had first heard of the Ungapuks at the convention of the Nescience Club in New York, that body of scientists, near-scientists and adventurers linked together for the purpose of awarding the yearly Woolman prizes for the most spectacular addition of empiric facts to various branches of science. One of the members of the club, an explorer, had told a wild yarn about a tribe of Brazilian Indians, headed by Sir Basil Addington, an English scientist, who was conducting secret experiments in biochemistry in his jungle laboratory. The explorer had said that the scientist, half-crazed by a powerful narcotic, had seemingly discovered some secret of life which enabled him to produce monsters in his laboratory and to change the physical characteristics of the Ungapuk Indians, who, in five years, had been transformed from cannibals into cultured men and women.

And now Hale Oakham, hoping to win one of the Woolman prizes, was here in the country of the Ungapuks, entering the jungle path that lead to the unknown.

Fifty feet from the *igarapé*, the path curved sharply away from a giant tree. Hale approached the bend with his hand on his gun. Just before he reached it, he stopped suddenly to listen.

A woman's voice had suddenly broken forth in a wild, incredibly sweet song. Hale stood entranced, drinking in the heady sounds that stirred his emotions like *masata*, the 97 jungle intoxicant. The singer approached the bend in the path, while the young man waited eagerly.

The first sight of her made him gasp. He had expected to see an Indian girl. No sane traveler would imagine a white woman in the Amazon jungle, with skin as amazingly pale as the great, fleshy victoria regia lilies in the *igarapé*.

When she saw Hale, she stopped instantly. With a quick, practiced twist, she reached for the bow flung across her shoulders and fitted a barbed arrow to the string.

She was a beautiful barbarian, standing quivering

before him. In the thick dull gold braids hanging over her bare shoulders flamed two enormous scarlet flowers, no redder than her own lips pouted in alarm. There was a savage brevity to her clothing, which consisted only of a short skirt of rough native grass and breastplates of beaten gold, held in place by strings of colored seeds.

The girl held out an imperious hand and, in perfect English, said:

“Go back!”

Hale drew his long body up to its slim height, folded his arms, and gave her his most winning smile. His insolence added to his wholesome good looks.

“Why?” he exclaimed. “I’ve come a couple of thousand miles to call on you.”

He saw that the eyes which held his levelly were pure and limpid, and of an astonishing orchid-blue.

“Who are you?” Her throaty, vibrant voice was a thing

of the flesh, whipping Hale's senses to sudden madness.

"I'm Hale Oakham," he said, a little tremulously, "a lone, would-be scientist knocking about the jungle. Won't you tell me your name?"

She nodded gravely. "I am Aña. I, too, am white." Her rich voice was quietly proud. "Come; I'll see if Aimu will receive you."

With surprising, childlike trust, she held out her little hand to him. The gesture was so delightfully natural that Hale, grinning boyishly, took her hand and held it as they walked down the jungle path.

"Sing for me," he demanded abruptly. "Sing the song you sang just now."

"That?" asked the girl, turning the virgin-blue fire of her eyes on him. "That was my death-song that I practice each day. Perhaps soon I shall be released from this." She passed her hands over her beautiful, half-clothed body.

Hale's warm glance swept over her. "Do you want to die?"

"Yes; don't you? But you do not, or you would not have retreated from my poisoned arrow."

"No, Aña; I want to live."

"To live—and be a slave of *this*?" Again her hand went over her slim body. "A slave of a pile of flesh that you must feed and protect from the agonies that attack it on every side? Bah! But I am hoping that my turn will come next."

"Your turn for what, Aña?"

"To enter the Room of Release. Perhaps, if Aimu approves of you, you, too, may taste of death." Her gentle smile was beatific.

"Do you speak of Sir Basil Addington?"

"He was called that once, before he came to us. Now he has no name. We can find none holy enough for

him; and so we call him Aimu, which means good friend.” Her beautiful face was sweet with reverence.

And now, in the distance, Hale saw that the path led into a large clearing. He slowed his pace, for he wanted to know this lovely girl better before he joined the Ungapuks.

“Who are you, Aña?” he asked suddenly, bending closer to the crinkled, dull-gold hair.

“I am Aña, a white woman.” She looked at him frankly.

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“But who are your parents, and how did you get among the Ungapuks?”

Aña’s red lips curved into a dewy smile. “I thought all white men were wise, like Aimu. But you are stupid. How do you think a white woman could appear in a tribe of Indians who live in the jungle, many weeks’ journey from what you call civilization?”

Hale looked a little blank and more than a little disconcerted.

“I suppose I am stupid,” he said dryly. “But tell me, Aña, how did you get here?”

“Why,” she exclaimed, “he made me!”

“Made you? Good Lord! What do you mean?”

“Just what I said, Hale Oakham. If he can take a few grains of dust and make a shoot that will grow into a giant tree like yonder monster itauba, don’t you think he can create a small white girl like me?” Her orchid-blue eyes glowed innocently into his.

The eager questions that he would have asked froze upon his lips, for a party of Indians approached.

The six nearly naked red men came close and surveyed him, toying nervously with their primitive, feather-decorated weapons.

A tall, handsome young fellow who possessed

something of the picturesque perfection of the North American plains' Indian stepped forward and, in perfect English, said:

"Good morning, white stranger. What is it you wish of the Ungapuks?"

"I came to see your white *cacique*," said Hale.

"Aimu? What is it you wish of Aimu? He is ours, white stranger."

"Yes, he is yours. I come as a friend, perhaps to help him in his great work."

"Perhaps!" The young Indian folded his bronze, muscular arms over his broad chest and continued his cool survey of Hale. "White men before you have come: spies and thieves. Some we poisoned with curari. Others Aimu took into the Room of Release."

He turned to Aña, who was still standing by Hale, and his expression softened.

“What shall we do with him, Aña?” he asked the question, a fleeting look of hunger swept his fine, flashing eyes.

Aña flushed beautifully, and, moving closer to Hale, with an impulsive, almost childish gesture, slipped her arm through his.

“Let us take him to our village, Unani Assu!” she suggested. “I like him.”

It was Hale’s turn to flush, which he did like a schoolboy.

Unani Assu’s brows drew together in a scowl. The hand holding his blow-pipe jerked convulsively.

“Aña! Come away!” he growled. “You mustn’t touch a stranger!”

Aña’s blue eyes stretched with astonishment. “But I like to touch him, Unani Assu!”

The tall Indian, with a half comical gesture of despair,

said:

“Don’t misunderstand her, stranger. She is young, very young, ah! And she has known only the reborn men of the Ungapuks.”

He stepped firmly over to Aña, and, taking the girl by the arm, drew her away.

“Run ahead,” he commanded, “and tell Aimu that we come.”

Aña, her feathered bamboo anklets clicking together, sped away.

Unani Assu bowed courteously to Hale.

“Come, stranger. If you are an enemy, it is you who must fear.” He motioned for him to proceed down the jungle path.

The path ended at a clearing studded with *moloccas*, the Indian grass huts made of plaited straw.

Altogether the scene was peaceful and sane and far

removed from the strange tales that Hale had heard concerning the Ungapuks.

Hale was conducted to a long, low stone building, where, in the doorway, stood a tall and emaciated white man.

“Aimu!” said the Indians reverently, and bowed themselves.

Over the bare, brown backs, the white man looked at Hale.

“Sir Basil Addington?” asked the young man.

“Yes. You are welcome. Come in.”

Hale entered the building.

He was in a book-filled study, furnished with hand-made chairs and a desk. Sir Basil asked him to be seated. He offered the young man long, brown native

cigarettes and a very good drink made from yucca.

After several minutes of conversation, Sir Basil suddenly changed his manner.

“And now,” he shot out, eyeing the young man through narrowed lids, “will you please state the purpose of this visit?”

Hale looked squarely at his questioner. “Frankly, Sir Basil, I have called on you because I am so intensely interested in your work among the Ungapuks that I wish to offer my services.”

He gave in detail his family history, his education, and his experience as a teacher and a scientist.

Sir Basil tapped his teeth thoughtfully with a pencil.

“But why do you think you can be of assistance to me?”

“That, of course, is for you to decide.”

Hale thought that the scientist looked like a huge, starved crow in his loose-fitting coat. He was so fleshless that, when the light fell strongly on his face as it now did, the bones of his head and hands showed through the skin with horrible clearness.

Hale, under Sir Basil's scrutiny, decided instantly that he did not like him.

"I need a helper," the scientist went on, with the air of talking to himself. "A white assistant who neither loves nor fears me. Unani Assu is good enough in his way, but I need a helper who has had technical training." Suddenly he wheeled on Hale and asked sharply, "How are your nerves, young man?"

Hale started, but managed to answer calmly.

"Excellent. My war record isn't half bad, and that was surely backed with good nerves."

"And you say you have no close relatives, no ties of any sort to interfere with work that is dangerous—and something else?"

“Not a soul would care if I passed out to-day, Sir Basil.”

“Good! And now tell me this: are you one of those scientists whose minds are so mechanical, so mathematically made, as it were, that your entire outlook on science is based on old, established beliefs, or do you belong to that rare but modern type of trained thinker and dreamer who refuse to permit yesterday’s convictions to influence to-day’s visions?”

Hale smiled quietly. “I recently lost my chair in a famous university because of my so-called unscientific teachings regarding ether-drift.”

Expressing himself in purely scientific terms, he went into an elaboration of his revolutionary theory. When he had finished, Sir Basil reached out his clawlike hand to him.

“Good!” he approved. “You have dared to think originally. Now listen to my theory of mind-electrons which has grown into the established fact that I have discovered the secret of life and death.”

The long, thin hands reached into a pocket for a box of pills. He swallowed one greedily, and immediately his emaciated face seemed charged with new virility.

He spoke out suddenly. "Our world, you know, is made up of three powers: matter, energy and what you call life. I might really say that there are but two powers, for matter, in its last analysis, is a form of energy. And what is life? You can't call it a form of energy, for every inorganic atom has 300 energy without having life. Life, Mr. Oakham, is mind or consciousness."

He began pacing the floor restlessly. "Everything that lives has this consciousness, and I say this in defiance of some fixed scientific views. The amoeba in a stagnant pool, a thallophyte on a bit of old bread, any of the myriads of trees and plants that you see in the jungle all have consciousness as well as you. And why?"

He brought his fist down upon the table. "Because they issue from the same source as you and I, the almighty mind, eternal, indestructible, which has permitted itself to be enslaved by matter. You are

Hale Oakham. I am Basil Addington, yet we are one and the same. Let me illustrate.”

He seized a glass and poured it full of *masata*. “Look! Two portions of *masata*. But I pour what is in the glass back into the bottle. The molecules cohere and the two portions become one again. Some day you and I—our individual consciousnesses—will flow back to the Whole. That sounds mystical, but listen.

“We scientists hold that the electron explains nearly all the physical and chemical phenomena. I go further and say that it explains *all*. Matter, electricity, light, heat, magnetism—all can be reduced to the ultimate unit. So, Mr. Oakham, I am going to make clear to you how life itself is electronic.”

His long finger touched Hale’s arm. “You, I, yonder mosquito on your sleeve, even one of the germs that is causing my malaria, all being individual living things, are the ultimate units of what I shall personify as the Mind. When I say *you* I do not speak of that mound of flesh in which you exist, and which can be reduced to the same familiar basic elements and

compounds as make up inorganic structures; I speak of your mind, your consciousness—for that is the real you. Are you following me?”

“Perfectly, Sir Basil.” Hale reached for another drink. “But do you mean to say that you and I are no more than a mosquito, a malaria protozoan, or even one of those trees in the jungle?”

Sir Basil’s dry skin slipped back into a long smile. “Startling, isn’t it? You, I, and all other living organisms are nothing but matter, energy and consciousness. You and I have a larger share of consciousness, because our organic structure permits the mind-electrons greater freedom over the matter than composes our bodies. We are more acutely aware of the universe about us, have a greater facility for enjoyment and suffering, a more intricate brain and nervous system. Yet when our bodies die and our consciousness is released, the mind-electrons enslaved by our atoms go back to the elemental Whole. This holds good for the protozoan, the tree, the man—for all things that live.”

Hale was drinking again. "You mean, Sir Basil, that there is a sort of war waged against what you personify as the Mind by matter; that matter is constantly seeking to enslave mind-electrons, so that it may become an organism which, for awhile, may enjoy what we call life?"

Sir Basil pushed back his tufted hair and looked happy. "Yes! And it's Nature's supreme blunder! In the end, the Mind always conquers and gains its release, yet the eternal chain of enslavement goes on and on, and will continue to go on as long as there is a living organism in the world to bind mind to matter."

Hale was excited now, as much from the fiery intoxicant as from the scientist's weird revelation. "I get you," he said, rather inelegantly for a professor. "You mean that if every living thing in the world should pass out, every man, every plant, every animal, even down to microscopic infusoria, the Mind would collect all its electrons, and through some more jealous law of, er, cohesion hold these electrons inviolate from matter and energy?"

“Right! And again, as in the beginning, the Mind would rule supreme. By what I have proved, you and I and all other creatures that now have life may, as separate unfleshed electrons, enjoy eternal consciousness as a part of the Mind.” A new passion leaped to his dark eyes. “When I have finished my mission, no more need we be slaves of the dust, subject to all the frightful sufferings of this dunghill of flesh.”

He brought his fist down upon his skinny leg with a resounding blow.

“But you cannot reduce your theory to fact, Sir Basil!”

“No?” Again came that frightful grin to his cadaverous face. “Can you withstand shock?”

“If you mean shock to the eye, let me remind you that I served two years in the big fight.”

“Then come to my laboratory. Better take another drink.”

While Hale helped himself again from the *masata* bottle, Sir Basil swallowed another pellet.

Then the two went into the adjoining apartment.

Sir Basil, his hand over the doorknob, paused.

“Before we go in,” he said, “I want you to remember that we call natural that which is characteristic of the physical world. Everything alive in this laboratory was produced by nature. I merely made available the materials, or, rather, I made the conditions under which matter was able to enslave mind-electrons.”

He opened the door, slipped his body through, and, with his ugly, teeth-revealing grin, gestured for Hale to follow him.

Hale steeled himself and looked around half fearfully. The first glance took in a large and well-equipped laboratory, somewhat fetid with animal odors. The second lingered here and there on cages, aquariums,

incubators, and other containers where creatures moved.

Suddenly, as something scuttled across the floor and disappeared into a hole in the wall, Hale cried out and covered his eyes with a hand.

Sir Basil laughed aloud. “Why didn’t you examine it closer?”

Hale looked nauseated. “My God, Sir Basil! A rat with a man’s head and face!”

Sir Basil’s voice was sharp, decisive. “Before you leave this laboratory, you’re going to come out of your foolish belief that man is a creature apart from other living organisms. You—the conscious you—is no greater, no more important in the final balance than the spark of consciousness in that rat. When your body and the rat’s body give up their atoms to nature’s laboratory, the little enslaved mind-electron that is you and the one that is the rat will be identical.”

Again Hale shivered and turned away from that cold, too-thin face.

The scientist was speaking. "Step around to all those cages and pens. I want you to see all my slaves of the dust."

But long before Hale had encircled the room, he was so disturbed at what he saw that he could scarcely complete his frightful inspection. In every enclosure he viewed a monstrosity that in some way resembled a human. Every reptile, every insect, every queer, misshapen animal not only looked human in some shocking manner, but also seemed to possess human characteristics. It seemed as though some demented creator with a perverted sense of humor had attempted to mock man by calling forth monsters in his image.

At last the young man cried out: "How did you breed these freaks?"

"They are not freaks, and I did not breed them. They are nature's parentless products whose basic

elements were brought together in this laboratory, and, by a scientific reproduction of the functions of creation, endowed with the life principle, which is merely 302 mind-electrons." He smoothed his long tuft of hair nervously. "Would you like to see how life springs from a wedding of matter, energy, and consciousness?"

"I suspect I can stand anything now," Hale admitted.

"Then come and peep into a very remarkable group of apparatus I have developed, where you can watch atoms building molecules and molecules building living organisms."

"You say I can see atoms?"

"Not directly, of course. The light waves will forever prevent us from actually seeing the atom. But I have perfected a system of photography which magnifies particles smaller than light waves, and, separating their images from the light waves, renders detail clear in the moving pictures."

He went to a huge machine or series of machines which took up all the center floor space of the laboratory, where he busied himself in an intricate network of wires, mirrors, electrodes, ray projectors, and traveling metal compartments. Presently he called out to Hale.

“Let me remind you, Oakham, that while any scientist can break up any of the various proteid molecules which are the basis of all living cells, animal and vegetable, no scientist before me has been able to compound the atoms and build them into a proteid molecule.”

He bared his teeth in the smile that Hale hated.

“I am proud to tell you that the proteid molecule can be built up only when the third element of nature’s trinity is added—the mind-electron. I have found a means of capturing the mind-electron and of bringing it in contact with proteid elements. And now it is possible to bring forth life in the laboratory. Come closer and watch proteid forming protoplasm, protoplasm forming a cell, and the cell evolving into—

well, what do you want, an animal, plant, or an insect?”

Hale had fallen under the scientist’s spell. He did not feel foolish when he said:

“Let’s have a rat!”

Hale became so absorbed in the wonders of the laboratory that when lunch time came, Sir Basil had food brought to them. While they were eating a very good vegetable stew, farina, and luscious tropical fruits, a sudden, agonized scream rang out, followed by other screams and wails.

Sir Basil opened the door and looked out. Aña came running forward. Her blue eyes were flooded with tears.

“Oh, Aimu!” she moaned. “A tree fell on Unani Assu.”

She buried her beautiful face in her hands and sobbed aloud.

Sir Basil frowned heavily.

“I can’t lose Unani Assu yet,” he declared. “He is a wonderful help around the laboratory. Is he dead?”

“No. We should rejoice if his time of release had come. But his legs, Aimu! No one wants to suffer and be crippled.”

Even in her distress, the girl’s voice was rich and vibrant, and every tone moved Hale curiously.

“Hurry!” cried the scientist. “Have them bring him here before he dies.”

The girl leaped to her feet and sped away.

“Come, Oakham,” continued Sir Basil. “Here is a rare opportunity for you to see how completely I have mastered the laws that govern organic matter. Help me prepare.”

For several minutes, Hale worked under the scientist’s sharply spoken directions. By the time the

injured man was brought to the laboratory, Sir Basil was ready for him.

Unani Assu was still conscious, but his pale face indicated that he had lost much blood. When the improvised stretcher was lowered to the floor, Sir Basil sent all the Indians away.

Unani Assu opened his eyes and called feebly, "Aña!"

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"Be still!" ordered Sir Basil. "Aña is not here."

"Please!" gasped the dying man. "I want her—my Aña!"

Sir Basil sucked in his breath sharply. "What's this? Have you been making love to Aña again, after my warning to you?"

The sufferer stirred uneasily. "No!" he panted. "But perhaps my hour of release has come, and I want to look at her—once more."

The scientist smiled unpleasantly as he eyed the magnificent body which looked like a broken statue in bronze.

“Some human characteristics are strange,” he muttered. “In spite of everything I do, this fellow continues to love Aña: Aña whom I intend for myself.”

He stepped to the apparatus and swiftly changed one of the adjustments.

“Perhaps,” he resumed, with a gleam in his eyes that chilled Hale, “this will forever cure him.”

In another moment, the still, half-dead body was lifted and gently slipped into a compartment.

Before Hale’s horrified gaze fastened on the eye-piece which revealed moving pictures of every process that went on within, Unani Assu’s body was reduced almost instantly to a fine, silvery dust.

“Good God!” he cried. “You have killed him.”

The scientist's teeth showed in his wide smile. "Think so? Does a woman destroy a dress when she rips it up to make it over?"

"Do you mean me to understand that you can reduce a living body to its basic elements and then rebuild these elements into a remade man?"

"Watch!" warned the scientist.

Hale looked again and saw the silver dust that was once a living body being whirled into a tiny, grublike thing. He saw the grub expand into an embryo, and the embryo develop into a foetus. From now on the development was slower, and he often stopped to talk with Sir Basil.

Once he asked: "If this man had died naturally, could you have brought him back to life?"

Sir Basil shook his head. "No. When once the mind-electron is completely freed from its enslavement by matter, it is forever beyond recall by the body it has just vacated. Like atomic electrons, whose

equilibrium disturbed break away from their planetary system and go dashing off into space, only to be drawn into another planetary system, the mind-electron may be enslaved almost immediately by extraneous matter. Had Unani Assu died, his liberated mind-electron might at once have been captured by a jungle flower going to seed. Immediately a new seed would be started. And now the former Unani Assu would be a seed of a jungle flower, later to find new life as a plant.”

Suddenly the scientist threw up his hand and cried: “You see? The Mind will be eternally enslaved as long as there is life! Oh, for the time of deliverance!” He gazed fanatically into space, as though he dreamed magnificently.

Hale observed him thoughtfully. When that great brain weakened, the consequences would be frightful.

Sir Basil, as though he had made a sudden decision, went over to that part of his machine which he called the molecule-disintegrator.

“Oakham!” he called out. “I have taken you partly into my confidence. Now I want to show you something. Come here.”

Hale obeyed with misgivings. The scientist pointed out the window to a group of Indians, anxious relatives of Unani Assu.

“Watch!” he ordered.

Turning one of the projectors on the machine toward the window, he sighted carefully and pressed a button.

Immediately one of the Indians fell to the ground and struggled. His companions 304 began dancing around him in evident joy. Faintly to the laboratory came a familiar chant, which Hale recognized as Aña’s death song.

Dust to dust
Mind to Mind—
He will shed his body
As the green snake sheds his skin.

As Hale watched, the struggling Indian's body seemed to shrink, and then, instantly, it disappeared.

"Watch them scatter the dust!" said the scientist.

One of the Indians stooped and blew upon the grass.

"What have you done!" Hale gasped. "You've killed this one. Oh, I see now! These poor devils are totally ignorant that you are killing them for practice. They worship you while you turn them to—silver dust!" He turned angrily on the scientist as though he longed to strike him.

"Keep cool, young man!" Sir Basil held up his fleshless hand. "There is no death! Change, yes; but no permanent blotting out of consciousness. Can't you see the horror of it as nature works? When your time for release comes, as it inevitably will, your mind-electron might find new enslavement in a worm!"

Hale's reply came hotly. "If that is true, why do you murder these poor devils deliberately!"

“My dear Oakham, perhaps you are not so brilliant as I had hoped! All that I have done thus far is only child’s play, in preparation for my real work. Haven’t you guessed by now what I am getting ready to do?”

“No; I’m a poor guesser.”

The scientist made a gesture of mock despair. “Then let me tell you. The molecule-disintegrator is active only on organic structures. When I concentrate it so”—he reached out again, sighted the projector on some point beyond the window and pressed a button —“one single living organism passes out. See that jupati tree by the rock disappear?”

Before Hale’s eyes, the tall, slender tree melted into air.

“But,” continued Sir Basil, “if I should *broadcast* my molecule-disintegrator on electron magnetic waves, destruction would pass out in all directions, following the curve of the earth’s surface, penetrating earth, air, water.” He wet his lips carefully. “You understand?”

Hale stiffened suddenly. "I understand. No life could survive these vibrations of destruction? Through every corner of the earth where life lurks, they would reach?"

"Yes!" cried Sir Basil. "There would be not a blade of grass, not a living spore, not a hidden egg! Think of it, Oakham! No more would the clean air and the sweet earth reek with life, and at last the ultimate mind-electron would be released forever."

He was breathing fast, and his emaciated face burned with two red spots.

Hale thought rapidly. He was convinced now that the fate of all life lay within that diabolical network of chemical apparatus.

At last he said: "And what of you and I, Sir Basil? Shall we, too, be caught in this wholesale destruction?"

"Not immediately," replied the scientist. "Of course, I want to remain in the flesh long enough to be sure

that my purpose has been accomplished. I have provided a way for my own safety. If you desire, you may remain with me.” He smiled craftily. “I have planned to keep Aña also, the woman whom I called into life and made as I wished.”

His words pounded against Hale’s tortured ears with almost physical force. With a supreme effort, the young man controlled his rage and despair. Aña needed him too much now for him to risk defeat by showing his emotions.

To Sir Basil he said: “But if all life disappears from the earth, what shall we do for food—you, Aña, and I?”

Sir Basil lifted his brows. “You don’t think I overlooked that, do you? What is food? Various combinations of the basic elements. I who have conquered the atom need never worry about starving to death.”

All this time, the machinery had been humming, and now the humming changed its note to a shrill whistle.

Sir Basil went to the eye-piece and looked into it. Opening a door in the machinery, he disappeared inside. He came out soon, flushed and evidently elated.

“Bring the stretcher, Oakham,” he ordered.

Hale brought the stretcher, placing it close to the machine. Then Sir Basil opened a metal door and gently eased out a human body.

It was Unani Assu, unconscious but alive and breathing. Hale, helping the scientist to get the man on the stretcher, noticed that the crushed legs were perfectly healed. Together they bore him to a long seat. The Indian’s eyes were still closed, but his even breathing indicated that he was only sleeping.

Suddenly Hale pointed a finger and cried out. “My God, Sir Basil, look at his hands and feet!”

Unani Assu, still lying like a recumbent bronze statue sculptured by a master, was perfect from shoulder to wrist, from thigh to ankle. But, somewhere in that

diabolical machine through which he had passed, his hands and feet had undergone a hideous metamorphosis which had transformed them from the well-formed extremities of a splendid young Indian into the hairy paws of a giant rat!

Hale turned away his head, sick with disgust.

Sir Basil cut the silence triumphantly:

“Now he’ll never again face Aña with love in his eyes!”

“What!” broke in Hale. “Did you plan this monstrous thing?”

“Of course! I told you I should forever cure him of his mad infatuation.”

“But why didn’t you kill him, as you killed the others? It would have been the most merciful way.”

Sir Basil showed his teeth in his ugly smile. “A creator is never merciful.”

A quiver passed through the Indian's body and presently, he sighed deeply and opened his eyes. He seemed dazed, puzzled. He looked from Hale to the scientist, and turned seeking eyes to other parts of the laboratory.

"Aña!" he called weakly. "Where is Aña?"

He pulled himself a little unsteadily to his feet—to the spatulated, hairy *rodent* feet that had come out of the life-machine. Staggering, he would have fallen, had he not thrown out his arm to steady himself. Instinctively he tried to grasp something for support, and then, for the first time, he discovered his deformity.

Hale was never to forget that expression of horror and disgust that swept over the Indian's face as he spread open his revolting extremities and stared at them.

A sudden, wild roar of despair rang through the room. "Aimu! My hands!"

The scientist smiled with evident amusement. "You are a grotesque sight, Unani Assu. Do you want to see Aña now?"

The fright and horror faded from the Indian's face, for now he glared with hate into the mad, mocking eyes.

"You did it!" the Indian ground out. "You've made me into a thing from which Aña will run screaming."

Through the quiet rage of the perfectly spoken English ran a thread of sorrow. "Aimu, whom we considered too holy to name!"

Choking, he hobbled away to the door, which he unbolted. As he passed out into the open, Sir Basil went over to the machine and began sighting the projector which cast forth the ray of destruction.

"No!" cried Hale. "You've done enough murder for to-day."

The scientist paused. "I was trying to be merciful. And then, I wonder if it is safe to let him go, hating me?"

Oh, well!" He shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I seldom leave the laboratory, and certainly nothing can harm me here." He touched the death-projector significantly.

Hale made a mental decision. "I must find out how the damned thing works and put it out of commission."

With this determination uppermost in his mind, he assumed a more intense interest in the strange laboratory. For the next two days, he assisted Sir Basil so assiduously that he learned much about the operation of the life-machine. And gradually he stopped being horrified as the fascination of producing life in the laboratory grew upon him.

After he had assisted the scientist in building living organisms from basic elements, he ceased to cringe when he remembered that perhaps it was true that Aña was created in the mysterious life-machine.

Once the scientist declared, "She is untainted with

inheritance. She is the perfect mate that I called into life so that before I pass from the flesh I may taste that one human emotion I've never experienced—love.”

That very night Hale kept a secret tryst with Aña after the village slept. Sweet, virginal Aña, who knew less of the world than a civilized child of twelve—what a sensation she would create in New York with her beauty, her culture, her natural fascination! With her in his arms and an orange tropical moon hanging low in the hot, black sky, he ceased to care that she had no ancestors, for now his one passionate desire was to save her from Sir Basil and to hold her forever for himself.

He might have been content to go on like this for months, tampering with creation in the day time, courting Aña in secret at night, had not Unani Assu come back for revenge.

On the fourth night after Unani Assu had disappeared into the jungle, Hale went to the *igarapé* to meet Aña. He had gone only half the distance when he

encountered her, running frantically up the path toward him.

“Hale!” she gasped, falling into his opened arms, where she lay panting and exhausted.

Hale gently patted the long braids, shimmering in silver tangles under the moonlight, and, crushing the soft little trembling body close, he murmured:

“What’s the matter, darling?”

She dug her face deeper into the bend of his arm.

“Oh, Hale! I saw Unani Assu a few minutes ago.” For several moments she was unable to go on, for sudden sobs cut off her breath. “It’s terrible, Hale, what Aimu did to his hands and feet, but what Unani’s going to do to Aimu is still more terrible.”

Hale placed his hand gently under her chin and tilted up her small, pale, tear-drenched face.

“Be calm, Aña, and tell me plainly.”

Still clinging to him, she went on. "He told me that Aimu is a devil, Hale. He showed me his hands and asked me if I could ever get used to them and be—his squaw." The round gold breastplates and the necklace of painted seeds clinked together over her panting bosom. "I told him about you, Hale. And then he seemed to go mad. He said he'd kill Aimu to-night."

"But, Aña! Why did he let you go, knowing that you would give the alarm?"

"He didn't let me go." Her petaled lips parted in a faint smile. "I escaped. Unani Assu tied me to a tree by the *igarapé*. Because he doesn't ... hate me, he could not bear to tie me too tightly."

"Then he must be close to the laboratory now. If he breaks in upon Aimu—oh, my God!"

Hale remembered the death-projector. If Sir Basil were in danger of attack, he would not hesitate to touch the 307 waiting button that would broadcast death throughout the world.

He seized Aña's little hand and cried out: "Run, Aña! The only safe place now is Aimu's laboratory. Run!"

As they dashed on madly, Hale opened wide his nostrils to scent the heavy, flower-laden air of the jungle. Any moment all this sweet, rich life might vanish instantly. He had a horrible vision of a world devoid of life, a world of bare rocks, dry sand, odorless, dead waters. For it was life that greened the landscape, roughened the stones with moss and lichen, thickened the ocean with ooze, and turned the dry sand into loam—life that swarmed underfoot, overhead, all around!

And now, just as they reached the laboratory door, panting and frantic, a hoarse shriek broke forth. Dragging Aña after him, Hale dashed forward, conscious of two masculine voices raised in passion.

The door to the room where the life-machine performed its vile work was locked. Hale pounded against it and called out to Sir Basil, but only curses and the sound of tumbling bodies came from beyond the door. Although originally the door had been thick

and strong, the destructive forces of the tropics had pitted and rotted the wood. A few blows of Hale's shoulder broke it down.

Under the brilliant electric light, Sir Basil and Unani Assu were fighting upon the blood-spattered floor. The struggle was uneven: the scientist's emaciated body was no match for the splendid strength of the young Indian.

"Help Aimu!" cried Aña, pushing Hale forward.

Aimu was being choked to death.

Hale acted fantastically but efficiently. Catching up a bottle of ammonia, he moistened a handkerchief and clapped it against Unani Assu's nose. Instantly the Indian choked, released Sir Basil, and fell back, gasping for breath.

Hale thrust the handkerchief into his pocket.

"Get out!" he ordered Unani Assu. "Quick!" He threatened him with the ammonia bottle.

But Unani Assu was not looking at the bottle. “Aimu!” he screamed, pointing.

When Hale saw and understood, he leaped across the room to plant his body in front of Aña; for Sir Basil was behind the life-machine, reaching for the controls of the ray projector.

Suddenly, from behind Hale, a silver streak shot across the room. Sir Basil groaned and sank to the floor of the laboratory.

A keen-bladed dissecting knife, thrown by Aña, stuck out from his left breast.

Aña ran forward, sobbing wildly. “Oh, Aimu! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean for it to strike you there. Only your hand, Aimu! I didn’t want Hale to die, Aimu. I didn’t—oh!”

She was on her knees by the scientist’s side, his head held in her slender arms.

“He’s breathing!” she rejoiced. “Some *masata*, Hale,

quick!”

Hale found a bottle of good brandy which he had contributed from his own supplies. Soon Sir Basil gasped and opened his eyes. He stared about him wildly, then gasped:

“I’m dying, Hale Oakham! Quick, the life-machine, before my mind-electron escapes.”

He tried to pull his body up, but fell back, weak and panting.

Hale hesitated, looking doubtfully at Aña.

“For God’s sake, quick!” screamed Sir Basil. “I’m dying, I say! I must have—rebirth. Lift me to the disintegrator. Hurry!...” His voice trailed off faintly.

“He is dying,” snapped Hale. “We might as well try it.” He jerked open the door to the disintegrator. “Here, Unani Assu! Lend a hand!”

Instantly the Indian came forward, a peculiar, pleased

expression on his handsome face. In a moment, Sir Basil's body was inside, and the machine began its weird humming, the humming that indicated the transformation of a human body into dust.

"Now!" cried Unani Assu exultingly, going behind the machine. "I have helped him enough to understand that if one changes this—and this—and this"—he made some rapid adjustments on the machine—"something that is not pleasant will happen."

"Stop!" cried Hale. "What did you change?"

The Indian laughed mockingly. "Wouldn't you like to know? But, yet, you should not worry. You have no cause to love him, have you?"

"I can't be a traitor, Unani Assu! Arrange the machine as it was originally, and I give you my word of honor that when Sir Basil comes out, I'll wreck the damned thing beyond repair. See, Unani Assu? You and I together will smash it."

The Indian folded his arms so that the repulsive

things that should have been hands were hidden.

“It’s too late now,” he admitted, shaking his head.

“Yet I’ve done no more to him than he did to me.”

Hale went to the eye-piece in the machine and started to look inside. Unani Assu stepped forward, tapped him on the shoulder, and, fingering significantly the dissecting knife which he had picked up, said:

“I am operating the machine. Will you sit over there by Aña and wait? It won’t be long. And, white stranger, remember this: I am your friend. I am turned against none but our common enemy.” He pointed significantly to the machine.

Two hours passed, long, silent hours for the watchers in the laboratory. Aña fell asleep, in a sweet, childish bundle upon the piled cushions, her golden hair, still decorated with the red flowers which she always wore, crushed and withered now. Several times Hale caught Unani Assu gazing at her sadly, and his own look saddened when it rested on the Indian’s strong, outraged body.

The humming of the machine changed to a whistle. Placing his fingers on his lips in a signal of quiet, Unani Assu whispered:

“Let Aña sleep. She mustn’t see this.”

Opening a door in the machine, his handsome face lighted with a grim smile, he whispered exultingly:

“Watch!”

A scuttling sound issued forth and then, half drunkenly, an enormous rat tumbled out—one of those horrible rats with the hairless, humanlike faces that had so frequently come from the life-machine.

Hale could not crush back the cry that issued from his throat.

“Where is Sir Basil?” he gasped.

“There!” cried the Indian, pointing to the kicking rat, which was fast gaining strength.

Hale staggered back. “No! You don’t mean it, do you?”

Unani Assu turned the rat over with a contemptuous toe. “Yes, I mean it. Behold Aimu, the man who thought himself creator and destroyer—the man who said that a human being was no higher than a rat! Perhaps he was right, for see this thing that was once a man!”

Hale buried his face in his hands. “Kill it, Unani Assu! Kill it!”

Unani Assu’s low laugh was metallic. “You kill it.”

Hale uncovered his face. “Open the disintegrator.” Gingerly he reached for the rat’s tail.

But his hand never touched the animal. The hairless face turned for a second, and the little, beady eyes blinked up at Hale with an expression that his fevered imagination thought almost human. Then, like a dark shadow, the rat dashed away. Once around the room it scampered, hunting for an exit. Hale started in

pursuit. He was almost upon the animal again, when, leaping up from his grasp, it landed on a low shelf where chemicals were stored. Several bottles fell, filling the room with fumes.

Another bottle fell, and, suddenly, amid a thunderous roar, the ceiling and walls began falling. Some highly explosive chemical had been stored in one of the bottles.

Hale was thrown violently against the couch. His hand touched Aña's body. One last shred of consciousness enabled him to pick her up and drag her out. In the open, he fell, aware, before blackness descended, that flames leaped high over the laboratory building and that Unani Assu lay dead within.

Hale and Aña, leaning over the deck-rail of a small steam launch, gazed into the dark waters of the Amazon.

"We ought to reach Para by morning," said Hale, "and then, dearest, we're off for New York!"

Aña, wearing one of the first civilized dresses she had ever donned, and looking as smart as any débutante, slipped her little hand into her husband's.

"Isn't it a shame, Hale," she moaned, "that the fire burned all the animals and insects, the machinery, and even your notes?" Her beautiful face saddened. "Just one or two specimens might have been proof enough for your What-You-Call-It Club!"

"The Nescience Club, darling. No, I can't expect to win the Woolman prize, but I've won a prize worth far more." He squeezed her little hand and looked devotedly into her blue eyes. "And, Aña, I've reasoned out something concerning mind-electrons which even Sir Basil overlooked."

"What is it, Hale?"

"He maintained that matter seeks always to enslave mind-electrons, but I am convinced that mind-electrons seek to enslave matter.

Understand? It's creation, Aña! Had Sir Basil succeeded in broadcasting death throughout the

world, the freed mind-electrons, as in the beginning, would have started again to vitalize inorganic atoms. And, in a few million years, which is no time to the Mind, the world would be humming with a new civilization. Large thought, eh, sweetheart?"

#61 The Sea Terror, By Sterner St. Paul Meek:

The trail of mystery gold leads Carnes and Dr. Bird to a tremendous monster of the deep.

Aproximate word count: 11,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

hung over the ship



- - -

“I beg your pardon, sir. I’m looking for Dr. Bird.”

The famous Bureau of Standards scientist appraised the speaker rapidly. Keen blue eyes stared questioningly at him from a mahogany brown face, criss-crossed with a thousand tiny wrinkles. The tattooed anchor on his hand and the ill-fitting blue serge suit smacked of the sea while the squareness of his shoulders and the direct gaze of his eye spoke

eloquently of authority.

“I’m Dr. Bird, Captain. What can I do for you?”

“Thank you, Doctor, but I’m not a captain. My name is Mitchell and I am, or was, the first mate of the *Arethusa*.”

“The *Arethusa*!” Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service sprang to his feet. “You said the *Arethusa*? There *were* no survivors!”

“I believe that I am the only one.”

“Where have you been hiding and why haven’t you reported the fact of your rescue to the proper authorities? Tell the truth; I’m a federal officer!”

Carnes flashed the gold badge of the Secret Service and an expression of anger crossed Mitchell’s face.

“If I had wished to talk to an officer I could have found plenty in New York,” he said shortly. “I came to Washington in order to tell my story to Dr. Bird.”

The seaman and the detective glared at one another for a moment and then Dr. Bird intervened.

“Pipe down, Carnes,” he said softly. “Mr. Mitchell undoubtedly has reasons, excellent reasons, for his actions. Sit down, Mr. Mitchell, and have a cigar.”

Mitchell accepted the cigar which the doctor proffered and took a chair. He lighted the weed and after another glance of hostility toward the detective he pointedly ignored him and addressed his remarks to Dr. Bird.

“I have no objection to telling you why I haven’t spoken earlier, Doctor,” he said. “When the *Arethusa* sank, I must have hit my head on something, for the next thing I knew, I was in the Marine Hospital in New York. I had been picked up unconscious by a fishing boat and brought in, and I lay there a week before I knew anything. When I knew what I was doing I heard about the loss of my ship and was told that there were no survivors, and I didn’t know what to do. The story I had to tell was so weird and improbable that I hesitated to speak to anyone about

it. I was not sure at first that it was not a trick of a disordered brain, but since my head has cleared I am convinced of the truth of it ... and yet I know that it *can't* be so. I have read about you and some of the things you have done, and so as soon as I was able to travel I came here to tell you about it. You will be better able to judge than I, whether what I tell you really happened or was only a vision."

Dr. Bird leaned back in his chair and put the tips of his fingers together. Long, tapering fingers they were, sensitive and well shaped, though sadly marred by acid stains. It was in his hands alone that Dr. Bird showed the genius in his make-up, the artistry which inspired him to produce those miracles of experimentation which had made his name a household word in the realm of science. Aside from those hands he more resembled a pugilist than a scientist. A heavy shock of unruly black hair surmounted a face with beetling black brows and a prognathous jaw. His enormous head, with a breadth and height of forehead which were amazing, rose from a pillar-like neck which sprang from a pair of

massive shoulders and the arching chest of the trained athlete. Dr. Bird stood six feet two inches in his socks, and weighed over two hundred stripped. As he leaned back a curious glitter, which Carnes had learned to associate with keen interest, showed for an instant in his eyes.

“I will be glad to hear your story, Mr. Mitchell,” he said softly. “Tell it in your own way and try not to omit any detail, no matter how trivial it may be.”

The seaman nodded and sat silent for a moment as though marshaling his thoughts.

“The story really starts the afternoon of May 12th,” he said, “although I didn’t realize the importance of the first incident at the time. We were steaming along at good speed, hoping to make New York before too late for quarantine, when a hail came from the forward lookout. I was on watch and I went forward to see what was the matter. The lookout was Louis Green, an able bodied seaman and a good one, but a confirmed drunkard. I asked him what the trouble was and he turned toward me a face that was

haggard with terror.

“‘I’ve seen a sea serpent, Mr. Mitchell,’ he said.

“‘Nonsense!’ I replied sharply. ‘You’ve been drinking again.’

“He swore that he hadn’t and I asked him to describe what he had seen. His teeth were chattering so that he could hardly speak, but he gasped out a story about seeing a monstrous head, a half mile across, he said, with a long snake body stretching out over the sea until the end of it was lost on the horizon. I turned my glass in the direction he pointed and of course there was nothing to be seen. The man’s condition was such as to make him worse than useless as a lookout, so I relieved him and ordered him below. I took it for a touch of delirium tremens.

“We were bucking a head wind, although not a very stiff one, and we didn’t make port until after dark, so we anchored at quarantine, just off Staten Island, in forty fathoms of water, and Captain Murphy radioed for a Coast Guard boat to come out and lay by us for

the night. As you have probably heard, we were carrying four millions in bar gold consigned to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York from the Bank of England.”

Dr. Bird and Carnes nodded. The inexplicable loss of the *Arethusa* had occupied much space in the papers ten days earlier.

“The cutter came out, signalled, and dropped anchor about three hundred yards away. So far, everything was exactly as it should be. I walked to the stern of the boat and looked out across the Atlantic and then I realized that Green wasn’t the only one who could see things. The wind had fallen and it was getting pretty dark, but not too dark to see things a pretty good distance away. As I looked I saw, or thought I saw, a huge black leathery mass come to the surface a mile or so away. There were two things on it that looked like eyes, and I had a feeling as though some malignant thing was staring at me. I rubbed my eyes and looked again, but the vision persisted, and I went forward to get a glass. When I came back the thing, whatever it was, had disappeared, but the water

where it had been was boiling as though there were a great spring or something of the sort under the surface.

“I trained my glass on the disturbed area, and I will take my oath that I saw a huge body like a snake emerge from the water. It lay in long undulations on the waves, and moved with them as though it were floating. It was quite a bit nearer than the first thing had been and I could see it plainly with the glass. I would judge it to be fifteen or twenty feet thick, and it actually seemed to disappear in the distance as Green had described it. The sight of the thing sent shivers up and down my spine, and I gave a hoarse shout. The lookout hurried to my side and asked me what the trouble was. I pointed and handed him the glass. He looked through it and handed it back to me with a curious expression.

“‘I can’t see nothing, sir,’ he said.

“I took the glass from him and tried to level it but my hands were trembling so that I was forced to rest it on the rail. The lookout was right. There was

absolutely nothing to be seen and the peculiar appearance of the sea had subsided to normal. The lookout was staring at me rather curiously and I knew that he was thinking the same thing about me as I had thought about Green in the afternoon. I made some kind of an excuse and went below to pull myself together. I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass. I was as white as a sheet, and the sweat was running off my face in drops.

“I shook myself together after a fashion and managed to persuade myself that the whole thing was just a trick of my mind, inspired by Green’s vivid description of his delirious vision of the afternoon. Eight bells struck, and when Mr. Fulton, the junior officer, relieved me, I laid down and tried to quiet myself. I didn’t have much luck. Just before I took the deck again at midnight I slipped down to the forecastle to see how Green was coming along. He was lying in his bunk, wide awake, with staring eyes.

“‘How are you feeling now, Green?’ I asked.

“He looked up at me with an expression of a man who

has looked death in the face.

“‘Ain’t there no chance of dockin’ to-night, Mr. Mitchell?’ he asked.

“‘Of course not,’ I said rather sharply. ‘What’s the matter with you? Are you afraid your sea serpent will get us?’

“‘He’ll get us if we stay out here to-night, sir,’ he replied with an air of conviction. ‘I saw the horrible mouth on him, large enough to bite this ship in half; and it had a beak like a bird, like a bloody parrot, sir. I saw its horrible body, too, with great black ulcers on the under side of it where the sharks had been after it. For all the shark takes a man now and then, he’s the seaman’s friend, sir, because he kills off the sea serpents who would take ship and all.’

“‘Nonsense, Green!’ I said sharply. ‘Don’t talk any more such foolishness or I’ll have you ironed. You’ve been drinking so much that you are seeing things, and I won’t have the crew disturbed by your crazy talk.’

“‘You won’t think it’s talk when those big eyes stare into yours to-night, Mr. Mitchell, and that body twists around you and squeezes the life out of you. I don’t care whether you iron me or not; I know that I’m doomed and so is everyone else; but I won’t talk about it, sir. The crew might as well rest easy while they can, for there’s no escape if we have to stay out here to-night.’

“‘Well, be sure you keep a tight mouth then,’ I said, and left rather hurriedly. I was in a cold sweat, for his air of conviction, together with what I had seen, had shaken me pretty badly. I heard the watch changing up above, and knew there would be men in the fore-castle in a minute. I didn’t want to face them right then.

“Mr. Fulton reported everything quiet when I went on deck to relieve him, and although I surveyed the water through a night glass for as far as I could see, there was nothing out of the way. The Coast Guard’s lights were shining less than a quarter of a mile away, and things looked peaceful enough. The wind had gone down with the sun; the sea was almost glassy,

and there was a bright moon.

“After going around the ship, I relieved all of the watch except two men for lookouts, and sent them below to get a good night’s sleep. If I hadn’t done that, some of them might be alive now.

“I paced the deck for an hour trying to quiet my nerves, but really getting more nervous every minute. Three bells struck and I walked forward and leaned on the rail to watch the water. I saw a peculiar swirl as though some large body were coming to the surface from below, and then I saw—it.

“Dr. Bird, I take a drink once in a while when I am on shore, but never at sea and never in excess, and I know it wasn’t a vision of drink delirium. I felt perfectly normal aside from my nervousness, and I don’t think it was fever. Either I saw it or I am insane, for it is as vivid to me as though I were standing on the *Arethusa*’s deck and that monstrous horror was rising once more before my eyes.”

The seaman’s face had become drawn and white as he

talked, and drops of sweat were trickling from his chin. Carnes sat forward absorbed in his narrative while Dr. Bird sat back with a glitter in his black eyes and an expression of great attention on his face.

“Go on, Mr. Mitchell,” the doctor said soothingly. “Tell me just what you saw.”

Mitchell shuddered and glanced quickly around the laboratory as though to assure himself that he was safe within four walls.

“From the surface of the sea,” he went on, “rose a massive body, black, and of the appearance of wet leather. It must have been a couple of hundred yards across, although the size of objects is often magnified by moonlight and my terror may have added to its size. In the midst of it were two great discs, thirty feet across, which glowed red with the reflected moonlight. It stared for a moment and then rose higher until it towered above the ship; and then I saw, or thought I saw, a huge gaping beak like a parrot’s. It was as Green had described it, large enough to bite the *Arethusa* in half, and she was a ship of three

thousand tons.

“I was frozen with horror and couldn’t move or cry out. As I watched, I saw the long snake-like body emerge from the water, and the estimate I had made of the size in the afternoon seemed pitifully inadequate. Presently a second and a third snake arose from the water, and then more, until the whole sea and the air above it seemed a writhing mass of huge snakes. I remember wondering why the watch of the Coast Guard cutter didn’t sound an alarm, and then I realized that the thing had arisen on our port side and the cutter was on the starboard.

“The mass of snakes writhed backward and forward, and then two of them rose in the air and hung over the ship. I could see the under side and I saw what Green had called the scars where the sharks had attacked. They were great cup-shaped depressions with vile white edges, and they did resemble huge sores or ulcers. They wavered over the ship for an instant, and then both of them dropped down on the deck.

“I found my voice and I think that I gave a yell, but even as I opened my mouth, I realized the futility of it. The *Arethusa* was sucked down into the sea as though it had been a tiny chip. I saw the water rising to the rail, and I think I cried out again. The ship tilted and I felt myself falling. The next thing I knew was when I was in the hospital and was told that I had been raving for a week. I was afraid to tell my story for fear I would be put in an asylum, so I kept a tight tongue in my head until I was discharged.”

Dr. Bird mused for a moment as the seaman’s voice stopped.

“You cried out all right, Mr. Mitchell,” he said. “You gave two distinct shouts, both of which were heard by the watch on the *Wren*, the Coast Guard cutter. They reported that at 1:30, the *Arethusa* sank without warning. As soon as he heard your shouts, the watch gave the alarm and the crew piled on deck. The *Arethusa* was gone completely and the *Wren* was tossing about like ‘a chip in a whirlpool’ as they graphically described it. The *Wren* had steam up and they fought the waves and steamed over your

anchoring ground looking for survivors, but they found none. The sea gradually subsided and they did the only thing they could do—dropped a buoy, to guide the salvage people, and radioed for assistance. The *Robin* came out and joined them, and both cutters stood by until daylight, but nothing unusual was seen. The insurance people are trying to salvage the wreck now, but so far they have made little headway.”

“That brings me to the rest of the story, the part that made me decide to come to you, Doctor,” said the seaman. “Did you see what happened to the divers yesterday?”

Dr. Bird nodded.

“I saw a brief account of it,” he said. “It seems that two of them were lost through their lines getting fouled and their air connections severed in some way. I don’t believe the bodies have been recovered yet.”

“They never will be recovered, Doctor. I was discharged from the hospital yesterday and the

papers were just out with an account of it. I went down to the dock where the *John MacLean*, the salvage ship, ties up, and I talked to Captain Starley who commands it. I have known him casually for some years, although not intimately, and he gave me a few more details than the press got. He didn't connect me up at first with the Mitchell who was reported lost on the *Arethusa*.

"The first man to go down from the *MacLean* was Charley Melrose, an expert diver. He went down in a pressure outfit to the bottom and started to work. Everything was going along fine until the telephone suddenly rang and the man who answered it heard him say, 'Raise me, for God's sake! Hurry!' The signal for raising was given, but they hadn't got him more than thirty feet from the bottom before there came a tug on the line and he was gone! The air line, the lifting cable and the telephone cord floated free and were reeled in. Melrose had been plucked off the end of that line as you or I would pluck off a grape."

Dr. Bird leaned forward with the curious glitter again in his eye.

“Go on,” he said tersely.

“Blake, the other diver, donned a suit and insisted on being lowered at once. Starley tried to dissuade him but he insisted on going down. They lowered him over the side with a twelve-foot steel-shod pike in his hand. He never got to the bottom. He had not been lowered more than a hundred feet when a scream came over the telephone, and again there was a jerk on the lines which threatened to wreck the reel—and the line came aboard with no diver on the end of it. At the same time, Starley told me, the sea boiled and churned as though the whole bottom were coming up, and his ship was tossed about as though it were in a violent storm, although it was calm enough for forty fathom salvage work and that is pretty quiet, you know. Half the time his screws were out of water and he had a hard time to keep from being capsized. He fought his way out of the disturbed area, and as soon as he did, it started to quiet down, and in ten minutes it was calm again.

“Starley was pretty badly shaken and besides he had lost both of his divers, so he came in and I saw him at

the dock. When I heard his yarn, I took him into my confidence and told him what I had seen and that I proposed coming to you and asking your advice. I was afraid until I heard his story that it was merely a vision that I had had, but it certainly was no vision that plucked those two divers off their lines.”

“Has Captain Starley told that story to anyone else yet?”

“No, Doctor, he hasn’t. He promised not to talk until after I had seen you. I’ll vouch for him; he’ll keep his word through anything; and he is keeping his whole crew on board until he hears from me.”

Dr. Bird sprang to his feet.

“Mr. Mitchell,” he said energetically, “you have shown excellent judgment. Wire Captain Starley that you have seen me and that he is to hold his crew on board and to talk to no one until I get there. Carnes, telephone the Chief of Naval Operations and ask him

to receive me in conference at once. Have him get the Secretary of the Navy in, too, if he is available. When you have finished that, telephone Bolton that you will be away from Washington indefinitely.”

“I’ll telephone Admiral Buck for you, Doctor, but I don’t dare telephone any such message to Bolton; he’d take my head off. He has been running the whole service ragged lately, and this is my first afternoon off duty in a fortnight.”

“What’s the trouble, a flood of new counterfeits?”

“No, the counterfeit division is getting along all right. In point of fact, they have lent us a dozen men. The trouble is a sudden big increase in Communist activity throughout the country, with the Young Labor party behind it. Bolton has been pretty jumpy since that Stokowski affair last August and he is afraid of another attempt of some sort on the President.”

“The Young Labor party? I thought that gang was bankrupt and out of business, since the Coast Guard broke up their alien smuggling scheme.”

“They were down and out for a while, but they are in funds again—and how! They must have three or four millions at least.”

“Where did they get it?”

“That’s what we have been trying to find out. The leaders have presented bars of gold to a dozen banks throughout the country and demanded specie. The banks shipped the gold to the mint and it was good gold, nine hundred and twenty-five fine. What we are trying to find out is how that gold got into the United States.”

“A shipment of that size should be easy to trace.”

“It would seem so, but it hasn’t been. We have accounted for every pound of every shipment that has come in through a port of entry, and we have checked almost that close on the output of every mine in the United States. If the gold came from Russia, it would have had to cross Europe, and we can’t get any trace of it from abroad. It looks as though they were *making* it.”

Dr. Bird rubbed his head thoughtfully.

“Possible, but hardly probable,” he said. “How much did you say they had?”

“Over three millions in thirty-pound bars. Each bar shows signs of having a mint mark chiselled off, but that don’t help much for they have done too good a job. It has us pretty well bluffed.”

Again Dr. Bird rubbed his head.

“Telephone Admiral Buck, and then phone Bolton and tell him exactly what I told you to: that you will be away indefinitely. When he gets through exploding, tell him that you are going with me and that possibly, just barely possibly, we might be on the trail of that gold shipment.”

“On the trail of the gold!” gasped Carnes. “Surely, Doctor, you don’t think—”

“Once in a while, old dear,” replied the Doctor with a chuckle, “which is more than anyone in the Secret

Service does. You might tell Bolton that I said that, but hang up quickly if you do. I don't want the wires of my telephone melted off. No, Carnesy, I have no miraculous inspiration as to where that gold is coming from; I just have a plain old-fashioned hunch, and that hunch is that we are going to have lots of fun and more than our share of danger before we see Washington again. After you get through bearding Bolton in his den, you might call the Chief of the Air Corps and ask him to have a bomber held at Langley Field subject to my orders. If he squawks any, I'll talk to him."

He turned to a telephone which stood on his desk and lifted the receiver.

"Get Mr. Lambertson on the wire," he said. "He is the chief technician of the Pyrex Glass Works at Corning, New Jersey."

The *U.S.S. Minneconsin* steamed out of New York harbor and headed down toward the lower bay. On her forward deck rested a huge globe. The bottom quarter of the sphere was made of some dark opaque

substance but the upper portion was transparent as crystal. Through the walls could be seen a quantity of apparatus resting on the opaque bottom portion. Two mechanics from the Bureau of Standards were making final adjustments of one of the pieces of apparatus, which resembled a tank fitted with a piston geared to an electric motor. From the tank, tubes ran to four hollow pipes, an inch and a half in diameter, which ran through the skin and extended thirty inches from the outer skin of the twenty-foot sphere. Dr. Bird stood near talking with the executive officer of the ship and from time to time giving a brief word of direction to the mechanics.

“It’s safer than you might think, Commander,” he said. “In the first place, that globe is not made of ordinary glass; it is made of vitrilene, a new semi-malleable glass which was developed at the Bureau and which is being made on an experimental scale for us by the Pyrex people. It is much stronger than ordinary glass, and is not sensitive to shock. It is also perfectly transparent to ultra-violet light, being superior even to rock crystal or fused quartz in that

respect. The walls, as you have noticed, are four inches thick, and I have calculated that the ball will stand a uniform external pressure of thirty-five hundred atmospheres, the pressure which would be encountered at a depth of about twenty miles. I believe that it will stand a squeeze of six thousand tons without buckling, and it is impossible to fracture it by shock. It could be dropped from the top of the Woolworth Building, and it would just bounce.”

“It seems incredible that it could stand such a pressure as you have named.”

“My figures are conservative ones. Lambertson calculated them even higher, but we allowed for the fact that this is the first large mass of the material to be cast, and lowered them.”

“But suppose your lifting cable should break?” objected the naval officer. “The outfit weighs a good many tons.”

“You notice that the lower quarter is made of lead. The specific gravity of the entire globe when sealed

up tight with two men in it is only a little more than unity. In the water its weight is so little that a three-inch manilla hawser would raise it, let alone a steel cable. I have another safety device. Granted that the cable should snap, I can detach the lead from it and it would shoot to the surface like a rocket.”

“How long can you remain under water in it?”

“A week, if necessary. I have an oxygen tank and a carbon dioxide removing apparatus which will keep the air in good condition. The globe is electrically lighted, and can be heated if necessary. Should my telephone line become fouled and broken, I have a radio set which will enable me to communicate with you. I can’t see that it is especially dangerous; not nearly as much so as a submarine.”

“What is your object in going down, if I may ask?”

“To take pictures and to explore the wreck if we can. The globe is equipped with huge floodlights and excellent cameras. The salvage people are having a little trouble and we are trying to help them out.”

“You mentioned exploring. Can you leave the globe while it is under water?”

“Yes. There is a locking device for doing so. A man in a diving suit can enter the lock and fill it with water. Once the external pressure is released he can open the outer door and step out. Coming back, he seals the outer door and the man inside blows out the lock and compressed air and then the inner door can be opened. It is the same principle as a torpedo tube.”

A jangle of bells interrupted them and the *Minneconsin* slowed down. Commander Lawrence stepped to the rail and gave a sharp order to the navigating officer on the bridge. The bells jangled again and the ship’s engines stopped.

“We are almost over the buoy, Doctor,” he said.

Dr. Bird nodded and spoke to the two mechanics. With a few final touches to the apparatus they emerged from the globe and Dr. Bird entered.

“Come on, Carnes,” he called. “No backing out at the

last minute.”

Carnes stepped forward with a sickly smile and joined the Doctor in the huge sphere.

“All right, boys; close her up.”

The mechanics swung the outer door into place with a crane. Both the edge of the door and the surface against which it fitted had been ground flat and were in addition faced with soft rubber. Bolts were fastened in the door which passed through holes in the main sphere, and Dr. Bird spun nuts onto them and tightened them with a heavy wrench. He and Carnes lifted the smaller inner door into place and bolted it tight. Dr. Bird stepped to the telephone.

“Lower away,” he directed.

From a boom attached to the *Minneconsin*’s forward fighting top, a huge steel cable swung down, and the latch at the end of the cable was closed over a vitrilene ring which was fastened to the top of the sphere. The cable tightened and the globe with the

two men in it was lifted over the side of the battleship and lowered gently into the water. Carnes involuntarily ducked and threw up his hand as the waters closed over them. Dr. Bird laughed.

“Look up, Carnes,” he said.

Carnes gasped as he looked up and saw the surface of the water above him. Dr. Bird laughed again and turned to the telephone.

“Lower away,” he said. “Everything is tight.”

The globe descended into the depths of the sea. Darker and darker it grew until only a faint twilight glow filled the sphere. A dark bulk loomed before them. Dr. Bird snapped on one of his huge floodlights and pointed.

“The *Arethusa*,” he said.

The ill-fated vessel lay on her side with a huge jagged hole torn in her fabric amidships.

“That’s where her boilers burst,” explained the Doctor. “Luckily we have a hard bottom to deal with. Let’s see if we can locate any of Mitchell’s sea serpents.”

He turned on other flood lights and swept the bottom of the sea with them. The huge beams bored out into the water for a quarter of a mile, but nothing unusual was to be seen. Dr. Bird turned his attention again to the wreck.

“Things look normal from this side,” he said after a prolonged scrutiny. “I’ll have the *Minneconsin* steam around it while we look it over.”

In response to his telephone orders the ship above them swung around the wreck in a circle, and Carnes and the Doctor viewed each side in turn. But nothing of a suspicious nature made its appearance. The sphere stopped opposite the hole in the side and Dr. Bird turned to Carnes.

“I’m going to put on a diving suit and explore that wreck,” he said. “If there ever was any danger, it isn’t

apparent now; and I can't find out anything until I get inside."

"Don't do it, Doctor!" cried Carnes. "Remember what happened to the other divers!"

"We don't know what happened to them, Carnes. No matter what it was, there is no danger apparent right now, and I've got to get into that ship before I can get any real information. We could have lowered an under-sea camera and learned as much as we have so far."

"Let me go instead of you, Doctor."

"I'm sorry to refuse you, old dear, but frankly, I wouldn't trust your judgment as to what you had seen if you went alone; and we can't both go."

"Why not?"

"If we both went, who would work the air to let us

back in? No, this is a one-man job and I'm the one to do it. While I am gone, keep a sharp lookout, and if you see anything unusual call me at once."

"How can I call you?"

"On this small radio phone. A pair of receivers tuned to the right wave-length are in my diving helmet, and I will be able to hear you although I can't reply. I won't be gone long: I have only a small air tank, large enough to keep me going for thirty minutes. Now help me into my suit and keep a sharp watch. A timely warning may save my life if anything happens."

With Carnes' assistance, Dr. Bird donned a deep-sea diving outfit and screwed down the helmet. He crawled through the inner door into the lock and lifted the inner door into place. Carnes fastened the door with nuts and the Doctor opened a pair of valves in the outer door and filled the lock with water. He removed the outer door; and, taking in one hand a steel-shod twelve-foot pike with a hook on the end, and in the other a waterproof flashlight, he sallied forth. As he left the shell he paused for a moment,

and then returned and picked up the heavy wrench with which he had removed the nuts holding the outer door into place. He fastened the tool to the belt of his suit. Then, with a wave of his hand toward the detective, he approached the hulk.

The hole in the side was too high for him to reach, but he hooked the end of his pike in one of the joints of the *Arethusa's* plates and climbed slowly and painfully up the side of the vessel. As he disappeared into the hull, Carnes realized with a sudden start that he had been watching his friend and neglecting the duty imposed on him of keeping a sharp watch. He turned quickly to the floodlights and searched the sea bottom.

Nothing appeared, and the minutes moved as slowly as hours should. Carnes felt that he had been submerged alone for weeks, and his nerves grew so tense that he felt that he would scream in another instant. A sudden thought sobered him like a dash of cold water. If he screamed, Dr. Bird would take it for an alarm signal and possibly be afraid to emerge from the vessel. His watch showed him that the Doctor had

been gone for twenty-five minutes and he moved slowly to the radio transmitter.

“Dr. Bird,” he said slowly and distinctly, “you have been gone nearly thirty minutes. Nothing alarming has appeared but I will feel better when I see you coming back.”

He glued his eyes on the opening in the ship’s side and waited. Five minutes passed, and then ten, with no signs of the Doctor. Carnes moved again to the receiver.

“It has been over half an hour. Doctor,” he cried in a pleading voice. “If you are all right, for God’s sake show yourself. I am frantic with worry.”

Another five minutes passed, and the sweat dripped in a steady stream from the detective’s chin. Suddenly he gave a sob of relief and sank back against the side of the globe. A bulky figure showed at the edge of the hole, and Dr. Bird climbed slowly and heavily out of the hold and dropped to the sea bottom. He lay prone for a moment before he rose and made his way with

evident effort toward the sphere. He entered the compartment and with a heroic effort lifted the outer door into place, and feebly and with fumbling fingers placed nuts on the bolts. His hands wandered uncertainly toward the valves and closed the upper one. He waved his hand toward Carnes and sank in a heap on the floor of the lock.

With trembling hands Carnes connected the air and opened the valve. Air flowed into the lock and the water was gradually forced out. When the lock was empty, he waited for Dr. Bird to close the outer valve but the Doctor did not move. Carnes tore at the bolts which held the inner door and threw his weight against it. It held against his assault, and he thought frantically. An inspiration came to him, and he disconnected the air valve. With a whistling rush, the air from the lock rushed into the sphere and he forced open the inner door. A stream of sea water drove against his feet through the open valve, and he reached for the valve to close it. The force of the water held it open for a moment, but he threw every ounce of his strength into the effort. The valve slowly

closed.

It was beyond his strength to haul the heavy Doctor with his pressure diving suit through the restricted confines of the inner door, so Carnes wormed his way into the lock and with trembling fingers unscrewed the helmet of the Doctor's diving suit. The helmet clanged to the floor and Carnes scooped up his hands full of water and dashed it into the Doctor's face. There was no response and he was at his wit's end. He sprang for the radio to order the sphere hauled up when his glance fell on the oxygen tank. It took him only a moment to connect a rubber hose to the tank, and in a few seconds a blast of the life-giving gas was blowing into the scientist's face. Dr. Bird gave a convulsive gasp or two and opened his eyes.

"Shut off the juice, Carnes," he said faintly. "Too much of that's bad."

Carnes shut off the oxygen and Dr. Bird struggled to a sitting position and inhaled deep breaths.

"That was a narrow squeak, old dear," he said faintly.

“Give me a hand and I’ll climb in.”

With the detective’s aid he climbed into the sphere and Carnes fastened the inner door. Slowly the Doctor rid himself of the diving suit and lay prone on the floor, his breath still coming in gasps.

“Thanks for your warning about the time, Carnes,” he said. “I knew that my air supply was running short but I was caught down there and couldn’t readily free myself. I thought for a while that my time had come, but it wasn’t so written. By the looks of things, I freed myself just in time.”

“Did you find out anything?” asked the detective eagerly.

“I did,” replied Dr. Bird grimly. “For one thing, the gold is no longer in the hold of the *Arethusa*.”

“It’s gone?”

“Clean as a whistle, every bar of it. A hole has been cut in the vault around the combination, and the bars

slid back and the door opened. The gold has been stolen.”

“Might it not have been stolen before the vessel sank?”

“The idea occurred to me of course, and I examined things pretty carefully. I know that the theft occurred after the vessel sank.”

“How could you tell?”

“For one thing, the hole was cut with an under-water cutting torch. For the second, look here.”

The Doctor rolled up his trousers and showed the detective his leg. Carnes cried out as he saw huge purple welts on it.

“What caused that?” he cried.

“As I entered the vault, I stepped full into a steel bear trap which was set there for the purpose of catching and holding anyone who entered. Someone has visited

the *Arethusa*, since she sank, and looted her, and also arranged so that any diver who got as far as the vault would never return to the surface to tell of it. Luckily for myself, I carried a heavy wrench and was able to free myself. Most divers don't carry such a thing."

"But who could have done it?"

"That's what we have got to find out, and we aren't going to do it down here. Give the word to have us hauled up; and, Carnes, don't mention anything about the looting of the vessel. Allow it to be understood that I couldn't get into the hold. We'll head back for New York at once. I want to have a few small changes made in this sphere before we use it again. While I am doing that, I want you to get hold of the Coast Guard or the Immigration Service or whoever it is that has the complete records in that case of alien smuggling, by the Young Labor party. When you get the information, report to me and we'll go over it. You might also drop a hint to Captain Starley that will stop all further attempts at salvage operations for a few days. Tell him that I'll arrange to have a Coast Guard cutter guard the locality of the wreck."

“Won’t that be rather risky for the cutter?”

“I think not. The gold is gone and there is no reason to apprehend any further danger in that locality, at least for the present.”

At nine o’clock next morning Carnes and Dr. Bird sat in the office of Lieutenant Commander Minden of the United States Coast Guard, listening intently to the history of the alien smuggling case. Commander Minden was saying:

“Their boats would load up and clear ostensibly for Rio de Janeiro or some other South American port, but once they were in the Atlantic, they would alter their course and head from the Massachusetts coast. Of course, we had no right to interfere with them on the high seas, and they never came closer than fifty miles of our coast line. When they got that close, they would cruise slowly back and forth for a few days and then steam away south to the port they had cleared for. When they got there, of course there were no passengers on board.

“We patrolled the coast carefully while they were around but we never got any indication of any landing of aliens and yet we knew they were being landed in some way. We drew lines so close that a cork couldn’t get by without being seen and we even had the air patrolled, but with no results. Eventually the air patrol was the thing that gave them away.

“They had been operating so successfully that they evidently got careless and started a load off late in the night so they didn’t reach the coast by dawn. A Navy plane was flying along the coast-line about twelve miles off when they spotted a submarine running parallel with the coast, headed north. It didn’t look like an American craft and they went on and radioed Washington and found that we had no under-sea craft in that neighborhood. They returned to their patrol and followed the sub for a matter of thirty or forty miles up the coast, and then it turned in right toward the shore. The shore line there is rocky, and, at the point where the sub was heading, it falls sheer about two hundred fathoms. The sub ran right at the cliff and disappeared from view.”

Lieutenant Commander Minden paused impressively. Carnes and Dr. Bird set forward in their chairs, for it was evident that the crux of the story was at hand.

“When the plane reported what they had seen, we knew how those aliens were being landed. The point where the sub went in gave us a good idea of the location of their base and we threw a cordon of men around and searched. A Navy sub was sent to the scene and they reported that there was a tunnel opening into the rock, about a hundred fathoms under water, running for they had no idea how far under the land. They stayed to guard the hole while we combed the land. It took us a week to locate the place, but we traced some truck loads of food and finally found it. This tunnel ran under the land for a mile and then ended in a large cave underground. The Young Labor party had established a regular receiving depot there, and took the aliens from the sub and kept them for a day or two until they had a chance to load them into trucks and run them into Boston or some other town in the night.

“Once we had the place spotted, we sent a gang in

and captured the whole works without any trouble. The underground cavern had no natural opening to the surface, but one had been made by blasting. We captured the whole lot and then sealed the end of the hole with rock and concrete. That was the end of the affair.”

“Thank you, Commander; you have given us a very graphic description of it. I suppose you could find the entrance which was sealed up?”

“Easily. I led the raiding party. I forgot to mention one blunder we made. Evidently some word of our plans leaked out, for the sub which was guarding the outer end of the tunnel was called away by a radio message supposed to be from the Navy Department. It had gone only a short distance, however, when the commander smelled a rat and made his way back. He was too late. He was just in time to see the sub emerge from the hole and head into the open sea. He gave chase, but the other sub was faster than the Navy boat and it got clear away. The leader of the gang must have been on it, for we didn’t get him.”

“Who was the leader?”

“From some records we captured, his name was Ivan Saranoff. I never saw him.”

“Saranoff?” said Dr. Bird thoughtfully. “The name seems familiar. Where have I—Thunder! I know now. He was at one time a member of the faculty of St. Petersburg. He was one of the leading biologists of his time. Carnes, we’ve found our man.”

“If you are thinking of Saranoff, I am afraid you are mistaken, Doctor,” said Commander Minden. “Neither he nor his submarine have ever been heard of since and it has been generally conceded that they were lost at sea. We had some pretty rough weather just after that affair.”

“Rough weather doesn’t mean much to a sub, Commander. I expect that he’s our man. At any rate, the place we want to go is the end of that tunnel.”

“I’m at your service, Doctor.”

“Carnes, get the location of that tunnel entrance from Commander Minden and order the *Minneconsin* to proceed north along the coast to that vicinity and stand by for radio orders. I am going to telephone Mitchell Field and get a plane. We have no time to lose.”

The plane from Mitchell Field roared down to a landing, and Carnes, Dr. Bird and Commander Minden dismounted from the rear cockpit and looked around. They had landed in a smooth field at the base of a rise almost rugged enough to be called a mountain. A group of three men were standing near them as they got out of the plane. One of the men approached.

“Dr. Bird?” asked the newcomer. “I am Tom Harron, United States Marshal. These two men are deputies. I understand that I am to report to you for orders.”

“I’m glad to know you, Mr. Harron. This is Operative Carnes of the Secret Service and Commander Minden of the Coast Guard. We are going to explore an underground cavern that is located in this vicinity.”

“Do you mean the one where they used to smuggle aliens? That is closed up. I was in charge of that work and we closed it tight as a drum two years ago.”

“Can you find the entrance?”

“Sure. It isn’t over a mile from here.”

“Lead the way, then. We want to take a look at it.”

The marshal led the way toward the eminence and took a path which led up a gully in its side. He paused for a moment to take his bearings and then turned sharply to his left and climbed part way up the side of the ravine.

“Here it is,” he announced. An expression of astonishment crossed his face and he examined the ground closely. “By Golly, Doc,” he went on as he straightened up, “this place has been opened since I left it!”

Dr. Bird hurried forward and joined him. The heavy stone and concrete with which the entrance to the

cavern had been sealed were undisturbed, but in the side of the hill was set a steel door beside the concrete. There was no sign of a keyhole or other means of entering it.

“Was this steel door part of your work?” asked Carnes.

“No, sir, it wasn’t. We sealed it solid. That door has been put there since.”

Dr. Bird closely examined the structure. He tapped it and went around the edges and then straightened up and took a small pocket compass from his pocket and opened the case. The needle swung crazily for a moment and then pointed straight toward the door.

“A magnetic lock,” he exclaimed. “If we could find the power line it would be easy to force, but finding that line might take us a week. At any rate, we have found out what we were after. This is their base from which they are operating. Mr. Harron, I want you to station a guard armed with rifles at this door day and night until I personally relieve you. Remember, until I

relieve you, in person. Verbal or written orders don't go. Capture or kill anyone who tries to enter or leave the cavern through this entrance. Just now we'll find that cavern more vulnerable from the sea end, and that is where I mean to attack. We'll force that door and explore from this end later. Commander Minden, you may stay here with Mr. Harron, if you like, or you may come with Carnes and me. We are going on board the *Minneconsin*."

The Mitchell Field plane roared to a take-off and bore south along the coast. Half an hour of flying brought them in view of the battleship steaming at full speed up the coast. Dr. Bird radioed instructions to the ship, and an hour later a launch picked them up from the beach and took them out. As soon as they were on board they resumed their progress, and in two hours the peak that Dr. Bird had marked as a landmark was opposite.

"Steam in as close to the shore as you can safely," he said, "and then lower us. Once we are down, you will be guided by our telephoned instructions. Come on, Carnes, let's go."

The detective followed him into the sphere as the *Minneconsin* edged up toward the shore. The huge ball was lifted from the deck and lowered gently into two hundred fathoms of water. It was pitch dark at that depth, and Dr. Bird switched on one floodlight and studied the cliff which rose a hundred yards from them.

“We have missed the place, Carnes,” he said. “We’ll have them pull us up a few hundred feet and then steam along the coast.”

He turned to the telephone and the sphere rose while the battleship steamed slowly ahead, the vitrilene ball following in her wake. For a quarter of a mile they continued on their way, and then Dr. Bird halted the ship.

“What depth are we?” he asked. “Eighty fathoms? All right, lower us, please.”

The ball sank until it rested on the sea bottom, and Dr. Bird turned on two additional floodlights and studied the surroundings. The bed of the ocean was

literally covered with lobster and crab shell, with the bones of fish scattered here and there among them. A few bones of land animals were mixed with the debris and Carnes gave a gasp as Dr. Bird pointed out to him a diving helmet.

“We are on the right track,” said the scientist grimly. He stepped to the telephone and ordered the sphere raised to one hundred fathoms. The ship moved forward along the coast until Dr. Bird again stepped to the telephone and halted it. Before them yawned the entrance to the underground tunnel. It was about two hundred feet high and three hundred across, and their most powerful beams would not penetrate to the end of it. A pile of debris could be seen on the floor of the tunnel and Carnes fancied that he could see another diving helmet among the litter. Dr. Bird pointed toward the side of the cavern.

“See those floodlights fastened to the cliff so that their beams will sweep across the mouth of the tunnel when they are lighted?” he said. “Apparently the cave is used as a prison and the light beams are the bars. The creature is not at home just now or the bars

would be up. My God! Look at that, Carnes!”

Carnes stared and echoed the Doctor’s cry of surprise. Clinging to a shelf of rock which extended out from the wall of the cavern and half hidden among the seaweed was a huge marine creature. It looked like a huge black slug with rudimentary eyes and mouth. The thing was fifty feet in length and fully fifteen feet in diameter. It hung there, moving sluggishly as though breathing, and rudimentary tentacles projecting from one end moved in the water.

“What is it, Doctor?” asked Carnes in a voice of awe.

“It is a typical trochosphere of the giant octopus, the devil fish of Indian Ocean legend, multiplied a thousand times,” he replied. “When the octopus lays its eggs, they hatch out into the larval form. The free swimming larva is known as a trochosphere, and I am positive that that is what we see; but look at the size of the thing! Man alive, if that ever developed, I can’t conceive of its dimensions!”

“I have seen pictures of a huge octopus pulling down

a ship,” said Carnes, “but I always fancied they were imaginary.”

“They are. This monstrosity before us is no product of nature. A dozen of them would depopulate the seas in a year. It is a hideous parody of nature conceived in the brain of a madman and produced by some glandular disturbance. Saranoff spent years in glandular experimentation, and no doubt he has managed to stimulate the thyroid of a normal octopus and produce a giant. I fancy that the immediate parent of the thing before us was of normal size, and so, probably, are its brothers and sisters. The phenomenon of giantism of this nature occurs in alternate generations and then only in rare instances. Its grandparent may not be far away, however. I wish it was safe to use a submarine to explore that cavern.”

“Why isn’t it?”

“Any creature powerful enough to pull the *Arethusa* under water would crush a frail submarine without effort. Anyway, a Navy sub isn’t built for under-water

exploration like this ball is. The window space is quite limited and they aren't equipped with powerful floodlights. I would like to be able to reach that thing and destroy it, but it can wait until later. The best thing we can do is to put out our lights and wait."

His hand sought the light switch, and the globe became dark. Only a tiny glimmer of light came down to them from the surface, a hundred fathoms above. In the darkness they stared into the depths of the sea.

For an hour they waited and then Dr. Bird grasped Carnes by the shoulder and pointed. Far in the distance could be seen a tiny point of light. It wavered and winked and at times disappeared, but it was gradually approaching them. Dr. Bird stepped to the telephone and the *Minneconsin* moved a hundred yards further from the shore. The light disappeared again as though hidden by some opaque body. Their eyes had become accustomed to the dim light and they could dimly see a long snake-like body approach the globe and then suddenly withdraw.

The light appeared again only a few hundred yards

away. The water swirled and the sphere swayed drunkenly as some gigantic body moved past it with express train speed and entered the mouth of the cavern. The light turned toward them and they could see the dim outlines of a small submarine on which it was mounted. Another rush of water came as the object which had entered the cave started to leave it, and the light swung around. It bore on a huge black body, and was reflected with a red glow from huge eyes, and the creature backed again into the cave. Back and forth across the mouth of the cavern the light played, and the watchers caught a glimpse of a huge parrot beak which could have engulfed a freight car. From the cavern projected twisting tentacles of gargantuan dimensions, and red eyes, thirty feet in diameter, glared balefully at them. For several minutes the light of the submarine played across the mouth of the cave, and then the floodlights on the cliff sprang into full glow and bathed the ball and the mouth of the tunnel in a flood of light.

Before their horrified gaze was an octopus of a size to make them disbelieve their eyes. The submarine had

moved up to within a few feet of them, and the light from it played full on the ball. The submarine maneuvered in the vicinity, keeping the ball full in the beam of its light, and then drew back. As it did so, the floodlights on the cliff died out and the beam of the submarine's light was directed away from them. Dr. Bird jumped to the telephone.

"Head straight out to sea and full speed ahead!" he shouted. "Don't try to pull us in; tow us!"

The ball swayed as the *Minneconsin's* mighty engines responded to his orders and the cliff wall disappeared.

"As long as they know we're here, we might as well announce our presence in good style," said the doctor grimly as he closed a switch and threw all of the sphere's huge lights into action. He had turned on the lights just in time, for even as he did so a mighty tentacle shot out of the darkness and wrapped itself around the ball. For a moment it clung there and then was withdrawn.

“The thing can’t stand light,” remarked the doctor as he threw off the switch. “That sub was herding it like a cow by the use of a light beam. As long as we are lighted up we are safe from attack.”

“Then for God’s sake turn on the lights!” cried Carnes.

“I want it to attack us,” replied the doctor calmly. “We have no offensive weapons and only by meeting an attack can we harm the thing.”

As he spoke there came a soft whisper of sound from the vitrilene walls and they were thrown from their feet by a sudden jerk. Dr. Bird stumbled to the switch and closed it, and the ball was flooded with light. Two arms were now on them but they were slowly withdrawn as the lights glared forth. The huge outlines of the beast could be seen as it followed them toward the surface. Its great eyes glared at them hungrily. The submarine was visible only as a speck of light in the distance.

The *Minneconsin*’s speed was picking up under the

urge of her huge steam turbines, and the ball was nearing the surface. The sea was light enough now that they could see for quite a distance. The telephone bell jangled and Dr. Bird picked the receiver from its hook.

“Hello,” he said. “What’s that? You can? By all means, fire. Yes, indeed, we’re well out of danger; we must be thirty or forty feet down. Watch the fun now,” he went on to Carnes as he replaced the receiver. “The beast is showing above the surface and they’re going to shell it.”

They watched the surface and suddenly there came a flash of light followed by a dull boom of sound. The huge octopus suddenly sank below them, thrashing its arms about wildly.

“A hit!” shouted Dr. Bird into the telephone. “Get it again if it shows up. I want it to get good and mad.”

He turned off the lights in the ball and the octopus attacked again. The shell had taught it caution and it kept well down, but three huge arms came up from

the depths of the sea and wrapped themselves about the ball. The forward motion stopped for a moment, and then came a jerk that threw them down. The ball started to sink.

“Our cable has parted!” cried the doctor. “Turn on the lights!”

Carnes closed the switch. The ball was so covered with the huge tentacles that they could see nothing, but the light had its usual effect and they were released. The ball sank toward the bottom and they could see the huge cephalopod lying below watching them. Blood was flowing from a wound near one of its eyes where the *Minneconsin's* shell had found its mark.

Toward the huge monster they sank until they lay on the bottom of the ocean and a few yards from it. In an instant the sea became opaque and they could see nothing.

“He has shot his ink!” cried the doctor. “Here comes the real attack. Strap yourself to the wall where you

can reach one of the motor switches.”

Through the darkness huge arms came out and wrapped themselves around the ball. The heavy vitrilene groaned under the enormous pressure which was applied, but it held. The ink was clearing slightly and they could see that the sphere was covered by the arms. The mass moved and the huge maw opened before them. The pipes projecting from the sides of the ball were buried in the creature’s flesh.

“Good Lord, he’s going to swallow us!” gasped the doctor. “Quick, Carnes, the motor switch.”

He closed one of them as he spoke, and the powerful little electric motors began to hum, forcing forward the piston attached to the tank connected to the hollow rods. Steadily the little motors hummed, and the tank emptied through the rods into the body of the giant cephalopod.

“I hope the stuff works fast,” groaned the doctor as they approached closer to the giant maw. “I never tried giving an octopus a hypodermic injection of

prussic acid before, but it ought to do the business. There's enough acid there to kill half New York City."

Carnes blanched as the ball approached the mouth. One by one the arms unwound until only one was holding them and the jaws opened wider. They were almost in them when the motion stopped. They could feel a shudder run through the arm which held them. For a moment the arm alternately expanded and contracted, almost releasing them only to clutch them again. Another arm came from the depths and whipped about the ball, and again the vitrilene groaned at the pressure which was applied. The arms were suddenly withdrawn and the ball started to sink.

"Drop the lead, Carnes!" cried the doctor. With the aid of the detective he operated the electric catches which held the huge mass of lead to the bottom, and the sphere shot up through the water like a rocket. It leaped clear of the water and fell back with a splash. A half mile away the *Minneconsin* was swinging in a wide circle to head back toward them. They turned their gaze toward the shore.

As they looked a giant arm shot a hundred yards up into the air, twisting and writhing frantically. It disappeared, and another, and then half a dozen flashed into the air. The arms dipped below the surface. A huge black body reared its bulk free from the water for a moment, and the sea boiled as though in a violent storm. The body sank and again the arms were thrown up, twisting and turning like a half dozen huge snakes. The whole creature sank below the waves and the ball tossed back and forth, often buried under tons of water and once tossed thirty feet into the air by the huge waves.

A momentary lull came in the waves. Carnes gave a cry of astonishment and pointed toward the shore. With an effort, Dr. Bird twisted himself in his lashing and looked in that direction. The huge body had again come to the surface, and three of the arms were towering into the air. Grasped in them was a long, black, cigar-shaped object. As they watched the object was torn into two parts and the fragments crushed by the enormous power of the octopus. Again the arms writhed in torment, and then they stiffened

out. For a moment they towered in the air and then slowly sank below the surface of the sea.

“The cyanide has worked,” cried the doctor, “and in its last agonies the creature has turned on its creator and destroyed him. It is a shame, for Saranoff was a brilliant although perverted genius, and besides, I would have liked to have learned his method.

However, I may find something when we open the land end and raid the cave; and really, he was too brilliant a man to hang for murder. Once we open the cave and I get any data that is there, my connection with the case will end. Trailing down the gold and recovering it is a routine matter for Bolton, and one in which he won’t need my help.”

“What about that creature we saw in the cave, Doctor? Won’t it hatch into another terror of the sea like the thing that destroyed the ship?”

“The trochosphere? No, I’m not worried there. It won’t try to leave the cave for some days yet, and by that time we’ll have the land end opened and the floodlights turned on. They will keep it there and it

will starve to death. We could send down a sub to feed it a torpedo, but there's no need. Nature will dispose of it. Meanwhile, I hope the *Minneconsin* rigs up a jury tackle pretty soon and takes us on board. I'm getting seasick."

#62 Gray Denim, By Harold Vincent Schoepflin:

The blood of the Van Dorn's ran in Karl's veins. He rode the skies like an avenging god.

Aproximate word count: 9,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

there came a stabbing pencil



- - -

Beneath the huge central arch in Cooper Square a meeting was in progress—a gathering of the gray-clad workers of the lower levels of New York. Less than two hundred of their number were in evidence, and these huddled in dejected groups around the pedestal from which a fiery-tongued orator was addressing them. Lounging negligently at the edge of the small crowd were a dozen of the red police.

“I tell you, comrades,” the speaker was shouting, “the time has come when we must revolt. We must battle to the death with the wearers of the purple. Why work out our lives down here so they can live in the lap of luxury over our heads? Why labor day after day at the oxygen generators to give them the fresh air they breathe?”

The speaker paused uncertainly as a chorus of raucous laughter came to his ears. He glared belligerently at a group of newcomers who stood aloof from his own gathering. Seven or eight of them there were, and they wore the gray with obvious

discomfort. Slummers! Well, they'd hear something they could carry back with them when they returned to their homes!

"Why," he continued in rising tones, "do we sit at the controls of the pneumatic tubes which carry thousands of our fellows to tasks equally irksome, while they of the purple ride their air yachts to the pleasure cities of the sky lanes? Never in the history of mankind have the poor been poorer and the rich richer!"

"Yah!" shouted a disrespectful voice from among the newcomers. "You're full o' bunk! Nothing but bunk!"

An ominous murmur swelled from the crowd and the red police roused from their lethargy. The mounting scream of a siren echoed in the vaulted recesses above and re-echoed from the surrounding columns—the call for reserves.

All was confusion in the Square. The little group of newcomers immediately became the center of a mêlée of dangerous proportions. Some of the more timid of

the wearers of the gray struggled to get out of the crowd and away. Others, not in sympathy with the speaker, rushed to the support of the besieged visitors. The police were, for the moment, overwhelmed.

The orator, mad with resentment and injured pride, hurled himself into the group. A knife flashed in his hand; rose and fell. A scream of agony shrilled piercingly above the din of the fighting.

Then came the reserves, and the wielder of the knife turned to escape. He broke away from the milling combatants and made speedily for the shadows that lay beyond the great pillars of the Square. But he never reached them, for one of the red guards raised his riot pistol and fired. There was a dull *plop*, and a rubbery something struck the fleeing man and wrapped powerful tentacles around his body, binding him hand and foot in their swift embrace. He fell crashing to the pavement.

A lieutenant of the red police was shouting his orders and the din in the Square was deafening. With their

numbers greatly augmented, the guards were now in control of the situation and their maces struck left and right. Groans and curses came from the gray-clad workers, who now fought desperately to escape.

Then, with startling suddenness, the artificial sunlight of the cavernous Square was gone, leaving the battle to continue in utter darkness.

Cooper Square, in the year 2108, was the one gathering place in New York City where the wearers of the gray denim were permitted to assemble and discuss their grievances publicly. Deep in the maze of lower-level ways seldom visited by wearers of the purple, the grottolike enclosure bore the name of a philanthropist of the late nineteenth century and still carried a musty air of certain of the traditions of that period.

In Astor Way, on the lowest level of all, there was a tiny book shop. Nestled between two of the great columns that provided foundation support for the eighty levels above, it was safely hidden from the gaze of curious passersby in the Square. Slumming

parties from afar, their purple temporarily discarded for the gray, occasionally passed within a stone's throw of the little shop, never suspecting the existence of such a retreat amidst the dark shadows of the pillars. But to the initiated few amongst the wearers of the gray, and to certain of the red police, it was well known.

Rudolph Krassin, proprietor of the establishment, was a bent and withered ancient. His jacket of gray denim hung loosely from his spare frame and his hollow cough bespoke a deep-seated ailment. Looking out from behind thick lenses set in his square-rimmed spectacles, the watery eyes seemed vacant; uncomprehending. But old Rudolph was a scholar—keen-witted—and a gentleman besides. To his many friends of the gray-clad multitude he was an anomaly; they could not understand his devotion to his well-thumbed volumes. But they listened to his words of wisdom and, more frequently than they could afford, parted with precious labor tickets in exchange for reading matter that was usually of the lighter variety.

When the fighting started in the Square, Rudolph was

watching and listening from a point of vantage in the shadows near his shop. This fellow Leontardo, who was the speaker, was an agitator of the worst sort. His arguments always were calculated to arouse the passions of his hearers; to inflame them against the wearers of the purple. He had nothing constructive to offer. Always he spoke of destruction; war; bloodshed. Rudolph marveled at the patience of the red police. To-day, these newcomers, obviously a slumming party of youngsters bent on whatever mischief they could find, were interfering with the speaker. The old man chuckled at the first interruption. But at signs of real trouble he scurried into the shadows and vanished in the blackness of first-level passages known only to himself. He knew where to find the automatic substation of the Power Syndicate.

Returning to the darkness he had created in the Square, he was relieved to find that the sounds of the fighting had subsided. Apparently most of the wearers of the gray had escaped. He skirted the avenue of pillars along Astor Way, feeling his way from one to another as he progressed toward his little shop.

Peering into the blackness of the square he saw the feeble beams of several flash-lamps in the hands of the police. They were searching for survivors of the fracas, maces and riot pistols held ready for use. A sobbing gasp from close by set his pulses throbbing. He crept stealthily in the direction from which the sound had come.

“Steady now,” came a whispered voice. “My uncle’s shop is close by. He’ll take you in. Here—let me lift you.”

There was a shuffling on the opposite side of the pillar at which Rudolph had halted; another grunt of pain.

“Karl!” hissed the old man. It was his nephew.

“Uncle Rudolph?” came the guarded response.

“Yes. Can I help you?”

“Quick—yes—he’s fainted.”

The old man was around the huge base of the column

in an instant. He groped in the darkness and his hands encountered human bodies.

“Who is it?” he breathed.

“One of the hecklers, Uncle. A young lad; and of the purple I think. He’s been knifed.”

Together they dragged the inert form into the shelter of the long line of pillars. There was a trampling of many men in the square. That would be a second detachment of reserves. A ray of light filtered through and dancing shadows of the giant columns made grotesque outlines against the walls of the Way. A portable searchlight had been brought to the scene. They must hurry.

Impeded by the dead weight of their burden, they made sorry progress and several times found it necessary to halt in the shadow of a pillar while the red police passed by in their search of the Square. It was with a sigh of relief that Rudolph opened the door of his shop and with still greater satisfaction closed and bolted it securely. His nephew shouldered the

limp form of the unconscious youth and carried it to his own bed in one of the rear rooms.

“Ugh!” exclaimed old Rudolph as he ripped open the young man’s shirt, “it’s a nasty cut. Warm water, Karl.”

The gaping wound was washed and bound tightly. Rudolph’s experienced fingers told him the knife had not reached a vital spot. The youth would recover.

“But Karl,” he objected, “he wears the purple. Under the gray. See! It’ll get us in trouble if we keep him.”

He was stripping the young man of his clothing to prepare him for bed. Suddenly there was revealed on the white skin a triangular mark. Bright scarlet it was and just over the right hip. He made a hasty attempt to hide it from the watching eyes of Karl.

“Uncle!” snapped his nephew, “—the mark you call cursed! He has it, too!”

The tall young man in gray was on his knees, tearing

the hands of the old man away. He saw the mark clearly now. There was no further use of attempting to conceal it. Rudolph rose and faced his angered nephew, his watery eyes inscrutable.

“You told me, Rudolph, that it was a brand that cursed me. I have seen it on him, too. You have lied to me.”

The old man’s eyes wavered. He trembled violently.

“Why did you lie?” demanded Karl. “Am I not your nephew? Am I not really cursed as you’ve maintained? Tell me—tell me!”

He had the old man by the shoulders, shaking him cruelly.

“Karl—Karl,” begged the helpless ancient, “it was for your good. I swear it. You were born to the purple. That’s what that mark means—not that you’re degraded to the gray, as I said. But there’s a reason. Let me explain.”

“Bah! A reason! You’ve kept me in this misery and squalor for a reason! Who’s my father?”

He flung Rudolph to the floor, where the old man crouched in apprehensive misery.

“Please Karl—don’t! I can explain. Just give me time. It’s a long story.”

“Time! Time! For twenty-odd years you’ve lied to me; cheated me. My birthright—where is it?”

He menaced his supposed uncle; was about to strike him. Then suddenly he was ashamed. He turned on his heel.

“I’m leaving,” he said shortly.

“Karl—my boy,” begged Rudolph Krassin, struggling to his feet. “You can’t! That lad in there—he—”

But Karl was too angry to reason.

“To hell with him!” he raged, “and to hell with you!”

I'm through!"

He stamped from the room and out into the eery shadows of the Way. Karl was done with his old life. He'd go to the upper levels and claim his rights. Some day, too, he'd punish the man who'd stolen them away. God! Born to the purple! To think he'd missed it all! Probably was kidnaped by the old rascal he'd been calling uncle. But he'd find out. Rudolph didn't have to explain. Fingerprint records would clear his name; establish his rightful station in life. He dived into a passage that would lead him to one of the express lifts. He'd soon be overhead.

A sergeant of the red police looked up startled from his desk as a tall youth in the gray denim of forty levels below appeared before him.

"Well?" he growled. The stalwart young worker had stared belligerently and insolently, he thought.

"I want to check my fingerprint record, Sergeant."

"Hm. Pretty cocky, aren't you? The records for such

as you are down below, where you belong.”

“Not mine, I think.”

“So? And who the devil are you?”

“That’s what I’m here to find out. I’ve got a triangle branded on my right hip.”

“A what?”

“Triangle. Here—look!”

The amazing youngster had raised his jacket and was pulling at his shirt. The sergeant stared at what was revealed, his eyes bulging as he looked.

“Lord!” he gasped, “a Van Dorn—in the gray!”

Quickly he turned to the radiovision and made rapid connection with several persons in turn—important ones, by the appearance of the features of each in the brilliant disc of the instrument.

Karl was confused by the sudden turn of things. The

sergeant talked so rapidly he could not catch the sense of his words. And that name, Van Dorn, eluded him. He knew he had heard it before, in the little shop down there in Astor Way. But he could not place it. He wished fervently that he had paid more attention to the desires of old Rudolph; had studied more and read the books the old man had begged him to read. His new surroundings confused him, too, and he knew that he was the center of some great new excitement.

Then they were in the room; two individuals, one in the red uniform of a captain of police, the other a pompous, whiskered man in purple. Others followed and it seemed to Karl that the room was filled with them, strangers all, and they stared at him and chattered incessantly. He experienced an overwhelming impulse to run, but mastered it and faced them boldly.

A square of plate glass was placed under his outstretched fingers. It was smeared with something sticky and he watched the whiskered man as he held it up to the light and studied the impressions. Then there was more confusion. Everyone talked at once

and the pompous one in purple made use of the radiovision, holding the square of glass near its disc for observation by the person he had called. The identification number was repeated aloud, a string of figures and letters that were a meaningless jumble to Karl. The room became quiet while the police captain thumbed the pages of a huge book he had taken from among many similar ones that filled a rack behind the desk.

Karl's blood froze in his veins at the rumbling swish of a car speeding through the pneumatic tube beneath their feet. His nerves were on edge. Then the captain of police looked up from the book and there was a peculiar glint in his eyes as he spoke.

"Peter Van Dorn. Missing since 2085. Wanted by Continental Government. Ha!"

The words came to Karl's ears through a growing sensation of unreality. It seemed that the speaker was miles away and that his voice and features were those of a radiovision likeness. Wanted by the great power across the Atlantic! It was unthinkable. Why, he had

been but an infant in 2085! What possible crime could he have committed? But the red police captain was speaking again, this time in a chill voice. And the room of the police, thick with the smoke of a dozen cigars, became suddenly stifling.

“Where have you been these twenty-three years, Peter Van Dorn?” asked the captain. “Who have you lived with, I mean?”

Something warned him to protect old Rudolph. And somehow he wished he had not treated the old fellow as he did when he left. His self-possession returned. A wave of hot resentment swept over him.

“That’s my affair,” he said defiantly.

The captain shrugged his shoulders. “Oh, well,” he said, “you needn’t answer—now. We’ll find out when it’s necessary. In the meanwhile we’ll have to turn you over to the Continental Ambassador.”

Two of the red police advanced toward him and the rest drew back.

“You mean I’m under arrest?” asked Karl incredulously.

“Certainly. Of course you’re not to be harmed.”

One of the guards had him by the arm and he saw the glint of handcuffs. They couldn’t do this! If it had been for rioting in the Square it would be different. But this! It meant he was a prisoner of a foreign government, for what reason he could not guess. He lost his head completely.

The captain cried out in amazement as one of his huskiest guards went sprawling under a well-planted punch. This youngster must be as crazy as was his father before him. But he was a whirlwind. Before he could be stopped he had tackled the other guard and with a mighty heave flung him halfway across the room where he fell with a thud that left him dazed and gasping. The pompous little man in the purple crawled under the desk as the sergeant leveled a slender tube at the young giant in gray.

Karl ducked instinctively at sight of the weapon, but

the spiteful crackle of its mechanism was too quick for him. A faintly luminous ray struck him full in the breast and stopped him in his tracks. A thrill of intense cold chased up his spine and a thunderbolt crashed in his brain. The captain caught his stiffened body as he fell.

Karl—refusing to think of himself as Peter Van Dorn—came to his senses as from a troubled sleep. His head ached miserably and he turned it slowly to view his surroundings. Then, in a flash, he remembered. The paralyzing ray of the red police! They never used it in the lower levels; but overhead—why, the swine! He sat suddenly erect and glared into a pair of green eyes that regarded him curiously.

A quick glance showed him that he was in a small padded compartment like that of the pneumatic tube cars. At one end there was an amazing array of machinery with glittering levers and handwheels—a control board on which numberless tiny lights blinked and flickered in rapid succession. At these controls squatted the twisted figure of a dwarf. A second of the creatures sat at his side and stared with those

horrible green eyes.

“Lord!” he muttered. “Am I still asleep?”

“No,” smiled the dwarf, “you’re awake, Peter Van Dorn.” The misshapen creature did not seem unfriendly.

“Then where am I, and who are you?”

“You’re in one of the Zar’s rocket cars, speeding toward Dorn. We are but two of the Zar’s servants—Moon men.”

“Rocket car? Moon men?” Karl was aghast. He wanted to pinch himself. But a hollow roar to the rear told him he was in a rapidly moving vessel of some sort. Certainly, too, these dwarfs were not figments of his imagination.

“You’ve been kept completely ignorant?” asked the dwarf.

“It—it seems so.” Karl was bewildered. “You mean we

are out in the open—traveling in space—to the Moon perhaps?”

The dwarf laughed. “No, I wish we were,” he replied. “But we are about halfway to the capital of the Continental Empire, greatest of world powers. We’ll be there in an hour.”

“But I don’t understand.”

“Stupid. Didn’t you ever hear of the rocket ships that cross the ocean like a projectile, mounting a thousand miles from the surface and making the trip in two hours?”

“No!” Karl was aghast. “Are we really in such a contraption?” he faltered.

“Say! Are you kidding me?” The dwarf was incredulous. “Do you mean to tell me you know so little of your world as that? Have you never read anything? The news broadcasts, the thought exchangers—don’t you follow them at all?”

Karl shook his head in growing wonder. Truly Rudolph had kept him in ignorance. Or was it his own fault? He had refused to dig into the volumes old Krassin had begged him to read. The broadcasts and the thought machines—well, only those of the purple had access to those.

“Hey, Laro!” called the dwarf to his companion, “this mole is as dumb as can be. Doesn’t know he’s alive hardly. And a Van Dorn!”

The two laughed uproariously and Karl raged inwardly. Mole! So that’s what they called wearers of the gray! He clenched his fists and rose unsteadily to his feet.

“Sorry,” apologized his tormentor. “Mustn’t get sore now. It seems so funny to us though. And listen, kid, you’ll never have another chance to hear it all. So, if you’ll sit down and calm yourself a bit I’ll give you an earful.”

Mollified, Karl listened. A marvelous tale it was, of a disgruntled scientist of the Eastern Hemisphere who

had conquered that portion of the world with the aid of the inhabitants he had found on the outer side of the Moon; of the scientist who still ruled the East—Zar of the Continental Empire. A horrible war—in 2085, the year of his own birth—depopulated the countries of Asia, Europe and Africa and reduced them to subjection. There was no combatting the destructive rays and chemical warfare of the Moon men. The United Americas, still weakened from a civil war of their own, remained aloof and, for some strange reason, the Zar left them in peace, contenting himself with his conquest of practically all of the rest of the world. Now, it seemed, the two major powers were as separate as if on different planets, there being no traffic between them save by governmental sanction; and that was rarely given.

It grew uncomfortably warm in the compartment as the rocket car entered the lower atmosphere but Karl listened spellbound to the astounding revelations of the Moon man. There came a pause in the discourse of the dwarf as a number of relays clicked furiously on the control board and the vessel slackened its

speed perceptibly.

“But,” said Karl, thinking aloud rather than meaning to interrupt, “what has all this to do with me? Why does the government of this Zar want me?”

The dwarf bent close and eyed him cautiously. “Poor kid!” he whispered, “it doesn’t seem right that you should suffer for something that happened when you were born; something you know nothing about. But the Zar knows best. You—”

There came a stabbing pencil of light from over Karl’s shoulder and the green eyes of the dwarf went wide with horrified surprise. He clutched at his breast where the flame had contacted, then slowly collapsed in a pitiful, distorted heap. Karl recoiled from the odor of putrefaction that immediately filled the compartment. He whirled to face the new danger but saw nothing but the padded walls.

Then they were in darkness save for the blinking lights of the control board. He was thrown forward violently and the piercing screech of compressed air

rushing past the vessel told him they had entered the receiving tube at their destination and were being retarded in speed for the landing. This much he had gathered from the explanations of the now silenced dwarf.

Laro, the other Moon man, remained mute at the controls. His companion evidently had talked too much.

The vessel had stopped and a section of the padded rear wall of the compartment moved back to reveal a second chamber. There were three other occupants of the ship and Karl knew now at whose hands the talkative Moon man had met his death. One of the three—all wearers of the purple—still held the generator of the dazzling ray in his hands. He decided wisely that resistance was useless and followed meekly when he was led from the ship.

Endlessly they rode upward in a high-speed lift, dismounting finally at a pneumatic tube entrance. A special car whisked them roaring into the blackness. Then they were shot forth into the open and Karl saw

the light of the sun for the first time in many years. They were on the upper surface of a great city, Dorn, the capital of the Continental Empire.

The air was filled with darting ships of all sorts and sizes, most of them being pleasure craft of the wearers of the purple. To Karl it was the sudden realization of his dreams. He was one of them. He, too, should be wearing the purple. Then his heart sank as one of his guards prodded him into action. His dream already was shattered for they stood at the entrance to a great crystal pyramid that rose from the flat expanse of the roofs of Dorn. It was the palace of the Zar.

It seemed then that fairyland had opened its gates to the young man in gray denim. He immediately fell under its influence when they traversed a long lane between rows of brightly colored growing things which filled the air with sweet odors. Feathered creatures fluttered about and twittered and caroled in the sheer joy of being alive. It was sweeter music than he had ever believed possible or even imagined as existing. Again he forgot the menace of the imperial

edict which had brought him from the other side of the world.

Then rudely, he was brought back to earth. He was in the presence of the mighty Zar and his three escorts were bowing themselves from the huge room in which the wizened monarch sat enthroned. They had finished their duties.

A shriveled face; beady eyes; trembling hands with abnormally large knuckles; a cruel and determined mouth—these were the features that most impressed Karl as he stared wordlessly at this Zar of the Eastern Hemisphere. The magnificence of the royal robe was lost on the young wearer of the gray.

“Well, well, so this is Peter Van Dorn, my beloved nephew.” The Zar was speaking and the chilly sarcasm in which the words were uttered belied the friendliness they otherwise might have implied.

“That’s what I’m told,” replied Karl, “though I didn’t know I’m supposed to be the nephew of so great a figure as yourself.”

Not bad that, for an humble wearer of the gray.

“Oh, yes, yes, indeed. Why else should I have sent for you?”

“I have wondered why—and still wonder.”

“Oh, you wonder, eh?” The Zar inspected him carefully and then broke into a cackle of horrible laughter. “A Van Dorn in gray denim!” he chortled. “A mole of the Americas! And to think that even the Zar has been unable to find him in all these years!”

“Stop!” bellowed Karl. “I’ll not have your ridicule. Come to the point now and have it over with. Kill me if you will, but tell me the story!” He had seen the slender tube in the Zar’s hand.

An expression of surprise, almost of admiration, flickered in the beady eyes of the Zar and was gone. He spoke coldly.

“Very well, I shall explain. You, Peter, are actually my nephew. Your father, Derek Van Dorn, was my

brother; he a king of Belravia and I a poor but experienced scientist. He scorned me and he paid, for I learned of the ancient race of the other side of the Moon, the side we can not see from the earth. I went to them and enlisted their aid in warring upon my brother. When we returned to carry on this war I learned that I had a son. So, too, did Derek. But my son was born in obscurity and Derek's son—you, Peter—in the lap of luxury. The war was short and, to me, sweet. Belravia was first to fall, and I had your father removed from this life by the vibrating death."

"You monster!" cried Karl. But the slender rod menaced him.

"A moment, my hot-headed nephew. I vowed I'd have your life, Peter, but your father had a few friends and one of these spirited you away. So temporarily you escaped. But now I have you where I can keep that vow. You, too, shall die. By the vibration. But first—ha! ha!—I'll give you a taste of the purple. Just so the going will be harder."

Karl kept his temper as best he could. He thought,

conscience-stricken, of old Rudolph, that good friend of his father. Then he thought of that youth he had taken from the Square.

“Your son?” he asked gently. “Has he the triangular brand?”

The Zar was taken aback. “He has, yes. Why?” he asked.

“I have seen him in the Americas. He now lies wounded and in peril of his life. What do you think of that?”

Karl was triumphant as the Zar paled.

“You lie, Peter Van Dorn!”

But the beady eyes saw that the young man was truthful. Sudden fury assailed the monarch of the East. A bell pealed its mellow summons and three Moon men entered the Presence.

“Quick, Taru—the radiovision! Our ambassador in the

Americas!” The Zar was on his feet, his hard features terrible in fear and anger. “By God!” he vowed, “I’ll lay waste the Americas if harm has come to my son. And you”—turning to Karl—“I’ll reserve for you an even more terrible fate than the vibrating death!”

The radiovision was wheeled in and in operation. A frightened face appeared in its disc: the Zar’s ambassador across the sea.

“Moreau—my son!” snapped the Zar. “Where is he?”

“Majesty! Have mercy!” gasped Moreau. “Paul has eluded us. He was skylarking—in the lower levels of New York. But our secret agents are combing the passages. We’ll have him in twenty-four hours. I promise!”

The rage of the Zar was terrible to see. Karl expected momentarily that the white flame would lay him low, for the anger of the mad ruler was directed first at Moreau, then at himself. But a quick, evil calm succeeded the storm.

“You, Peter,” he stated, in tones suddenly silky, “shall have that twenty-four hours—no more. If Moreau has not produced my son in that time you shall be dismembered slowly. A finger; an ear; your tongue; a hand—until you reveal the whereabouts of the heir to my throne!”

“Never! You scum!” Karl was on the dais in a single bound. He had the Zar by the throat, his fingers twisting in the flabby flesh. Might as well have it over at once. “Fratricide—murderer of my father, I’ll take you with me!”

But it was not to be. The throne room was filled with retainers of the mad emperor. Strong hands tore him away and he was borne, struggling and fighting, to the floor. A sharp pain in his forearm. A deadening of the muscles. He was powerless, save for the painful ability to crawl to his knees, swaying drunkenly. A delicious languor overcame him. Nothing mattered now. He saw that a tall man in the purple had withdrawn the needle of the hypodermic and was replacing the instrument in its case. Ever so slowly, it seemed.

The Zar was laughing. That horrible cackle. But Karl didn't care. They'd have their sport with him. Let 'em! Then it'd be over. Lord! If only he had been a little quicker. He'd have torn the old Zar's windpipe from its place!

"My word," laughed the Zar. "The sacred word of a Van Dorn. I gave it. He'll wear the purple for a day. Take him from my sight!"

Karl was walking, quite willingly now. The effects of the drug were altering. His muscular strength returned but his mental state underwent a complete change. Always he'd wanted a taste of the purple. For years he'd listened to the orators of the Square, to the conflicting statements of old Krassin. But now he'd see. He'd know the joys of the upper levels; the pleasure cities, perhaps. For one day. But what did it matter? He found himself laughing and joking with his companion, a heavy-set wearer of the purple. They were in a luxurious apartment. Servants! Moon men all of them, but so efficient. They stripped him of his gray denim; discarded it contemptuously. Karl kicked the heap into a corner and laughed delightedly. His

bath was waiting.

Much can happen in a day. Clothed in the purple, Karl—Peter Van Dorn, he was, now—expanded. Turgid emotions surged through his new being. He was a new man. In his rightful place. He was delighted with the companionship of his new friend of the purple, Leon Lemaire. An euphonious name! A fine fellow! Fool that the Zar must be, to leave him in the care of so amiable a man. Why, Leon couldn't hold him! None of them could. He'd escape them all—if he wished. Twenty-four hours, indeed!

They were in the midst of a gay company. Wine flowed freely, and Leon had attached to their party a pair of beautiful damsels, young, and easy to know. There was music and dancing. Lights of marvelous color played over the assemblage in the huge hall, swaying their senses at the will of some expert manipulator. Peter was a different person now. He was exhilarated to the point of intoxication, but not by the wine. Somehow he couldn't bear the taste of the amber fluid the others were imbibing with such gusto. The effects of the drug had left a coppery taste in his

mouth. But no matter! Rhoda, his lovely companion at the table leaned close. Her breath was hot at his throat. He swept her into his arms. Leon and the other girl laughed approvingly.

There were many such places in the upper levels of Dorn and they traveled from one to another. Now their party was larger, it having been augmented by the appearance of other of Leon's friends. Fine companions, these men of the purple, and the women were incomparable. Especially Rhoda. They understood one another perfectly now. It was all as he had pictured it.

Someone proposed that they visit the intermediate levels. It would be such a lark to watch the mechanicals. They made the drop in a lift. A laughing, riotous party. And Peter was one of them! He felt that he had known them for years. Rhoda clung to his arm, and the languorous glances from under her long lashes set the blood racing madly in his veins.

In the levels of the mechanicals they romped boisterously. To them the strange robots—creatures of

steel and glass and copper—were objects of ridicule. Poor, senseless mechanisms that performed the tasks that made the wearers of the purple independent of labor. Here they saw the preparation of their synthetic food, untouched by human hands. In one chamber a group of mechanicals, soulless and brainless, engaged in the delicate chemical compounding of raw materials that went into the making of their clothing. Here was a nursery, where tiny tots born to the purple were reared to adolescence by unfeeling but efficient mechanical nurses. The mothers of the purple could not be bothered with their offspring until they had reached the age of reason. The whirring machinery of a huge power plant provided much amusement for the feminine members of the party. It was all so massive; throbbing with energy. But dirty! Ugh! Lucky the attendants could be mechanicals.

“We have visited the lower levels,” whispered Rhoda in his ear, “but not often. It isn’t pleasant. Ignorant fools in the gray denim—too many of them. I don’t know why we permit their existence. Fools who will

not learn. Education made us as we are, and they won't take it. Sullen looks and evil leers are all that they have for us. Hope nobody suggests going down there now."

"Me, too," said Peter. He had forgotten that once he was Karl Krassin, a wearer of the despised gray.

Someone in the party was becoming restless. They must move on.

"Where to?" asked Peter.

"Sans Dolor, sweet boy. A pleasure city within a hundred kilometers of Dorn. You'll love it, Peter."

A pleasure city! Fondest dream of the wearers of the gray! In the dim past, when he was Karl, he had dreamed it often. Now he was to visit one!

They were atop the city now and the crystal palace of the Zar shimmered in the sunlight off there across the flat upper surface of Dorn. But it seemed so far away that Peter did not give it a second thought. He was

living in the present.

A swift aero took them into the skies and they roared out above the wilderness that was everywhere between the great cities of earth. Funny nobody thought of leaving the cities and exploring the jungles of the outside. But, of course, it wasn't necessary. They had everything they needed within the cities. All of their wants were supplied by the mechanicals and by the few toilers in the gray who still persisted in ignorance and in some perverse ideas that they must work in order to live. Besides, the jungle was dangerous.

Sans Dolor loomed into view, a great island floating in the air a thousand meters above the tossing waters of the ocean. Peter gave not a thought to the forces that kept it suspended. Dimly he recalled certain words of old Rudolph, words regarding the artificial emanations that had been discovered as capable of counteracting the force of gravity. But his mind was intent on the pleasures to come.

They were over the city. Carefully tended foliage lined

its streets and a smooth lagoon glistened in its center. Its towers and spires were decorated with gay colors. The streets were filled with wearers of the purple and the nude bodies of bathers in the lagoon gleamed white in the strong sunlight.

He sensed anew the nearness of Rhoda. Her soft warm hand nestled in his and she responded instantly to his sudden embrace.

There came a shock and the party was stilled in dismay. The aero careened violently and the pilot struggled with controls that were dead. Sans Dolor dropped rapidly away beneath them. They were shooting skyward, drawn by some inexplicable and invisible energy from above.

Rhoda screamed and held him close, trembling violently. All of the women screamed and the men cursed. Leon arose to his feet and stared at Peter. The friendliness was gone from his features and he spat forth an accusation. A glistening mechanism appeared in his hand as if by magic. A ray generator! He had been appointed by the Zar to guard this upstart and,

whatever happened, he'd not let him escape with his life. The girl shuddered at sight of the weapon and extricated herself from his arms. Her affection too had been a pose.

Peter's mind was clearing from the effects of the drug. He had not the slightest idea of what might have caused the quick change in the situation but he resolved he would die fighting, if die he must. Leon fumbled with the catch of the generator. It refused to operate. The force that was drawing them upward had paralyzed all mechanisms aboard the little aero. Flinging it from him in disgust he sprang for Peter.

Their minds befuddled, the rest of the men watched dully. The women huddled together in a corner, whimpering. They were a sorry lot after all, thought Karl. He was no longer Peter Van Dorn, and he thrilled to the joy of battle.

Leon Lemaire was no mean antagonist. His flailing arms were everywhere and a huge fist caught Karl on the side of his head and sent him reeling. But this only served to clear his mind further and to fill him

with a cold rage. He bored in unmercifully and Lemaire soon was on the defensive. A blow to his midsection had him puffing and Karl hammered in rights and lefts to the now sinister face that rocked his opponent to his heels. But the minion of the Zar was crafty. He slid to the floor as if groggy, then with catlike agility, dove for Karl's knees, bringing him down with a crash.

The air whistled by them as the ship was drawn upward with ever-increasing speed. The other passengers cowered in fright as the two men rolled over and over on the floor, banging at each other indiscriminately. Both were hurt. Karl's lip was split, and bleeding profusely. One eye was closing. But now he was on top and he pummeled his opponent to a pulp. Long after he ceased resisting them, the blows continued until the features of Leon Lemaire were unrecognizable. The infuriated Karl did not see that one of the members of the party was creeping up on him from behind. Neither was he aware that the upward motion of the aero had ceased and that they now hung motionless in space. A terrific blow at the

base of his skull sent him sprawling. Must have been struck by a rocket, one of those funny ships that crossed the ocean so quickly. A million lights danced before his aching eyeballs.

Lying prone across the inert body of his foe, dimly conscious and fingers clutching weakly, he knew that the cabin was filled with people. Alien voices bellowed commands. There was the screaming of women; the sound of blows; curses ... then all was silence and darkness.

It was a far cry to the little book shop off Cooper Square, but Karl was calling for Rudolph when he next awoke to the realization that he was still in the land of the living. His head was bandaged and his tongue furry. A terrible hangover. Then he heard voices and they were discussing Peter Van Dorn. He opened one eye as an experiment. The other refused to open. But it might have been worse. At least he was alive; he could see well enough with the one good optic.

“Sh-h!” whispered one of the voices. “He’s

recovering!”

He looked solemnly into the eyes of an old man; a pair of wise and gentle eyes that reminded him somehow of Rudolph's.

“Quiet now, Peter,” said the old man. “You’ll be all right in a few minutes. Banged up a bit, you are, but nothing serious.”

“Don’t call me Peter,” objected Karl. He loathed the sound of the name; loathed himself for his recent thoughts and actions. “I am Karl Krassin,” he continued, “and as such will remain until I die.”

There were others in the room and he saw glances of satisfaction pass between them. This was a strange situation. These men were not of the purple. Neither were they of the gray. Their garments shone with the whiteness of pure silver. And that’s what they were; of finely woven metallic cloth. Was he in another world?

“Very well, Karl.” The kind old man was speaking once more. “I merely want you to know that you are

among friends—your father’s friends.”

Surprised into complete wakefulness, Karl struggled to a seated position and surveyed the group that faced him. They were a fine looking lot, mostly older men, but there was a refreshing wholesomeness about them.

“My father?” he faltered. “He’s not alive.”

“No, my poor boy. Derek Van Dorn left this life at the hands of your uncle, Zar Boris. But we, his friends, are here to avenge him and to restore to you his throne.”

“But—but—I still do not understand.”

“Of course not, because we’ve kept ourselves hidden from the world for more than twenty-two years, waiting for this very moment. There are forty-one of us, including Rudolph, my brother. We have lived in the jungle since Boris conquered the Eastern Hemisphere. But amongst our numbers were several scientists, two greater than was Boris, even in his

heyday. They have done wonderful things and we are now prepared to take back what was taken from Derek—and more. His life we can not restore—Heaven rest him—but his kingdom we can. And to his son it shall be returned.

“You were given into Rudolph’s care when little more than a babe in arms and he has cared for you well. We’ve watched, you know, in the detectoscopes—long range radiovision mechanisms that can penetrate solid walls, the earth itself, to bring to us the images and voices of persons who may be on the other side of the world. We’ve followed your every move, my boy, and the first time we feared for you was yesterday when the drug of the Zar’s physician stole away your sense of right and wrong. But we were in time to save you, and now we are ready to kneel at your feet and proclaim you our king. First there is the Zar to be dealt with and then we shall set up the new regime. Are you with us?”

Karl gazed at the speaker in wonder. He a king? Always to live amongst the wearers of the purple? To be responsible for the welfare of half the world? It

was unthinkable! But Zar Boris, the murderer of his own father—he must be punished, and at the hands of the son!

“I’ll do it,” he said simply. “That is, I’ll do whatever you have planned in the way of exterminating the Zar. Then we’ll talk of the new empire. But how is the Zar to be overcome? I thought he was invincible, with his Moon men and terrible weapons.”

“Ah! That, my boy, is where our scientists have triumphed. True, his rays were terrible. They could not be combatted when he first returned. The strange chemicals and gases of the Moon men defied analysis or duplication. His citadel atop the city of Dorn is proof against them all; proof against explosives and rays of all kinds known to him. The disintegration and decomposition rays have no effect on the crystal of its walls. It is hermetically sealed from the outer air so can not be gassed. The vibration impulses have no effect upon its reinforced structure. But there is a ray, a powerful destructive agent, against which it is not proof. And our scientists have developed this agency. You shall have the privilege of pressing the release of

the energy that destroys the arch-fiend in his lair. His dominance over, the empire will fall. We shall take it—for you.”

A strange exaltation shone from the faces of those in the room, and Karl found that it was contagious. His bosom swelled and he itched to handle the controls of this wonderful ray.

“This ray,” continued the brother of old Rudolph, “carries the longest vibrations ever measured, the vibrations of infra-red, the heat-ray. We have succeeded in concentrating a terrific amount of power in its production, and with it are able to produce temperatures in excess of that of the interior of the earth, where all substances are molten or gaseous. The Zar’s crystal palace cannot withstand it for a second. He cannot escape!”

“How’ll you know he’s there at the time?” Karl was greatly excited, but he was curious too.

“Come with me, my boy. I’ll show you.” The old man led him from the room and the others followed

respectfully.

They stopped at a circular port and Karl saw that they were high above the earth in a vessel that hovered motionless, quivering with what seemed like human eagerness to be off.

“This vessel?” he asked.

“It’s a huge sphere; the base of our operations. To it we drew the aero on which you were fighting. A magnetic force discovered by our scientists and differing only slightly from that used in counteracting gravity. We let the rest of them go; foolishly I think. But it’s done now and we have no fear. From this larger vessel we shall send forth smaller ones, armed with the heat-ray. The flagship of the fleet is to be yours and you’ll lead the attack on Dorn. Here—I’ll show you the Zar.”

They had reached the room of the detectoscopes—a mass of mechanisms that reminded Karl of nothing so much as the vitals of the intermediate levels which he had visited with Leon—and Rhoda. He knew that he

flushed when he thought of her. What a fool he had been!

A disc glowed as one of the silver-robed strangers manipulated the controls. The upper surface of Dorn swung into view. Rapidly the image drew nearer and they were looking at the crystal pyramid that was the Zar's palace. Down, down to its very tip they passed. Karl recoiled from the image as it seemed they were falling to its glistening sides. The sensation passed. They were through, penetrating solid crystal, masonry, steel and duralumin girders. Room after room was opened to their view. It was magic—the magic of the upper levels.

Now they were in the throne room. A group of purple-clad men and women stood before the dais. Leon, Rhoda—all of his wild companions were there, facing the dais. The Zar was raging and the words of his speech came raucously to their ears through the sound-producing mechanism.

“You’ve failed miserably, all of you,” he screamed.

“He’s gotten away and you know the penalty. Taru—

the vibrating ray!”

The Moon man already was fussing with a gleaming machine, a machine with bristling appendages having metallic spheres on their ends, a machine in which dozens of vacuum tubes glowed suddenly.

Rhoda screamed. It was a familiar sound to Karl. He noted with satisfaction that Leon could hardly stand on his feet and that his face was covered with plasters. Then, startled, he saw that Leon was shivering as with the ague. His outline on the screen grew dim and indistinct as the rate of vibration increased. Then the body bloated and became misty. He could see through it. The vibrating death! His father had gone the same way!

Karl groaned at the thought. The whine of the distant machine rose in pitch until it passed the limit of audibility. Tiny pin-points of incandescence glowed here and there from the Zar’s victims as periods of vibration were reached that coincided with the natural periods of certain of the molecules of their structure. They were no longer recognizable as

human beings. Shimmering auras surrounded them. Suddenly they were torches of cold fire, weaving, oscillating with inconceivable rapidity. Then they were gone; vanished utterly.

The Zar laughed—that horrible cackle again.

“Great God!” exclaimed Karl, “let’s go! The fiend must not live a moment longer than necessary. Are you ready?”

Rudolph’s brother smiled. “We’re ready Karl,” he said.

The great vessel hummed with activity. The five torpedo-shaped aeros of the battle fleet were ready to take off from the cavities in the hull. In the flagship Karl was stationed at the control of the heat-ray. His instructions in its operation had been simple. A telescopic sight with crosshairs for the centering of the object to be attacked; a small lever. That was all. He burned with impatience.

Then they were dropping; falling clear of the mother

ship. The pilot pressed a button and the electronic motors started. A burst of roaring energy streamed from the tapered stern of their vessel and the earth lurched violently to meet them. Down, down they dived until the rocking surface of Dorn was just beneath them. Then they flattened out and circled the vast upper surface. From the corner of his eye Karl saw that the other four vessels of his fleet were just behind. There was a flurry among the wasplike clouds of pleasure craft over the city. They scurried for cover. Something was amiss!

“Hurry!” shouted Karl. “The warning is out! There is no time to lose!”

He pressed his face to the eye-piece of his sight, his finger on the release lever of the ray. The crystal pyramid crossed his view and was gone. Again it crossed, more slowly this time. And now his sight was dead on it, the gleaming wall rushing toward him. Pressure on the tiny button. They’d crash into the palace in another second! But no, a brilliant flash obscured his vision, a blinding light that made the sun seem dark by comparison. They roared on and

upward. He took his eye from the telescope and stared ahead, down. The city was dropping away, and, where the crystal palace had stood, there was a spreading blob of molten material from which searing vapors were drifting. The roofs of the city were sagging all around and great streams of the sparkling, sputtering liquid dripped into the openings that suddenly appeared. Derek Van Dorn was avenged.

“Destroy! Destroy!” yelled Karl madly. A microphone hung before him and his words rang through every vessel of his convoy.

The lust of battle was upon him. A fleet of the Zar’s aeros had risen from below; twenty of them at least. These would be manned by Moon creatures, he knew, and would carry all of the dreadful weapons which had originated on that strange body. But he did not know that his own ships were insulated against most of the rays used by the Zar’s forces. He knew only that he must fight; fight and kill; exterminate every last one of the Zar’s adherents or be exterminated in the attempt.

Kill! Kill! The madness was contagious. His pilot was a marvel and drove his ship straight for the massed ships of the foe. The air was vivid with light-streamers. A ray from an enemy vessel struck the thick glass of the port through which he looked and the outer surface was shattered and pock-marked. But a cloud of vapor and a dripping stream of fiery liquid told him his own ray had taken effect on a vessel of the enemy. One! They wheeled about and spiraled, coming up under another of the Zar's aeros. It vanished in a puff of steam and they narrowly missed being covered by the falling remnants of incandescent liquid. Two! Karl's aim was good and he gloated in the fact. Three! They climbed and turned over, dropping again into the fray. Four!

The air grew stifling, for the expended energy of the enemies' rays must needs be absorbed. It could not disintegrate them nor decompose their bodies, but the contacts were many and the liberation of heat enormous. They were suffocating! But Karl would not desist. They drove on, now beneath, now above an enemy ship. He lost count.

One of his own vessels was in trouble. The report came to him from the little speaker at his ear. He looked around in alarm. A glowing object reeled uncertainly over there between two of the aeros of the Zar. The concentration of beams of vibrations was too much for the sturdy craft. It was red hot and its occupants burned alive where they sat. Suddenly it slipped into a spin and went slithering down into the city, leaving a gaping opening where it fell. This sobered him somewhat, but he went into the battle with renewed fury.

How many had they brought down? Fifteen? Sixteen? He tore his purple jacket from his body. The perspiration rolled from his pores. His own ship would be next. But what did it matter? Kill! Kill! He shouted once more into the microphone, then dived into battle. Another and another! In Heaven's name, how many were there? It was maddening. If only he could breathe. His lungs were seared; his eyes smarting from the heat. And then it was over.

Three of the Zar's aeros remained, and these turned tail to run for it. No! They were falling, nose down,

under full power; diving into the city from which they had come. Suicide? Yes. They couldn't face the recriminations that must come to them. And anything was better than facing that burning death from the strange little fighters which had come from out the skies. Dorn was a mass of wreckage.

Karl tore at the fastenings of the ports, searing his fingers on the heated metal. His pilot had collapsed, the little aero heading madly skyward with no guiding hand. Air! They must have air! He loosened the pilot's jacket; slapped frantically at his wrists in the effort to bring him to consciousness. Then he was at the controls of the vessel, tugging on first one, then the other. The aero circled and spun, executing the most dangerous of sideslips and dives. A little voice was speaking to him—the voice of the radio—instructing him. In a daze he followed instructions as best he could. The whirlings of the earth stabilized after a time and he found he was flying the vessel; climbing rapidly.

A sense of power came to him as the little voice of the radio continued to instruct. Here were the controls of

the electronic motor; there the gravity-energy. He was proceeding in the wrong direction. But what did it matter? He learned the meaning of the tiny figures of the altimeter; the difference between the points of the compass. Still he drove on.

“East! Turn East!” begged the little voice from the radio. “You’re heading west. Your speed—a thousand kilometers an hour—it’s too fast. Turn back, Zar Peter!”

He tore the loud speaker of the radio from its fastenings. West! He wanted to go west! On and on he sped, becoming more and more familiar with the workings of the little vessel as he progressed. A cooling breeze whistled from the opened ports, a breeze that smelled of the sea. His heart sang with the wonder of it all. He could fly. And fly he did. Zar Peter? Never! He knew now where he belonged; knew what he wanted. He’d find the coast of North America. Follow it until he located New York. A landing would be easy, for had not the voice instructed him in the use of the gravity-energy? He’d make his way to the lower levels, to the little book

shop of Rudolph Krassin. A suit of gray denim awaited him there and he'd never discard it.

Onward he sped into the night, which was falling fast. He held to his westward course like a veteran of the air lanes. The pilot had ceased to breathe and Karl was sorry. Game little devil, that pilot. Have to shove his body overboard. Too bad.

Rudolph's brother would understand. He'd be watching in the detectoscope. And the others—those who had wished to seat him on a throne—they'd understand, too. They'd have to!

Rudolph would forgive him, he knew. Paul Van Dorn—his own cousin—the secret agents of the Zar would never locate him! Too many friends of Rudolph's were of the red police.

He gave himself over to happy thoughts as the little aero sped on in the darkness. Home! He was going home! Back to the gray denim, where he belonged and where now he would remain content.

#63 The Ape-men Of Xlotli, By David R. Sparks:

A beautiful face in the depths of a geyser—and Kirby plunges into a desperate mid-Earth conflict with the dreadful feathered serpent.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

his hiss filled the night



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Chapter 1

Kirby did not know what mountains they were. He did know that the Mannlicher bullets of eleven bad Mexicans were whining over his head and whizzing past the hoofs of his galloping, stolen horse. The shots were mingled with yelps which pretty well curdled his spine. In the circumstances, the unknown range of snow mountains towering blue and white beyond the

arid, windy plateau, offering he could not tell what dangers, seemed a paradise. Looking at them, Kirby laughed harshly to himself.

A beautiful face in the depths of a geyser—and Kirby plunges into a desperate mid-Earth conflict with the dreadful Feathered Serpent.

As he dug the heels of his aviator's boots into the stallion's flanks, the animal galloped even faster than before, and Kirby took hope. Then more bullets and more yelps made him think that his advantage might prove only temporary. Nevertheless, he laughed again, and as he became accustomed to the feel of a stallion under him, he even essayed a few pistol shots back at the pack of frantic, swarthy devils he had fooled.

Three hours ago he had been eating a peaceful breakfast with his friend and commandant, Colonel Miguel de Castanar, in the sunlit patio of the commandant's hacienda. Castanar, chief of the air patrol for the district, had waxed enthusiastic over the suppression of last spring's revolutionists and the

cowed state of up-country bandits. Captain Freddie Kirby, American instructor of flying to Mexican pilots in the making, had agreed with him and asked for one of the Wasps and three days' leave with which to go visiting in Laredo. The simple matter of a broken fuel line, a forced landing two hundred kilometres from nowhere, and the unlucky proximity of the not-so-cowed horsemen, were the things which had changed the day from what it had been to what it was.

The one piece of good fortune which had befallen him since the bandits had surrounded the wrecked Wasp, looted it, and taken its lone pilot prisoner, was the break he was getting now. During the squadron's first halt to feed, he had knocked down his guards and made a bolt for the grazing stallion. So far, the attempt was proving worth while.

On and on the stallion lunged toward the white mountains. Kirby's eyes became red rimmed now from fatigue and the glare of the sun and the dust of the pitilessly bare plateau. A negligible scalp wound under his mop of straw-colored hair, slight as it was, did not add to his comfort. But still he would not give

up, for the horse, as if it sensed what its rider needed most, was making directly for a narrow ravine which debouched on the plateau from the nearest mountain flank.

It was the promise of cover afforded by the jagged rocks and jungle growth of that ravine which kept hope alive in Kirby's throbbing brain.

The stallion was blown and staggering. Foam from the heavily bitten mouth flashed back in great yellow flakes against Kirby's dust-caked aviator's tunic. But just the same, the five mile gallop had carried both horse and rider beyond range of any but the most expert rifle shot. And Kirby knew that if his own splendid mount was almost ready to crash, the horses of his pursuers must be in worse shape still. So for the third time since the fight had begun, he laughed. This time there was no harshness, but only relief, in the sound which came from his dry lips.

Ten minutes later, he flung himself out of his saddle. Like the caress of a vast, soothing hand, the shadowed coolness of the ravine lay upon him. As his

feet struck ground, they splashed in the water overflowing from a spring at the base of an immense rock. At once Kirby dropped the reins on the stallion's neck, giving him his freedom, and as the horse lowered his head to drink, Kirby stooped also.

There was cover everywhere. Kirby's first move after pulling both himself and the horse away from the spring, was to glance up the long, deeply shaded canyon which he had entered—a gash hacked into the breast of the steep mountain as by a titanic ax. Then, reassured as to the possibilities for a defensive retreat, he glanced back toward the dazzling, bare plateau.

It was what he saw taking place amongst the sombreroed bandits out there which made the grin of satisfaction fade from his broad mouth. His last glance backward, before bolting into the canyon mouth, had showed him a ragged squadron of men left far behind, yet galloping after him still. But now—

Presently a puzzled frown made wrinkles in Freddie Kirby's wide sunburned forehead. He relaxed his grip

upon the heavy Luger, which, in his big hands, looked like a cap pistol, and rubbed his eyes.

But he was not mistaken. The horsemen had halted! Out there on the glaring, alkali-arid plateau, they were standing as still as so many statues. Looking toward the canyon mouth which had swallowed their quarry, they certainly were, but they were halted as completely as men struck dead.

“Huh,” Kirby grunted, and scratched behind his ear.

The next second he swung around to look at his horse, uncertain what he was going to do next, but aware of the fact that right now, with a lot of unknown country between himself and Castanar’s sunlit patio, the stallion was going to be a friend in need.

As he turned, however, prepared to take up the loose reins, something else happened. The stallion let out a neigh as shrill as a trumpet blast. As Kirby jumped, grabbed for the bridle, his fingers found empty air. Like a crazy animal the stallion leaped past him,

barely missing him. Out toward the plain the horse jumped, out and away from the shaded canyon mouth, out toward the spot where other horses waited. And despite the animal's blown condition, the speed he put into his retreat left Kirby dazed.

After a helpless, profanity-filled second, Kirby scratched behind his ear again. As certain as the fact that almost his sole hope of getting back to civilization depended upon the stallion, was the fact that the brute did not intend to stop running until he dropped.

"Now what in the hell ever got into his crazy head?" Kirby muttered grimly.

Then he turned around to glance up the shadow-filled slash of a canyon, and sniffed.

"Huh!"

Faintly in the air had risen an odor the like of which he had never encountered in his life. A combination, it was, of the unforgettable stench which hangs over a

battlefield when the dead are long unburied, and of a fragrance more rare, more heady, more poignantly sweet than any essence ever concocted by Parisian perfumer.

With the drifting scent came a sound. Faint, carrying from a distance, the rumble which Kirby heard was almost certainly that of a geyser.

There was no telling what had brought the troop of horsemen to a halt, but after a time Kirby knew that the cause of his horse's sudden departure must have been a whiff of the strange perfume.

For a long time he stood still, watching the crazy stallion dwindle in size, watching the line of unexpectedly timid bandits. Then, when it became apparent that the horsemen were going to stay put either until he came out, or showed that he never was coming out, he shrugged, and swung on his heel so that he faced up the canyon.

The odor was dying away now, and the geyser rumble was gone. In Kirby's heart came a mingled feeling of

tense uneasiness and fascinated curiosity.

Momentarily he was almost glad that his horse *had* bolted, and that his pursuers *were* blocking any lane of retreat except that offered by the canyon. If things had been different, the queer behavior of the Mexicans, the unaccountable actions of his horse and the equally strange growth of his own uneasiness might have made him uncertain whether he would go up the canyon or not. Now it was the only thing to do, and Kirby was glad because, fear or no fear, he wanted to go on.

“I wonder,” he said out loud as he started, “just what the denizens of First Street in Kansas would say to a layout like this!”

Chapter 2

At the end of an hour he was still wondering.

At midday the canyon was chill and dank, lit only by a half light which at times dwindled to a deep dusk as the rock walls beetled together hundreds of feet above his head. Always when he stumbled through one of the darkest passages, he heard and half saw immense gray bats flapping above him. In the half-lit reaches, he hardly took a step without seeing great rats with gray coats, yellow teeth, and evil pink eyes. But rats and bats combined were not as bad as the snakes. They were almost white, and nowhere had he seen rattlers of such size. If his caution relaxed for a second, they struck at him with fangs as long and sharp as needles.

The tortured, twisted cedars, the paloverdi, occatilla, cholla, opunti, through which he edged his laborious way, all offered an almost animate, armed hostility.

Altogether this journey was the least sweet he had taken anywhere. Yet he went on.

Why had eleven Mexican bandits refused to advance even to within decent rifle range of the canyon's mouth? What was there about the putrid yet gorgeous perfume that had made the stallion go off his nut, so to speak?

After a time, Kirby veered away from a fourteen-foot rattler which flashed in a loathsome coil on his left hand. Hungry, weakened by all he had been through since breakfast time, he plodded doggedly on.

But a moment later he stumbled past a twisted cedar, and then stopped, forgetting even the snakes.

At his feet lay the bleached skeleton of a man.

Beside the right hand, in a position which indicated that only the final relaxation of death had loosened his grip upon a precious object, lay a cylinder, carefully carved, of rich, yellow gold.

Of the science of anthropology Kirby knew enough to make him sure that the dolicocephalic skull and characteristically shaped pelvic and thigh bones of

the skeleton had belonged to a white man.

As for the cylinder—But he was not so sure what that was.

Regardless of the dry swish of a rattler's body on the rocks behind him, he lifted the object from the spot in which it had lain for no man knew how long. Of much the size and shape of an old-time cylindrical wax phonograph record, the softly gleaming thing weighed, he judged, almost two pounds.

Two pounds of soft, virgin gold of a quality as fine as any he had seen amongst all the treasures brought out of Mexico, Yucatan, and Peru combined!

But the gold was not the only thing. If Kirby was human enough to think in terms of treasure, he was also enough of an amateur anthropologist to hold his breath over the carvings on the yellow surface.

First he recognized the ancient symbols of Sun and Moon. And then a representation, semi-realistic, semi-conventionalized, of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered

Serpent, known in all the annals of primitive Mexican religions.

Good enough.

But the mere symbols by no means told the whole story of the cylinder. The workmanship was archaic, older than any Aztec art Kirby knew, older than Toltec, older far, he ventured to guess, than even earliest archaic Mayan carvings.

God, what a find!

For a moment it seemed almost impossible that he, Freddie Kirby, native of Kansas, unromantic aviator, should have been the one to discover this relic of an unknown, lost race. Yet the cylinder of gold was there, in his hand.

After a long minute Kirby looked around him, then listened.

From up the canyon came the provocative rumble of the geyser. It was closer now, and Kirby, glancing at

his watch which had been spared to him in the Wasp's crash, noted that just forty-four minutes had passed since the last eruption. There was nothing to be done about the bleached skeleton. So, tucking the precious cylinder into his tunic, Kirby headed on up the gash of a canyon.

Far away indeed seemed the neat, maple-shaded asphalt street, the rows of parked cars and farm wagons, the telephone office and drug store and bank, of the Kansas town where he had grown up.

Time passed until again he heard the geyser, and again was dizzied by the perfume. As the fragrance—close and powerful now—died away, he flailed with one arm at a two-foot bat which flapped close to his head.

And then he trudged his dogged way around a deeply shadowed bend, and found the chasm not only almost wholly dark, but narrower than it had been at any previous point.

“Holy mackerel,” Kirby groaned. “Phew! If this keeps

up, I—”

He stopped. His jaw dropped.

“Oh, hell!”

The beetling walls narrowed in until the gash was scarcely fifteen feet wide. Further progress was barred by a smooth wall which rose sheer in front of him.

Kirby did not know how many seconds passed before he made out through the gloom that the wall was man-made and carved with the same symbols of Sun, Moon, and Feathered Serpent, which ornamented the cylinder of gold. But when he did realize at last, the shout with which he expressed his feeling was anything but a groan.

It simply meant that the skeleton which once had been a man, had almost surely found the golden cylinder beyond the wall and not in the canyon. And if the dead man had passed that smooth, carved barrier, another man could do it!

Kirby jumped forward, began to search in the darkness for some hidden entrance.

Minute after minute passed. He gave another cry. He saw a long, upright crack in the stone surface, and a quick push of his hands made the stones in front of him give almost an inch.

All at once his shoulder was planted, and behind that square shoulder was straining all the muscle of his two hundred pound body. The result was all that he desired. When he ceased pushing, a slab of rock gaped wide before him, giving entrance to a pitch dark tunnel.

For a moment he held the portal back, then, releasing his pressure, he stepped into the dark passage. By the time a ponderous grating of rocks assured him that the door had swung shut of its own weight, he had produced matches and struck a light.

The puny flame showed him a curving passage hewn smoothly through the heart of bedrock. Before the flare died he walked twenty feet, and as another

match burned to his fingers, he found the right hand curve of the passage giving way to a left hand twist. After that he dared use no more of his precious matches. But just when the darkness was beginning to wear badly on his nerves, he uttered a low cry.

As he increased his rapid walk to a run, the faint light he had suddenly seen ahead of him grew until it became a circular flare of daylight which marked the tunnel's end.

Out of the passage Kirby strode with shoulders square and head up, his cool, level, practical blue eyes wide with wonder. Out of the tunnel he strode into the valley of the perfumed geyser.

“God above!”

The words were vibrant with hoarse reverence. He saw the sunlight of a cliff-surrounded diminutive Garden of Eden. He saw a vale of flowering grass, of palms and live oaks, saw patches of lilies so huge as to transcend belief, and dizzying clumps of tree cactus almost as tall as the palms themselves.

What was more, he saw in the center of this upland, cliff-guarded valley, a gaping black orifice which every faculty of judgment told him was the mouth of the geyser of perfume. And beside it, outstretched on a smooth sheet of rock which glistened as though coated with a layer of clear, sparkling glass, he saw—

Kirby blinked his eyes rapidly, hardly believing what he saw.

On the glistening rock lay the perfectly preserved figure of a Spanish Conquistadore in full armor. Morion and breast-plate were in place, and glistened as though they had been burnished this morning. And the Spaniard's dark, handsome, bearded face! Kirby saw instantly that no decay had touched it, that even the hairs of the beard were perfect. The whole armor-clad corpse gleamed softly with a covering of the same glassy substance which covered the rock.

Kirby glanced at his watch, saw that twelve minutes must elapse before the geyser spouted again. Then his eyes narrowed. He remained standing where he was, hard by the mouth of the tunnel, knowing that a

wise man would conduct cautiously his exploration of this valley of wonders.

Arsenic! Silicon!

The two words stood out sharply in his thought. In Africa existed plenty of springs whose waters contained enough arsenic to bring death to those who drank. Might not the Spaniard's presence here be explained, then, by assuming that the geyser water was charged with a strong arsenic content, and, in addition, with some sort of silicon solution which, left to dry in the air, hardened to glass?

Lord, what a discovery to take back with him to Kansas! Almost it made the discovery of the golden cylinder pale by comparison. Why, the commercial uses to which this silicon water might be put were almost without limit, and the owner of the concession might confidently expect to make millions!

It was while Kirby stood there, breathless and jubilant, waiting for the geyser to spout, that he began to feel that *he was being watched*.

Suddenly, with a start, he shot a sweeping glance over the whole grove. But that did no good. He saw nothing save sunlight and waving green leaves.

Eleven days were to pass before he discovered all that was to be involved in that sensation of being gazed at by unseen eyes.

Chapter 3

At the beginning of the eleventh morning in the valley, Kirby had again posted himself close to the mouth of the black tunnel, and again felt that hidden eyes were observing him.

But this morning differed from the first morning, because now, for the first time, he was ready to do something about the watcher or watchers.

Exploration of the whole valley had not helped.

Therefore, there lay at his feet a considerable coil of rope, the manufacture of which from plaited strands of the tough grass in his Eden had taken him whole days. With what patience he could find, he was waiting for the gigantic spout of milky-colored, perfumed water which would mean that the geyser had gone off and would erupt no more for exactly forty-four minutes.

Eleven days in the valley!

While he waited, Kirby considered them. Who had made the beautiful footprints beside him, when he

had slept at last after his arrival here? Why had so many of the queer, fuzzy topped shrubs with immense yam-shaped roots, which grew here been taken away during that first sleep, and during all his other periods of sleep? Who had taken them? Early in his stay, he had learned that the tuberlike roots were good to eat and would sustain life, and he supposed that the unseen people of the valley took them for food. But who were these people of the valley?

Who had laid beside him during his first sleep the immense lily with perfume like that which came with the milky geyser spray—that spray of death and delight mingled? Why had someone scratched a line in the earth from him directly to the distant orifice of the geyser? Was this, as he believed, a signal to come not only to the edge of the orifice, *but to lower himself down into its depths?* And if the line were intended as a signal, did the persons who came to the valley while he slept, always eluding him, wish him well or mean to do him harm?

Last question of all: had the beautiful girl's face he believed he had seen just once, been real or an

hallucination? It had been while he was kneeling at the very edge of the geyser cone, staring down its many colored throat, that the vision had appeared. Misty white amidst the green gloom, the face had been turned up to him, smiling, its lips forming a kiss, and its great eyes beckoning. Had the face been real or a dream?

Eleven days in the valley! Now, with his braided rope ready at last, he was going to do something which might help to answer his questions.

Kirby reached out and began to run his grass rope, yard by yard, through his hands, searching carefully for any flaw. A canyon wren made the air sweet above him, while the morning sun began to wink and blink against the shadows which still lay against the face of the guardian cliffs. Kirby glanced at his watch and got up.

Crossing beyond the mouth of the geyser, he grinned good morning at his friend the Conquistadore, and marched on into the shade of the live oak which grew nearest the geyser. Here he made one end of his rope

fast to the gnarled trunk, inspected his pistol, patted his tunic to make sure that the cylinder of gold was safe, then stood by to await the geyser.

With the passing of three minutes there came from the still empty orifice a sonorous rumbling. Kirby grinned.

From deep in the earth issued a sound of fizzing and bubbling, and then, to the accompaniment of subterranean thunder, burst loose the milky, upward column which had never ceased to awe the man who watched so eagerly this morning. As the titanic jet leaped skyward now, the slanting rays of the sun caught it, and turned the water, fanning out, into a fire opal, into a sheet of living color.

Kirby, hard headed to the last, drew from the supply in one pocket of his tunic, a strip of one of the tuberlike roots, and munched it.

The thunder ceased. The waters receded.

After that Kirby hesitated not a second. Promptly he

moved forward, flung his coil of line down into the geyser tunnel, and swung on to the line. By the time he had swallowed the last bite of his breakfast, the world he knew had been left behind, and he was climbing down to a new.

It became at once apparent that the gorgeously colored, glassy-smooth throat glowed with tints which were unfamiliar to him. He could perceive these new shades of color, yet had no name for them.

As he stopped after fifty feet to breathe, the color phenomenon made him wonder if the tuber roots he had been eating had affected his vision; then decided they had not. In addition to food value, the roots had some power to stimulate courage and a slight mental exhilaration. But the drug had proved non-habit forming, and Kirby knew that his powers of perception were not now, and never had been, affected.

He swung down further.

Just a moment after he began that progress was when

things began to happen to him. First he heard what seemed to be the low titter of a human voice laughing sweetly. Next came a far off, unutterably lovely strumming of music. And then he realized that, at a depth of about a hundred feet, he was hanging level with a hole which marked the mouth of another tunnel.

This new tunnel sloped down into the earth on his right hand. The floor and walls were glassy smooth, and the angle of descent was steep, but by no means as steep as the drop of the vertical geyser shaft in which he now hung.

Laughter, music, the new tunnel suddenly aroused an excitement which made him quiver.

“When I saw *her*,” he gasped, “she was standing here, in the mouth of this tunnel, looking up at me!”

Violently, Freddie Kirby forgot the maple-shaded street of his Kansas town, forgot everything but desire to reach the mouth of the new tunnel, where the girl of the exquisite face and beckoning lips had

stood. Tightening his grip on the rope, he began to swing himself back and forth like a pendulum.

It seemed probable that when the geyser water shot up past the horizontal tunnel, its force was so great that no water at all entered. He redoubled his efforts to widen his swing.

Then his feet scraped on the floor, and in a second he had alighted there. He still hung stoutly to his line, however, for the tunnel sloped down sharply enough, and was slippery enough, to prohibit the maintenance of footing unaided.

The music which issued from the depths of that stunningly mysterious passage swelled to a crescendo—and stopped. Kirby clung there to his precarious perch, his feet slipping on the glass under them with every move he made, and feelings stirred in his heart which had never been there before.

Then, as silence reigned where the music had been, something prompted him to look up. The next instant he stifled a cry.

With widening eyes he saw the flash of a white arm and the gleam of a knife hovering over the spot where his taut rope passed out of the geyser opening into the sunshine of the outer world. Again he stifled a cry. For crying out would do no good. While the suppressed sound was still on his lips, the knife flickered.

Then Kirby was shooting downward, the severed line whipping out after him. The first plunge flung him off his feet. A long swoop which he took on his back dizzied him. But as the fall continued, he was able to slow it a little by bracing arms and legs against the tunnel walls.

“Holy Jeehosophat!” he gurgled.

But there seemed to be no particular danger. The slide was as smooth as most of the chutes he had ever encountered at summer swimming pools. If ever the confounded spiral passage came to an end, he might find that he was still all right. As seconds passed and he fell and fell, it seemed that he was bound for the center of the earth. It seemed that—

He swished around a multiple bend, and eyes which had been accustomed to darkness were blinded by light.

It was light which radiated in all colors—blue, yellow, browns, purples, reds, pinks, and then all the new colors for which he had no name. Somehow Kirby knew that he had shot out of the tunnel, which emerged high up in the face of a cliff, and that he was dropping through perfumed, brilliant air resonant with the sound of birds and insects and human cries. The funny thing was that the pull of gravity was not right, somehow, and he was dropping fairly slowly. From far below, a body of what looked like water was sweeping up to meet him. Kirby closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, his whole body was stinging with the slap of his impact, and he found that it was water which he had struck. The proof of it lay in the fact that he was swimming, and was approaching a shore.

But such water! It was milky white and perfumed as the geyser flow had been, and it seemed luminous as

with a radium fire. Had he not realized presently that the fluid probably contained enough arsenic to finish a thousand like him, he would have thought of himself as bathing in the waters of Paradise.

But then he began to forget about the poison which might already be at work upon him.

Ahead of him, stretched out in the gorgeous, colored light, ran a beach which was backed by heavy jungle. And on the beach stood the lovely creatures, all clad in shimmering, glistening garments, whose flutelike cries had come to him as he fell.

Kirby looked, and became almost powerless to continue his swim. The beauty of those frail women was like the reputed beauty of bright angels. That paralyzing effect of wonder, however, did not last long.

The girls moved forward to the water's edge, and, laughing amongst themselves, beckoned to him with lovely slender hands whose every motion was a caress.

“Be not afraid,” called one in a curious patois dialect, about five-sixths of which seemed made up of Spanish words, distorted but recognizable.

“The water would kill you,” called another, “as it killed the Spaniard in armor. But we are here to save you. I will give you a draught to drink which will defeat the poison. Come on to us!”

Kirby’s heart was almost literally in his mouth now, because the girl who promised him salvation was she whose lips had formed a kiss at him from the green-gloomy throat of the geyser.

His feet struck a shale bottom. Panting, he stood up and was conscious of the fact that despite his forlornly dripping and dishevelled condition, he was tall and straight and big, and that for some reason all of the girls on the gleaming sand, and one girl in particular, were anxious to receive him here.

The one girl had drawn a small, gleaming flask of gold from the misty bodice of her gown, and was holding it out while she laughed with red lips and great,

dazzling dark eyes.

“Pronto!” she called in pure Spanish, and other girls echoed the word. “Oh,” went on the bright owner of the flask, “we thought you would *never* have done with your work on the rope. It took you so long!”

Kirby left the smooth lake behind him and stood dripping on the sand. The moment the air touched his clothes, he felt that they were stiffening slightly. Yet the sensation brought no terror. He could not feel terror as he faced the girls.

“Give him the flask, Naida!” someone exclaimed.

“Ah, but the Gods *have* been kind to us!” echoed another.

The girl with the flask made a gesture for silence.

“Is it Naida you are called?” Kirby put in quickly, and as he spoke the Spanish words, the roll of them on his

tongue did much to make him know that he was sane and awake, and not dreaming, that this was still the Twentieth Century, and that he was Freddie Kirby.

Answering his question, Naida nodded, and gave him the flask.

“A single draught will act as antidote to the poison,” she said.

“I drink,” said Kirby as he raised the flask, “to the many of you who have been so gracious as to save me!”

A flashing smile, a blush was his answer. And then he had wetted his lips with, and was swallowing, a limpid liquid which tasted of some drug.

“Enough!” Naida ordered in a second.

As she reached for the flask, her companions closed in as though a ceremony of some sort had been completed.

“Is it time to tell him yet, Naida?” piped one of the girls, younger than the rest, whom someone had called Elana.

“Oh, *do* begin, Naida,” chorused two more. “We can’t wait *much* longer to find out if he is going to help us!”

Kirby turned to Naida, while a soothing sensation crept through him from the draught he had taken.

“Pray tell me what it is that I am to be permitted to do for you. I can promise you that the whole of my life and strength, and such intelligence as I possess, is yours to command.”

Excited small cries and a clapping of hands answered him. As for Naida, her face lighted with glowing joy.

“Oh, one who could say that, *must* be the friend and protector of whom we have stood in such bitter need!”

“What,” asked Kirby, “is this need which made one of you cut my rope, so that I should come here?”

A momentary silence was broken only by the hum of insects in the perfumed air, and by the golden thrilling of a bird back in the jungle. Then Kirby beheld Naida bowing to him.

“So be it,” she said in a voice low and flutelike. “I will speak now since you request it. Already you have seen that you are here in our world because we conspired amongst ourselves to bring you here. Our reason—”

She paused, looked deep into his eyes.

“Amigo,” she continued slowly, “we whom you see here are the People of the Temple. For more centuries than even our sages can tell, our progenitors have dwelt here, where you find us, knowing always of your outer world, but remaining always unknown by it. But now the time has come when those of us who are left amongst our race need the help of one from the outer races we have shunned. Dangers of various

orders confront us who have waited here for your coming. When we first discovered you in the Valley of the Geyser, the idea came to me that we must make you understand our troubles, and ask of you—”

But then she stopped.

As Kirby stared at her, the gentleness of her expression was replaced by a swift strength which made her majestic.

The next moment bedlam reigned upon the beach.

“They are after us!” gasped one of the girls in terror.
“Quick, Naida! Quick! Quick!”

Whatever it was that threatened, Naida did not need to be told that the need for action was pressing. She shouted at her companions some order which Kirby did not understand. From a pouch at her side, she snatched out a greyish, spherical vegetable substance which looked almost like a tennis ball. Then she braced herself as if to withstand an assault.

“Stand back!” she cried to Kirby.

He had long ago ceased to wonder at anything that might happen here. Disappointed that Naida’s story had been interrupted, wondering what was wrong, he obeyed Naida’s order to keep clear.

As he fell back and stood motionless, there came from behind a dense screen of shrubs which would have resembled aloe and prickly pear bushes, save that they were as big as oak trees, a ghastly howling. The next second, hopped and hurtled across the beach toward the girls, a group of hair-covered, shaggy creatures which were neither apes nor men. The faces, contorted with lust, were hideously leathery and brown, the foreheads small and beetling, and the mouths enormous, with immense yellow teeth.

Helpless, Kirby realized that Naida and all the others had clapped over their faces curious masks which seemed to be made of some crystalline substance, and that now others had armed themselves with the tennis balls. And that was the last observation he made before the battle opened furiously.

With a cry muffled behind her mask, Naida leaped out in front of her squadron and cut loose her queer vegetable ball with whizzing aim and force.

Full into the snarling face of one of the ape-men the thing smashed, filling the air all about the creature with a yellow, mistlike powder. Kirby was half deafened by the yells of rage and terror which went up from the entire attacking band. The creature who had been hit fell to his knees the while he made agonized tearing movements at his face and uttered shrill, jabbering yelps.

Other balls flashed instantly from Naida's ranks, and each brought about the same ghastly result as the first. But then Kirby saw that the whole jungle seethed with the hairy, awful men.

"Keep back!" Naida shrieked at him through her mask. "We have no mask for you. If the powder from our fungi touches you, it will be the end!"

With gaps in the advancing line filled as soon as each screeching ape went down, the attackers leaped on

until Kirby knew they would be upon the girls in a matter of seconds. A sweat broke out on his neck.

But then an idea gripped him, and suddenly, without even a last glance at Naida, he leaped away even as she had commanded.

A great boulder lay on the shore fifty yards away. Toward it Kirby streaked as though he had become coward. But he had not turned coward.

By the time he reached the shelter which would protect him from the fungus mist, a turning point had come in the battle. The ape-men had closed in on the girls, were swarming about them, and the mist balls had almost ceased to fly. But the thing which gave Kirby hope was that the apes were not attempting to harm the girls. They seemed victors, but they were not committing atrocities.

It was the sharp intuition that something like this might happen which had sent Kirby fleeing from the fight. He believed he might yet prove useful.

The thickest group of attackers were jostling about Naida. As the screams and sobs of the girls quivered out, mingled with the guttural roaring of the men, Naida was shut off by a solid wall of aggressors.

Then Kirby saw her again. But now two of the most powerful of the ape-men had caught her up and was carrying her. Her kicking and writhing and biting accomplished nothing. The apes were headed directly back to the jungle.

Now, however, most of the yellow mist had disappeared, and that was all Kirby had been waiting for. With a growling shout, he tore out from behind his boulder, his Luger ready. Naida's captors were in full retreat, and other pairs of men were snatching up other girls and hopping after them. Toward Naida Kirby ran madly but not blindly.

"Naida! Naida!" he bellowed.

He got in two strides for every one the apes made.

"Naida!" he shouted, and at last saw her look at him.

Her face was pallid with loathing and terror. As her glimmering dark eyes met his, they flashed a plea which made his heart thrash against his lungs.

With a final roar of encouragement Kirby closed in on the hair-covered men, and fired instantly a shot which caught one full in the heart. The creature wavered on its legs, looked at the unexpected enemy with dismayed, swinish little red eyes, and relaxing his hold upon Naida, dropped without making a sound.

After that—

But suddenly Kirby found himself unable to comprehend fully the other terrific results of his intervention. Before the echoes of his shot died, there came to him the rumble of what seemed to be tons of falling rock. In the bright air a slight mist was precipitated. To all of which was added the effect upon the ape-men of fear of a weapon and a type of fighter utterly new to them.

Kirby had fired believing that he would have to fight other ape-men when the first fell. But not so. Instead

of that—

He blinked rapidly as he took in the scene.

Naida had been released. Lying on the sand beside the dead ape-man, she was looking up at him in stupefied wonder. And her other captor, instead of remaining to fight, had clapped shaggy hands over his ears, and was leaping headlong for the protection of the jungle!

Moreover, the soprano cries of the girls and the deep howls of the men were rising everywhere, and everywhere the ape-men were dropping their captives and plunging away after their leader.

“Huh,” Kirby muttered aloud, and wondered what the citizens of Kansas would have to say about *this*.

Naida looked at the dead and bleeding ape-man and shuddered, and then at the score or so of others brought down by the puff balls. Then she looked up at Kirby, raised her arms for his support, and smiled up into his brown face.

Kirby forgot Kansas, lifted her, warm and alive, radiantly beautiful, in his arms.

“Our friends the enemies,” she whispered as she remained for a second in his embrace and then drew away, “will attack no more this day—thanks to you.”

There was no possible need for another shot, Kirby saw. In terrified silence, the first of the apes had already floundered behind the prickly pear and aloe bushes, and the last stragglers were using all the power in their legs to catch up. On the beach, Naida’s followers were picking themselves up, and already a few of them had burst into ringing laughter.

“Come on, all of you,” Naida said to them, and, including Kirby in her glance, added, “We may as well go to the caciques now, and have it over with.”

Chapter 4

It was with Naida at his side and the other girls grouped about them, that they started their journey to the “caciques,” whoever they might be, “to have it over with,” whatever that might mean. As they strode along in silence, Kirby did what he could to straighten out in his mind the many curious things which had happened since he sat testing his rope in the upper world this morning.

In final analysis, it seemed to him that, extraordinary as his experience had been, there was nothing so much out of the way about it, after all. The only unusual thing was the existence of this inhabited pocket in the earth. For the rest, the strange colors to which he could not put a name, were simply some manifestation of infra-reds and ultra-violets. And then the startling effect of his single shot at the ape-men—that was simply the old story of savage creatures running from a new weapon and a new enemy; naturally the shot had sounded loud in this enclosed cavern. Lastly, the pull of gravity down here seemed upset somehow. But why should it not seem so, at this

distance within the earth? The American was no scientist; the conclusions he reached seemed very reasonable to him.

All told, the last thing Kirby found he needed to do was pinch himself to see if he was awake.

A place of indefinite extent, the cavern seemed to be exactly what he had already judged it—a giant pocket within the earth. The ceiling, or the sky, was of some kind of natural glass—no doubt the same kind which was crackling on his clothes now—and from it emanated the brilliant, many colored glow which lighted the cavern. Radium? Perhaps it was that. Perhaps the rays were cast off from some other element even less understood than mysterious radium. As for the plant and animal life with which the cavern teemed, it was amazing.

But Kirby did not give himself up to silent observation any longer.

“Will you finish telling me,” he asked of Naida, “about the task I am to perform for you here?”

Naida, walking with lithe strides along a path jungle-hemmed on both sides, smiled at him.

“You are to be our leader.”

“Yes?”

Now both Naida and the other girls became sober.

“You will lead us in a revolt.”

“Ah!” Kirby whistled softly.

“In a revolt against the caciques—the wise men—whose kind have governed the People of the Temple since the beginning.”

Her statement was received with acclaim by the whole troop, who crowded close around, the while they smiled at Kirby.

“You mean I am to lead a revolt,” he asked, “against these same caciques whom we are going now to face?”

Naida nodded emphatically.

“Yes, if revolt proves necessary. And it probably will.”

“Hum.” Kirby scratched behind his ear. “You’d better tell me what you can about it.”

Then, as they hurried on, Naida spoke rapidly.

The situation before the People of the Temple was that for a long time now, the only children to be born had been girls. Worse still, not even a girl had been born during a period equal to sixteen upper-world years. The only remaining members of a race which had flourished in this underground land for countless thousands of years, consisted of the caciques, a handful of aged people, and the thirty-four girls, including Naida, who accompanied Kirby now.

On one hand was promised extinction through lack of reproduction. On the other, even swifter and more terrible extinction at the hands of the ape-men, whom Naida called the Worshippers of Xlotli, the Rabbit God, the God of all bestiality and drunkenness.

It was the menace of the ape-men, rather than the less appalling one of lack of reproduction, which was making the most trouble now. Ages ago, when the People of the Temple had flourished as a race, they had been untroubled by the Worshipers of Xlotli. But now the ape-men were by far the stronger; and they desired the girls who had been born as the last generation of an ancient race. The battle of this morning had been only one of many.

Dissension between the caciques, who ruled the People of the Temple, and their girl subjects, had arisen on the subject of the best way of dealing with the ape-man menace.

Some time ago, Naida, heading a council of all the girls, had proposed to the caciques that support be sought amongst the people of the upper world. This would be done judiciously, by bringing to the lower realm a few men who were wise and strong, men who would make good husbands, and who could fight the ape-men.

This proposal the priests had promptly quashed. They

would never receive, they said, any members of the teeming outer races from whom the People of the Temple had so long been hidden. Those few who had blundered into the Valley of the Geyser during the centuries, and who had never escaped, were enough. Better, said the caciques, that a compromise be arranged with the subjects of the Rabbit God.

Flatly then, the priests had proposed that some of the girls, the number to be specified later, should be given to the ape-men, and peace won. During the time of reprieve which would thus be afforded, prayers and sacrifices could be offered the Lords of the Sun and Moon, and to Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent. In answer to these prayers, the Gods would surely send the aged people who alone were left as prospective parents, a generation of sons.

Once the priests' program of giving up some of the girls to the ape-men had been made definite, it had not taken Naida and the others long to decide that they would never submit. And then, while matters were at an acute stage, a tall, blond white man had come to the Valley of the Geyser—Kirby.

As Naida had finished her story, Kirby mustered a smile despite the soberness which had come upon him.

“So the white man came,” he repeated after her, “and all of you decided forthwith to stage your revolt.”

“Why not?” Naida answered. “We observed you until we were sure you possessed the qualities of leadership we wanted. After that, we did what we could to coax you to come here.”

Kirby grinned at that.

“Now,” Naida ended simply, “we will go to the caciques. If they accept you, and grant our requests to them, there will be peace. If they rage, it will be war.”

Suddenly she drew closer to Kirby as they swung along, and slipped her hand into his, looking up at him in silent entreaty.

“How much farther,” he asked in a voice which

became sharp, “until we reach the headquarters of these caciques?”

“They live in a castle which our ancestors built ages ago on a protected plateau,” Naida answered tensely. “It is a good distance still, but we will cover it soon enough.”

They crossed now one edge of a shadow-filled forest composed principally of immense, pallid palmlike trees. Farther on, the path wound through a belt of swampy land covered by gigantic reeds which rustled above their heads with a glassy sound, and by things which looked like the cat-tails of the upper world, but were a hundred times larger. Everywhere hovered odd little creatures like birds, but with teeth in their long snouts and small frondlike growths on each side of their tails. About some swamp plants with very large blooms resembling passion flowers, flitted dragon flies of jeweled hues and enormous size, and under the flowers hopped strange toadlike creatures equipped with two pair of gauzy wings.

Finally, through a tunnel composed of ferns a hundred

feet high, they emerged to a still densely overgrown but higher country which Naida said was a part of the Rorroh forest.

In the forest, Kirby gained a hazy impression of bronzy, immense cycads and what appeared to be tree chrysophilums with gorgeous blossoms. Then he received a much clearer impression of other trees with blossoms of bright orange yellow and very thick petals, each tipped with a glassy sharp point. The disconcerting thing about the tree was that, as they approached, the scaly limbs began to tremble and wave, and suddenly lashed out as though making a human effort to snatch at the bright travelers.

Naida and all the others hurried along without offering comment, and Kirby asked no questions.

Once he thought he saw a group of gorilla creatures paralleling their course back amongst the forest growth, but if Naida observed the animals, she paid no attention. The one thing which had any effect upon the company was the appearance, presently, of two vast, birdlike creatures. As these things approached,

Naida signaled to all to crouch beneath the shelter of a tall rock beside the path.

Enormous, the birds had bat wings, and carried with them, as they approached, the stink of putrid flesh. The long beaks were overfull of sharp teeth. The heads, set upon bodies of glistening white-grey, were black. Reddish grey eyes searched the jungle as the creatures flapped along. But, the Pterodactyls—if they were that—passed above Naida's band without offering attack, and presently Naida gave the command to advance again.

In time, they came to a chasmlike gorge across which was suspended a slender long thread of a bridge. Not far above the bridge, a considerable river emptied itself into the gorge in a mirrorlike ribbon. Kirby could not hear the torrent fall—or rather could not hear it strike any solid bottom. But from somewhere in the unlighted, unfathomed depths of the abyss rose strange bubbling and whistling sounds.

At the bridge, Naida paused and pointed to the land across the river. And as Kirby looked in the direction

indicated, he beheld a rocky eminence rising for several hundred feet straight up from the expanse of a level, tree and grass covered plain. Atop of the plateau, glimmered the complex towers and turrets, the crenellated walls of a castle which, in its grey antiquity, seemed as old as the race of men.

“It is behind those walls that the caciques dwell,” Naida said quickly. “It is behind the castle, in a series of separate houses, that the older members of the race dwell. We shall go and look upon them presently. But first we will force an interview with the caciques.”

In silence Kirby took her hand, and, with the others following, they moved out upon the swaying, perilous causeway which hung above the chasm. After that, the trip across the plain to the foot of the plateau cliffs was quickly accomplished.

Here, however, Kirby thought they must face trouble, for he found that the great walls, of a sparkling, almost glassy smoothness, shot up to a height of at least three hundred feet, and that no path of any sort was visible.

“We’re here,” he said, “but how can we get up?”

But understanding began to dawn as Naida laughed, and produced from the pouch at the side of her gauzy dress four pliable discs of a substance which resembled rubber.

“You are very strong, are you not?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you will have no trouble in following us up the cliff. Our Serpent God, Quetzalcoatl, taught us how to climb long ago.”

With that she handed Kirby the set of vacuum discs, and producing another for herself, moistened them in a pool of water close at hand. Then, as all of the girls followed her action, she strapped them to her hands and feet, and in a moment they had begun the ascent.

“Why,” Kirby said presently, “with these things you could hang by your feet and walk on a smooth ceiling!”

Naida laughed, and they worked their way upward.

When the climb was accomplished and the discs were put away, Kirby found himself standing on the outer edge of a mediaeval paradise, of a magnificent plateau partly fortified by nature, partly by the hand of man.

“Ah!” he cried in deep admiration, then followed Naida.

The building—the castle—in the near distance, resembled a castle of Spain, save that there was greater beauty and subtlety of architecture. Turreted on all four corners, constructed of material which looked like blocks of natural glass, the fairylike structure was crowned by a gigantic tower of something which resembled obsidian. Up and up this tower soared until its gleaming black tip seemed almost to touch the glassy-radiant sky of the cavern.

No people showed themselves, and Kirby saw that the bronze-studded portals set in the front of the castle were closed.

Admiringly, he glanced at the surrounding land laid out in checkerboard patches of gardens and orchards where grew a bewildering variety of unknown fruits and blooms. Butterflies drifted past, and the air was freighted with the scent of flowers. Inside a walled enclosure, Kirby saw a good-sized plot heavily grown with the plant on which he had been subsisting. As they passed this ground, each of the girls, Naida leading, made a strange little bowing, gliding genuflection, and Kirby wondered.

Now, however, new sights distracted him as they crossed a port drawbridge above a deep moat which was a fairyland of aquatic plants. Although not a sound had come from the castle, the great entrance doors were swinging back.

“Be ready,” Naida whispered, “for almost anything. The doors are being opened by some of the palace guard. I have little doubt that word was long ago rushed to the caciques that we are come to them with an upper-world man!”

Kirby answered with a nod. Then they passed the

outer doors, passed inside, and Kirby blinked at what he saw.

In a long hall decorated bewilderingly with a carven frieze in which appeared all of the symbols common to early Mexican religions, and many new ones, stood a row of bright suits of armor of the Sixteenth Century. From each suit peered the glassy face and shovel beard of a dead Conquistadore.

So this was what happened to intruders from the upper world! The Conquistadore who kept his long watch beside the geyser was not the only one! Kirby felt an involuntary chill prickle up his back. But he was not given long to think before Naida, ignoring the gruesome array, clasped his arm.

“Look! Behold!”

And Kirby saw that with almost magical silence the whole wall at the end of the corridor was sliding back to reveal an enormous amphitheatre in the center of which stood a vast circular table. Ranged in a semicircle about that table, stood fifteen incredibly

ancient men clad in long, glistening grey robes. Blanched beards trailed down the front of the garments until they all but touched the floor.

The caciques!

Kirby, on the threshold of the amphitheatre, squared his shoulders and held his head high. Then with Naida on his right, his own eyes boring unyieldingly into the smouldering, narrowed eyes which stared at him, he advanced.

But in front of him the priests moved suddenly. From Naida burst a shriek. In the radiant glare of the council room flashed the long, thin, cruel blade of a sacrificial knife.

The cacique who had whipped it from his robe flew at Kirby with a condor swoop, talon-hands outstretched, his wrinkled, bearded face contorted with fury.

Chapter 5

Before Kirby was more than half set to fight, the priest was clawing at his throat, and a gnarled old fist was poised to drive the knife in a death stroke.

Kirby did the only thing he could do quickly—sprang to one side. The move saved him. The knife whipped past his shoulder, and the cacique nearly fell. But it had been a close enough squeak for all that.

Nor was it over. After Kirby the priest sprang with unexpected agility, and before Kirby could snatch at his pistol the talon-hands were lunging at his throat once more.

With the gasps of the girls ringing in his ears, Kirby bunched himself for another side leap only to find the cacique all over him like an octopus. Momentarily the knife hung above his chest, and Kirby, dismayed at the powers of his opponent, almost felt that the thing must plunge before he could break the octopus hold.

But he had no intention of being defeated, and now he

was getting used to the fight. The priest's left arm swiftly clenched about his neck and shoulders, and the right arm, with the knife, attempted a drive through to the heart. Suddenly, however, Kirby lurched sideways and backward, and as the octopus grip slackened for a flash, he himself got a wrestler's grip that left him ready to do business. As the priest broke free, he slid around in an attempt to fasten himself on Kirby's back. Quickly, tensely Kirby doubled, and knew that he had done enough. The cacique shot over his shoulders, described a somersault in midair, and landed with a sharp crack of head and shoulders against unyielding stone.

From the semicircle of other priests went up a gasp. From Naida came a strangled cry of joy. Kirby made one leap for the knife which had fallen from the cacique's hand as he slumped into unconsciousness, and then he straightened up with the weapon safe in his possession.

"There, you old billygoat," he croaked in English, "maybe you won't try any more fast ones for awhile."

A second later he stepped over the sprawled body to stand beside Naida.

Upon the wrinkled countenances of the remaining caciques was stamped a look of dismay and hatred which boded no good. It was plain to Kirby that in battering up the man detailed to kill him, he had committed a desecration of first order.

“Is there anyone else who cares to fight?” he flung at them in Spanish, showing a contempt as great as their rage.

The response he got was instant. From one old gullet, then from others, came choking, snarling sounds which presently became words. By those words Kirby heard himself cursed with a vituperation which made him, even in his temporary triumph, feel grave.

But he did not let that soberness trouble him long. For the main point now was that no one made a move to fight further, which was what he had expected. He had flung them the challenge, knowing that he was possessed of their knife, and suspecting that it was

their only weapon. The belief that no one would care to try a barehanded conflict, no matter what insult was waiting to be avenged, seemed justified as none of the caciques advanced, and as even the cursing presently ceased.

“No?” Kirby asked. “There is to be no more fighting?”

One of the caciques now came forward a few steps.

“No,” he answered with a lameness which was not to be denied. “But you, a criminal interloper in our realm, have been marked as a victim for sacrifice, and from this there is no power in the universe which can save you.”

Kirby, after a reassuring glance at Naida, looked at the floored priest who was sitting up now, looking stupidly about, and feeling himself all over, and Kirby suppressed a grin.

“Ah, I am to be sacrificed, eh? But what happens until

that time comes? Listen my Wise Ones—”

He stabbed a finger at them, and his eyes flashed.

“Listen! What you mean to say is that I have defeated you, and you must lay off me until you can launch another attack. But I have a few things to say to that. One is that I am not going to permit myself to *be* sacrificed. Another is that I demand, right here and now, that you begin to discuss with me certain agreements which are going to regulate the future conduct of affairs in this world to which I have come.”

A low exclamation answered that, but it came from no priest. They remained sullen and staggered. It was Naida who murmured, and there was excitement and pleasure in her voice. Suddenly she placed her lips against Kirby’s ear.

“You must not treat with them,” she said. “Tell them you want to see the Duca, and will destroy them all unless he comes!”

Understanding burst over Kirby. The Duca! Then

these men were only the representatives of a High Priest, the Duca!

“Yes,” he repeated resolutely to the assembled greybeards, “a meeting is going to be held in this chamber of council at once. But I will not deal with you! Do you understand me? I must see the Duca. I leave it to you to decide whether you will summon him, or force me to fight my way through to wherever he is staying.”

“The Duca!”

The words burst in dismay from the gimlet-eyed cacique who had said there would be no more fighting. He looked at Naida, well aware of the fact that it was her interference which had made Kirby extend his demand. And his look was black.

Kirby slid between Naida and the cacique.

“Yes,” he spat out, “the Duca! Will you summon him, or—”

He did not repeat what he would do as an alternative. A second passed in silence. It seemed as if the cacique who had been speaking was ready to burst.

“Answer me!” Kirby thundered.

And then the priest obeyed.

“Very well,” he growled in a voice which quaked with rage. “I obey. But you will wish you had never made the demand!”

The next second he swung on his heel, and leaving his company behind as a guard, headed toward a stair which led upward from one side of the amphitheatre, and which was protected by a door of heavy, grilled metal work. The stairway seemed to be spiral, and was all enclosed. Kirby realized that it must lead into the tall and beautiful tower of obsidian which he had seen outside.

“Oh,” Naida whispered as looks and smiles of approval came from all of the girls, “you have been magnificent! Mark now, what we must do. You must

be the one to state our terms, because you have already won a victory for us. Tell the Duca that we will not submit to any compromise with the ape-men, and least of all will we let any of our number go to the ape-men."

A deep flush crept into Kirby's cheeks at thought of what he would like to do to the man who had proposed that sacrifice.

"Then tell him," Naida continued, "that we want men brought to our world from the world above. And finally tell him we will live under his dictatorship no longer, and hereafter demand a voice in all councils affecting temporal affairs."

"All right," Kirby spoke grimly. "I'll tell him. Naida, is this high priest we're waiting for, the one who proposed sacrifice of some of you to the apes?"

Naida nodded.

Next moment, she, Kirby, and all the others, including the row of glowering caciques, became silent. At

sounds from above, all looked toward the grilled doorway to the tower. Then Kirby realized that all of the girls, as well as the caciques, were dropping to their knees.

“No!” he commanded quickly. “Get up! You must not abase—”

He had not finished, and Naida had scarcely risen, when the heavy door swung on noiseless hinges.

The light in the amphitheatre seemed to become more intense. Then, against the great glow, Kirby beheld majesty, beheld one who represented the apotheosis of priestly rank and power.

Clad in robes of filmy material which glimmered white beside the gray robes of his underlings, the Duca wore about his waist the living flame of a girdle composed of alternate cut diamonds and blood red rubies each larger than a golf ball. And Kirby, searching for comparisons, realized that the Duca’s face, upheld to others, would be as remarkable as his jewels must be when compared to ordinary gems. It

was a chiseled face, seamed by a thousand wrinkles, which a god might have carved from ivory before endowing it with the flush and glow of life. A mane of snow white hair cascaded back from a tremendous forehead to fall about thin but square shoulders and mingle with the downward sweep of pure white beard. The eyes, black as polished jet, flamed now with the glare of baleful fires.

As Naida, stealing close to Kirby, trembled, and even the abased caciques trembled, Kirby himself felt as if icy water was trickling over him.

He fought the sensation off. For suddenly he knew that in spite of first impressions which made the man seem a living god, the old Duca was human. And what was more, he was in the wrong. All of which being true, the thing to do was keep a level head and fight.

All at once Kirby spoke across the silence in the great room.

“I have sent for you,” he said, weighing words carefully.

“And I,”—the Duca’s voice was mellow and deep —“have come. But I am not here because you summoned me.”

“Oh!” Kirby let sarcasm edge his words. “Well, I won’t quibble about your motives for coming. Did my messenger tell you why we are here and demand your presence?”

“Your messenger,” the old man said calmly, “told me.”

“Very well. Do you consent to listen to Naida’s and my terms? If you *will* listen—”

“But wait a moment,” the Duca interrupted, still calmly, but with a look in his eyes which Kirby did not like. “Are you asking *me*, to my face, whether I will listen to terms which you offer as self-styled victor of a battle with my caciques?”

Kirby nodded. His apprehension increased.

“Ah,” said the Duca softly. And then, amazingly, a smile deepened every wrinkle of his parchment face.

“But do you not remember that I said I had *not* come here because you summoned me?”

“Yes,” Kirby said solidly. “I remember very well.”

“The thing which brought me here was the failure of my followers to accomplish an assignment which I had given them—namely, that of ending your life.”

“Hum.” Kirby scratched behind his ear. “You are *not* interested in arranging terms of peace, then.”

“I am here,”—suddenly the Duca’s voice filled the room—“to do that which my priests were unable to do. And the moment has come when the Gods will no longer trifle with you. You dog! You thieving intruder! You—”

Swiftly the Duca plunged one withered but still powerful hand into the folds of his robe above the flaming girdle. Then his hand flashed out, and in it he held—

But Kirby did not get to see.

A strangled cry of terror smote his ears. Naida leaped toward him from one side, while Elana, the lovely youngest girl, sprang from another direction, hurled Naida aside, and stopped in front of Kirby.

Through the glaring room flickered a tiny red serpentine creature which the Duca hurled from a crystalline tube in his hand. As the minute snake struck Elana's breast, she gave a choked cough, and then, as she half turned to smile at both Naida and Kirby over her shoulder, her eyes went blank, and she collapsed gently to the polished stones of the floor—dead.

A second later came squirming out from under her the ghastly, glimmering little snake which had struck.

Slowly, while every mortal in the room stood paralyzed, Kirby stepped forward and set his heel upon the writhing thing. When he raised his boot, the snake was only a blotch on the floor.

The Duca was standing as still as girls and caciques. The laughter with which he had started to greet what he had thought would be Kirby's extermination had faded to a look of wonder—and fear. He was an easy mark.

Up to him Kirby rolled, and with all the force of soul and muscular body, drove his fist into the Duca's face.

"By God," he roared, "you want war, and you shall have it!"

The Duca was simply out—not dead. Since Kirby did not want him dead, he did not strike again, but swung back from the sprawled body, faced Naida, and pointed to the tower door.

"Up there!" he snapped. "Seize the tower. I have a reason!"

At the Duca's crashing downfall, had come to the caciques a tension which made Kirby know they would not be dummy figures much longer. His eyes never left them.

“Quick, Naida!” he snapped again. “We must hold the tower!”

Naida, all of the girls, were staring dazedly at Elana, dead.

“The tower!” she choked. “But we cannot go there. It is the Duca’s!”

“Because it is the Duca’s,” Kirby said firmly, “is exactly why we must hold it. Come, Naida, please—”

And then he saw comprehension begin to dawn at last.

He also saw two of the caciques glide from the wooden line, and slink toward him past the unconscious Duca, stealthily.

As Naida suddenly cried out to her companions, pushed at two of them, and then darted like a rainbow nymph toward the silent and forbidding upward spiral

of steps, Kirby faced the gliding caciques.

One he clutched with viselike hands, and lifted him. As the other shrieked and sprang, he was mowed down by the hurtling body of his fellow priest which Kirby flung forward mightily.

The rest of the caciques were howling. While Naida waited beside the tower door, the other girls flashed up the steps. The Duca still lay where he had fallen, a thread of blood oozing from his mouth. Kirby, after his last look over all, solemnly stooped and gathered in his arms the limp, radiant little body of the girl who had given her life that her friends might be left with a leader.

A moment later, he was standing on the steps. Naida, unopposed by the still stupefied caciques, swung shut the tower door and shot a double bolt.

“Naida—” Kirby whispered as he held Elana closer to him, “oh, I am so sorry that we could have won only at such a price.”

As Naida stooped to kiss the pale little forehead with its halo of golden hair, sobs came. But then she raised her eyes, and they were, for Kirby, alight with the message that she could and would accept Elana's sacrifice, because she would gladly have made it herself.

"We will not forget," she whispered. "Carry her tenderly, and come."

For better, for worse, the Duca's tower was theirs.

Chapter 6

At the end of an hour, Kirby was taking a turn of guard duty at the foot of the steps, while the others remained with Elana in a chamber above. To Kirby, with things thus far along, it seemed that the seizure of the tower had proved a shrewd stroke.

It seemed that the tower was to the Duca what hair was to Sampson. From Naida had come the information that the Duca lived hidden within the great shaft of obsidion, and appeared but seldom even before his caciques. Apparently a large part of his hold upon his subjects was maintained by the mystery with which he kept himself surrounded. And now his retreat was lost to him! Such had been the moral effect of the loss upon both Duca and caciques, that his whole first hour had gone by without their doing anything.

Kirby, standing just around the first turn of the winding stairway, presently cocked his ears to listen to the conclave being held in the amphitheatre.

“Why not starve them out, O Holy One?” he heard one of the caciques ask of the Duca, only to be answered by a growl of negation.

The Duca, Kirby had gathered before this, wanted to fight.

“But there is no food in the tower, is there?” the cacique still pressed on, and this time he was supported by other voices.

“No,” the Duca rumbled back. “But am I to be deprived of my retreat, left here like a common dog amongst other dogs, while these accursed fiends starve slowly to death? No! I tell you, you must fight for me!”

But he had told them so several times before and nothing had happened. Kirby grinned at the thought of the caste the Duca was losing by being driven to this belittling parley.

“Holy One,” exclaimed a new priest in answer to the urge to fight, “what can we do against the golden

haired fiend? The stairs are so narrow that he could defend them alone. And then there are the gates of bronze. If we could shatter the first, at the foot of the steps, we should only encounter others. The Duca must remember that his tower was built to withstand attack.”

“Even so,” the Duca snapped back, “it must be attacked! I—”

But then he fell silent, having been made so by the sounds of dissension which arose amongst his caciques. Kirby, laughing to himself, turned away from his listening post, and tip-toed up the steps.

After he had closed and bolted behind him three of the bronze portals so feared by the caciques, he turned to the entrance of the chamber in which he had left Naida and the others. Here all was silent, and he found his friends grouped about a couch on which lay Elana. Feeling the solemnity of the moment, he would have taken his place quietly amongst the mourners.

Naida, however, came to him at once, and in a low voice asked for news from the amphitheatre, and when Kirby answered that the caciques were unanimously in favor of leaving them alone until they starved, she exclaimed:

“Oh, then it is good news!”

After that, however, a shadow of doubt flickered in her great eyes.

“And yet, is it? It means temporary immunity, of course. But—starvation!”

Kirby assured her with a grin.

“If we had to starve we might worry. But there is more food here than the Duca thinks. Look!”

From a bulging pocket of his tunic he fished a strip of the roots on which he had subsisted so comfortably. Naida’s eyes widened, and several of the girls gave low cries.

“Yes,” Naida exclaimed, “but such food! Why—why, do you know what you are offering us? Why, this is the sacred Peyote! Only the Duca eats it, and, at rare intervals, his priests.”

Kirby was really startled now.

“But surely you and the others have taken quantities of the stuff away from the Valley of the Geyser. Do you mean—”

“Because we gathered the Peyote does not mean that we have ever tasted it. We gather it for the Duca. To taste would be complete, utter sacrilege. Have *you* been eating it?”

Inwardly Kirby was chuckling at this added proof of the buncumbe with which the Duca—and other Ducas—had fooled all.

“Of course I’ve been eating the Peyote.”

“And—and nothing has happened to you?” Naida asked.

“Hardly. I certainly haven’t been blasted by the Lords of the Sun and Moon, or the Serpent either!”

Naida and all the others were silent. The conflict between their reverence for the food and their clear desire to eat it, now that it was become the food of their leader, was pathetic.

Kirby put one of the strips in Naida’s hand.

“Why not?” he asked. “We have bested the Duca in fair fight. We have seized his tower. Why not eat his food?”

As he had hoped it would, the suggestion at last settled the matter. A moment later, as Naida nibbled her first bite, she smiled.

“Why, it—it’s good!”

With the question of provisions settled at least for a time, Kirby’s next thought was of the tower. The present lull of peace seemed made for exploration.

“Come along,” he said to Naida, “we’ve plenty to do,” and then, when he explained, they set out, accompanied by Nini, a cousin of Naida’s, and Ivana, a younger sister.

All of the others remained with little Elana.

While they climbed spiral stairs, Naida explained that the chamber they had just left was used by the Duca as a place in which he prayed before and after contacts with caciques or subjects. A sort of halfway station between earth and heaven, as it were, where the Duca might be purged of any sully influence gained from human relationships.

At thought of the rank, egotistical hypocrisy implied by the story, Kirby smiled grimly. Then they came to a new door, heavier than that which barricaded the prayer chamber. Unlocked, the thing swung ponderously at Kirby’s push, and with the three girls pressing close beside him, he entered—and stopped.

“Naida!” he gasped.

“Oh, *oh!*” she cried, and while Nini and Ivana gasped, she clapped her hands in an instinctive, feminine reaction of joy. “But there are things here which I believe none but the Ducas of our race have ever seen! Oh! Why, the sacred girdle is as nothing compared to this display!”

By “display” she meant a treasure which took Kirby’s breath away, which made his heart act queerly.

The walls of the chamber were fashioned of polished blocks of obsidion on which stood out in heavy bas-relief a maze of decorative figures fashioned of pure, beaten gold—the same kind of gold which had gone into the making of the cylinder of gold. With his first glance at the gorgeously wrought motifs of Feathered Serpent and Sun and Moon symbols, Kirby knew to a certainty whence the golden cylinder had come originally.

But even the gold—literally tons of it there must have been—was nothing compared to the gems.

They were spread out in blinding array upon a great

table in the center of the room. There were pearls as big as turkey eggs and whiter, softer than the light of a June morning growing in the East. There were rubies. One amongst the many was the size of a baseball and glowed like the heart of a red star. The least of the two or three hundred gems would have outclassed the greatest treasures of the Crown jewels of England and Russia combined.

Most overwhelming of all, however, was the jewel which rested against a square of black cloth all its own in the center of the table. While his heart still acted queerly, while Naida, Nini, and Ivana hung back, delighted, but still too bewildered to move, Kirby advanced and took gingerly in his hands a single white diamond about eighteen inches long, and almost as wide and deep as it was long.

The thing was carved with exquisite cunning to a likeness of the living head of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent.

Kirby dared not guess how many pounds the carven hunk of flashing, blue-white carbon weighed. He

knew only that like it there was no other diamond in the world, and that the thing was real. Naida and the two girls were silent now, and suddenly Kirby realized that to their awe of the gem was added awe of deepest religious nature. Slowly he put the diamond head of the Serpent back upon its square of cloth.

“We—we had heard that this thing existed,” Naida said presently, voice hushed, “but no one except the holy men of our race has ever beheld it.”

“But, what is it?” Kirby asked. “Whence came it?”

However, when Naida would have answered, he interrupted.

“But wait! Tell me as we go. We could stay here for the rest of our lives without much trouble, but we’ve got to cover the rest of the tower and get back to the others.”

It was after they had closed the door to the treasure room that Naida told him the story.

“There is not so much to tell,” she began. “The diamond itself is so gorgeous that it is hard to talk about. But here is the story. A great many ages ago one of the Ducas of our race found the diamond, decided to carve it into a perfect likeness of the head of the Serpent God. All of the craftsmen of the race helped him and when they were done, they took their image to Quetzalcoatl himself, and showed him what they had done.

“Quetzalcoatl was pleased. So pleased, that he promised all of the wise men that he would cease to prey upon them as he had in the past, and henceforward would take his toll of sacrifice from the ape-men alone. Then he hated and would continue to hate because they worshipped not him but Xlotli.

“And so it came about,” Naida went on slowly, looking up at Kirby as they still mounted wide steps to the upper reaches of the tower, “that our people gained immunity from a God which had always before harmed and destroyed them. Our race presently began to build this castle here on the high plateau, and Quetzalcoatl kept his compact with them. He still

comes out of his chasm at intervals and preys upon the ape-men, but no one of our race has seen him for thousands of years, and he has always let us alone. And there is the whole myth and explanation of why the great diamond is revered among us as a holy of holies.”

They had mounted to a new door which Kirby guessed might give entrance to the Duca’s living quarters. But he was in no mood to open it at once.

“Wait a minute,” he said as they all paused. “You say that, although none of your race has seen Quetzalcoatl since the diamond head was carved, he still comes out of his chasm and makes trouble for the ape-men. Just what does that mean?”

“Why—” Naida looked at him wonderingly. “I mean what I have said. The Serpent comes out of his chasm and—”

“What chasm?” Kirby asked sharply.

“Why, the one we crossed this morning. It extends to

the far reaches of our country, beyond the Rorroh forest, where the ape-men dwell but which our people never visit. It is in that distant part of the chasm that the Serpent dwells.”

“But—but—Oh, good Lord!” Kirby whistled softly.

“Naida, do you mean to tell me that Quetzalcoatl was not simply a mythical monster, but an actual, living serpent which is alive *now*?”

Naida and the others shrugged.

“Why not?” she answered. “Sometimes we have captured a few ape-men, and they tell us stories of how Quetzalcoatl kills them. *They* say he is very much alive.”

“But,” Kirby mumbled in increasing wonder, “is this living creature the same which your ancestors worshipped first as long ago, perhaps, as a million years?”

“That,” Naida answered unhesitatingly, “I’m not sure of. Our caciques believe that the Serpent, although it

lives longer than any other sentient thing, finally dies and is succeeded by a new Serpent which is reproduced by itself, within its own body.”

So overwhelming did Kirby find this unexpected sequel to their discovery of the great diamond head, so staggered was he by the fact that Quetzalcoatl, of Aztec myth, might exist as a sentient creature here in this cavern world, that he had little heart left for exploring other wonders.

Nevertheless, he presently pushed open the new door before which they had paused, and behind it found, as he had expected, the Duca’s living quarters.

These were as severe as the jewel chamber had been gorgeous. A thin pallet spread upon a frame of wood formed the bed, and beside it stood a single stiff chair. That was all. The walls of glistening obsidian were bare.

There was, however, a door in one circular wall, and as Kirby flung this open, his previous disappointment changed to delight. For shelves along the walls of the

small chamber held roll after roll of parchment covered with script. And in one corner lay six undamaged, almost new Mannlichers and several hundred rounds of ammunition!

“Naida,” he exclaimed, “do you know what those are?”

“I suppose that they are weapons of the sort you used against the ape-men this morning?”

Kirby grinned.

“They are the same kind I used, and then some. With these weapons we can do what we never could with the smaller one. How did they get here?”

“They came when I was much younger,” Naida answered with a shade of sadness in her voice. “The men who had them penetrated the Valley of the Geyser, coming by a different route from the one you followed. When the Duca learned they were there, he sent such men of the race as were still able to fight to kill them. That order of the Duca’s was one of the first

things to turn me against him. The men were not harming us, and they should have been permitted to go away. But the Duca insisted that they be killed, and in the fight were lost eight of our youngest and strongest men.”

Kirby stooped to inspect the rifles.

“Has no one learned to use these weapons?”

“No,” Naida answered. “The Duca kept them for himself.”

“We think,” put in Ivana, “that he hoped to learn to use them, and was afraid for us to have the knowledge.”

Kirby filled one of the magazines, and felt the heft of the gun with pleasure.

“Very well,” he said. “It looks to me as though your time to learn the art of shooting has come at last. Come, I think we had better be getting back downstairs.”

Kirby took three guns himself, and with the others lugging the rest, they started back. The parchment rolls, he decided, must be left for examination later on.

They were all elated when they rejoined the girls in the prayer chamber, and high spirits were still further increased by the report, promptly given, that all had remained quiet in the amphitheatre. Save only for the presence of Elana, radiant and calm in death, the give and take of questions would have been accompanied by actual gaiety.

But the time of peace did not last much longer. While Naida was in the midst of answering incessant questions about the wonders of the jewel chamber, Kirby heard a sound from below, and suddenly went over to the downward-winding steps.

“Listen,” he called sharply back to the others.

He had not been mistaken. Many footsteps echoed from the amphitheatre, and he made out that the caciques were coming toward the bolted gate at the

foot of the steps. While he listened, and Naida came eagerly to his side, silence fell.

But then clear words came up to them.

“Let the upper-world man come to the foot of the steps,” called the Duca. “I have an offer to make him!”

Chapter 7

To himself Kirby chuckled. Such real entreaty filled the Duca's voice that there seemed no danger of further treachery from him at the moment.

With a grin, Kirby took Naida's hand and led her down the steps, unbolting each bronze gate but the last.

"What do you want?" he asked in a cool voice a moment later, when he stopped on the final step and faced the Duca from behind the protection of the final gate.

Clearly the parley was going to be a blunt one.

"I want you to leave our world," the Duca rumbled promptly.

He was drawn up in a posture intended to display dignity. But his left cheek, where Kirby had hammered him, was pulpy and discolored, and somehow he seemed to Kirby more than ever merely

human.

“Under what conditions am I to leave?”

“If you will vacate my tower at once,” the Duca said with a flush of eagerness which he could not conceal, “I will permit Naida and one of my caciques to escort you back to the Valley of the Geyser. I will also give you directions by which you may travel in safety from there to the outer world.”

Kirby, wanting more details, made himself seem thoughtful.

“And what will happen to me, and to the girls, if I decline?”

Encouraged, the Duca made an impressive gesture.

“You will be left in the tower to die of starvation. Mine is not a complicated offer. It should require no complicated decision. What is your answer?”

Kirby dropped his carefully assumed mask of thought.

“My answer is this,” he lashed out. “I will not leave! The tower is ours, and we will hold it until you have accepted Naida’s peace terms on your priestly oath!”

“But if you stay in the tower you will starve!”
thundered the Duca.

“No, we won’t starve! We won’t starve because we eat the food of Ducas!”

In silence, Kirby took from his pocket a strip of the sacred Peyote and bit off one end of it. Suddenly the hush in the amphitheatre became complete. As he watched Kirby chewing, the Duca gasped and choked.

“Moreover,” Kirby announced with slow emphasis, “I have taken possession of the weapons which you took from men of the upper world, and which have already sent men of your race to their death. I have no wish to kill either you or your caciques, but if you do not presently discuss peace with me, you will certainly find yourself embroiled in a struggle more bitter than the mild one of this morning.”

With that said, he swung on his heel, and taking Naida's hand again, started with her up the steps.

"I have nothing more to say," he called over his shoulder to a Duca whose white haired majesty had been stripped from him.

"We're getting on," he whispered to Naida a moment later. "The best thing for us is just to sit still now, and wait."

With the questions he wanted to ask Naida about her world becoming insistent, he found himself, as a matter of fact, glad for the prospect of further respite. As both of them rejoined the girls in the Duca's prayer chamber, the first thing he did was to take from his tunic the cylinder of gold which he had found in the canyon.

"What is this, Naida?" he asked, hoping to start talk that would make all of them forget the Duca and politics, and at the same time help him to learn much that he wished to know.

But a queer thing happened. Naida's reaction to the carven gold was as unexpected as it was marked.

"*Oh!*" she cried in a voice which suddenly trembled with surprise, with blank dismay. Somehow, the cylinder of gold brought to her face things which not even the Serpent's head of the diamond had evoked.

The prospect of a long session of talk began to fade out in Kirby's mind.

"But Naida, whatever is there about this fragment of gold to startle you as it does?"

By this time all of the thirty-odd other girls had come flocking about them, and all were staring at the cylinder as fascinatedly as Naida.

"Do you see what he has there?" Naida finally asked, ignoring Kirby in her continued excitement.

"Do we *see*?" answered the girl she had addressed.
"Naida, surely it is the carving which was lost!"

Naida was quivering with feeling now.

“Do you realize what it means to our cause that it should have been returned to us in this way?”

The girl to whom she had spoken, and the others, simply looked at her, but in one face after another presently dawned awe and joy.

Kirby stood still, puzzled and interested, until at last Naida was recovered enough to speak to him.

“Where did you get this thing which you call ‘a fragment of gold’?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“I found it,” Kirby answered, “lying beside the skeleton of an upper-world man, while I was ascending the canyon which brought me to the Valley of the Geyser.”

“And you do not know what the cylinder is? But no, of course you could not.”

“*What* is it, Naida?”

Naida glanced at her friends, then laid her hand on Kirby's.

"Next to the great diamond, it is the most cherished possession of our race. In some respects it is even more holy than the Serpent's head. The cylinder happens to be the first work in gold which was ever produced by our people. It was made when the race was new. It was because our first wise men had found they could create things of beauty like this cylinder, that they decided to attempt the creation of the Serpent's head, which is supposed to have brought all of our blessings upon us."

Kirby thought he was beginning to understand the excitement which his introduction of the cylinder had created. He also thought he could see what Naida had meant by implying that the cylinder could be made to aid their cause.

"Tell me," he asked in a mood approaching reverence, "how the cylinder came to be lying beside a dead man's bones."

“It was stolen,” Naida answered in the breathless silence which the others were keeping. “When I was very young, an upper-world man found his way here, and the Duca captured and meant to sacrifice him. But while they were leading him to the temple where such special ceremonies are held—the building stands on another plateau, beyond this—the man broke away. Some of the priests in the procession were carrying the cylinder, for it was an occasion of great importance. The prisoner knocked them down, got the cylinder away from them, and finally escaped by the same route over which you came.”

“And he escaped,” said Kirby wonderingly, “only to be killed by a rattlesnake before he ever reached the civilized world. But do you mean that you never knew your sacred cylinder was so close to you all these years?”

Naida shook her head.

“We never got to the canyon of which you speak, for a special reason which I shall explain some day. And besides that, I think the Duca was afraid of this man

who fought so bravely. So he counted the cylinder as lost. And that is one of the reasons why he killed the men with the rifles, who appeared in the Valley a few years later.”

Kirby looked at her thoughtfully. The mood for discussing all the wonders of this lower world, which had made him bring out the cylinder originally, had quite vanished.

“I suppose,” he said, “that anyone who was responsible for the return of the cylinder to its rightful owners, would be held in some respect?”

Naida nodded vigorously, while little lightnings of excitement flickered in her eyes.

“He might be held in more than respect.”

“What, then, do you suggest that we do next?”

Again the small lightnings darted, and Naida reached for the cylinder.

“Do you mind if I take it for a moment?”

“Of course not.”

Promptly then she faced around.

“Wait here, everyone,” she ordered.

And with that she waved the cylinder in a flashing little arc before their eyes, and darted to the door.

It was all so unexpected that she was gone before Kirby could speak. Slowly, with all of the suddenly gay company of girls following after him, he went to the doorway, and stood on the steps leading to the amphitheatre.

A minute passed. He heard voices downstairs. He heard Naida’s voice ringing clearly, though he could not distinguish her words. He heard a great cry from a score of male throats. More minutes passed. Words that were low and tense poured out in a rumbling volume. Above the rumble, Naida’s voice presently sounded again, clear and sweet, but incisive. Then,

when no more than five or six minutes had gone, Kirby heard the clang of the bronze gate at the foot of the steps, heard light, swift footsteps ascending.

“Naida!” he called softly.

She flashed upward toward him around the last curve in the stairway. Straight to his outstretched arms she went.

“It is done! It is done!” she whispered.

“Tell us!” cried first one girl and then others.

Naida drew away from Kirby at last.

“I told the Duca,” she said to all of them, “that our leader would keep the cylinder for a period of time equal to one upper-world year. If the Duca grants all the terms of peace which we will ask of him, and if he accepts the upper-world man as our temporal ruler, and all goes well for a year, then we will consider replacing the cylinder where it belongs.”

“And what,” Kirby asked exultantly, “does the Duca say?”

Suddenly, without warning, Naida dropped before him on one knee, and from that position gazed up at him laughing.

“He says he will make you our King, to govern all temporal affairs within our realm! He is waiting for you to come and hold a conclave now.”

“What?”

Still kneeling half in fun, half in sincere reverence, Naida held out the precious, potent cylinder of gold.

“Guard it carefully!” she exclaimed. “So long as you keep it away from the Duca, making him hope to win it back, he will consent to almost anything. Yes, he is waiting with the caciques in the amphitheatre now; waiting to draw up terms of peace.”

Chapter 8

To be King amongst these people! A queer sensation tugged at Kirby's heart as he descended the steps with Naida at his right, and all of her—and his—dainty and gracious friends following after. Yet, intense as his emotion was, never for a second was he able to doubt the evidence of his senses which told him that all of this was real. As they descended the black steps of the tower, Naida's sweetness, her grace, the warm humanity of her, made him humble with gratitude for the extraordinary fortune which had come to him, an unromantic aviator born in Kansas.

Then they were standing in the brilliant light of the amphitheatre, and the Duca, surrounded by his caciques, was advancing to meet them.

It was not a long conference which followed. Kirby saw from the start that the Duca was indeed ready to come to terms. So treasured an object, it seemed, was the cylinder of gold, that the mere fact that Kirby possessed it made the Duca respect the possessor,

whether he would or no. With this initial advantage, it did not take long to make demands and win acceptance.

It was agreed that some systematic campaign of extermination should be planned and carried out against the ape-men. Further, the project for eventually bringing other upper-world men to the realm was accepted. Most notable of all, it was agreed that while the Duca should retain a voice in the regulation of temporal affairs, Kirby should possess an absolute veto over his word.

Naida said there must be some formal ceremony to celebrate Kirby's ascendancy to power. To this the Duca consented, and established the date as a fortnight hence, and the place as the temple on the plateau beyond the plateau of the castle, where the Ducas had been invested with their robes of state from time immemorial. At the end, it was decided that little Elana should be left in the prayer chamber until a burial ceremony could be held on the morrow.

In less than an hour, Kirby, Naida, and the others

withdrew from the amphitheatre to return to the regular dwelling places of the girls. Deep in his mind, Kirby did not know how sincere the Duca was, and fear lingered, somehow, but he put it aside for the present.

As they came out of the castle, proceeding in a gay procession across the drawbridge above the moat of beautiful aquatic plants, Kirby saw that the light from the glass sky was fading to a glow like that of spring twilight in the upper world. Naida answered his question about the phenomenon by saying that day and night in the cavern corresponded to the same period above. What quality of the glass sky gave out light, she did not know, but it seemed definite that the element was sensitive to the presence of light in the upper world, and when the sun sank there, the glow faded here.

A flower embroidered path led them around the castle to a group of little crystalline houses all overgrown with bougainvillea vines and honeysuckle. In front of the first, Naida paused, and while the others went on to the other houses, she looked at Kirby.

“It is Elana’s dwelling,” she said simply, “and it will be vacant now. Elana would want you to take it. Will you, please?”

The twilight was deepening swiftly. Kirby nodded reverently, then drew close to Naida.

“Naida?”

“Yes?”

He took her hand.

“I can stay here, I can consent to become, after a fashion, a King, only if you will reign with me as Queen. Will you, Naida? Will you love me as I have learned to love you during this single day in Paradise?”

She did not answer. But presently Kirby’s mind went blank for sheer joy. For then Naida raised her face, and he kissed her lips.

It made no difference then that, despite the day’s

victory, Kirby could see trouble ahead, and feared, rather than rejoiced at, the Duca's too easy acceptance of terms. The future could take care of itself. This moment in the dusk belonged to him and Naida.

The two weeks which passed for Kirby after that particular twilight sped quickly. During the first morning, all attended the ceremony which was held for Elana's burial in the plot of garden ground where lay her ancestors. Ensuing mornings were devoted to conferences in the amphitheatre with Duca and caciques.

After the fourth day Kirby, at Naida's insistence, moved into splendid quarters in the castle—a suite of chambers across the amphitheatre from those in which the caciques dwelt. In practically forcing the move on Kirby, Naida won his consent finally by agreeing to have their wedding ceremony performed on the day of his coronation; then she would come to the castle with him.

The afternoons of that first fortnight before the

wedding and coronation were spent in hunting and fishing. Also Kirby and Naida visited often the aged people of the race, who dwelt in crystalline, vine covered houses like those of the girls, but removed from them. Naida's relatives were dead, but she had relatives there, and to all these aged ones, who sat living in the past, she did what she could to explain present developments in the affairs of the younger generation.

Last but not least, Kirby set aside certain hours each afternoon which he devoted to the formation of a rifle squad amongst the girls. Six rifles he had, and in turn he trained each of the girls in their use, having set up a range at the foot of the plateau cliffs. The results he gained made him feel that the day would come soon enough when he would dare launch an offensive against the ape-people; and especially pleasing was the sense of power over the Duca which he gained. The Duca showed no sign of treachery. Yet Kirby did not trust him. Never did he quite forget the misgivings which had lingered in his mind after the first conclave.

As for his relationship with Naida, that grew with every moment they could steal to spend with each other. And side by side with their growing knowledge of each other grew, for Kirby, an increasing store of knowledge of the realm.

He learned, amongst other things, what seemed the origin of the worship of the Serpent, Quetzalcoatl, amongst primitive Mexican races. The time had been when the People of the Temple had mingled freely with the races above them; and, that they might have ready means of egress to the world, they had built the tunnel through which Kirby had entered the Valley of the Geyser. Thus, going and coming as they did, they had spread their cult of the worship of Quetzalcoatl; and when, eventually, strife arose between the peoples of upper world and lower, and the People of the Temple withdrew to their realm, they left behind them the Serpent myth which was to live through countless centuries.

The tunnel, Naida said, had been abandoned when her people left the upper world once and for all, and its use for any reason prohibited. This, Naida gave as

the reason why none of them went near the tunnel now, and why the cylinder of gold had lain in the canyon undiscovered. It was the explanation she had promised on the day in the tower, when first she saw the cylinder.

So the days passed, until the day set aside for wedding and coronation dawned. On that morning, Kirby, having concluded a long conference with the Duca, was walking with Naida in the gardens outside the castle.

“Tell me,” he said to her: “do you yourself believe that this Serpent has the powers of a God?”

Naida looked at him quickly, a sudden fright in her eyes.

“I believe the Serpent exists to-day, somewhere in the distant reaches of the chasm, beyond the Rorroh forest.”

“Yes, but do you believe the Serpent is God?”

Actually frightened now, she looked swiftly about. But when she saw that they were alone, confidence returned.

“No!” she exclaimed. “I do not believe Quetzalcoatl is a god. I believe he is the most terrible creature anywhere in our realm, and that men first worshipped him through fear. I believe our race would be better a hundred times if they had never made him their God.”

Kirby whistled.

“Then you do *not* believe that the Ducas of past ages talked with him. You do not believe it was Quetzalcoatl’s pleasure over the great diamond which made him cease preying on your people?”

“No! Long habit makes me show respect for these myths, and adhere to the customs of our cult, but I do not believe. I think our race gained immunity for the Serpent’s ravages, not through a compact with Quetzalcoatl, but because our builders were intelligent enough to erect the castle up here on the plateau, where Quetzalcoatl could not reach them. To

tell the truth, I think the whole cult is false and wrong, and I wish Quetzalcoatl were dead and gone from the world!”

Kirby smiled. In spite of Naida’s reverence for certain features of the cult, he had long suspected that her true feelings were those she had just expressed. And he was glad for this new bond of understanding between them. He glanced at her with understanding and perfect trust.

“Naida, since we have talked so frankly, there is one more thing which I must bring out.”

She looked up at him.

“What is it?”

“The Duca.”

She drew closer, her perfumed body brushing his, her great eyes caressing him.

“Naida, I am afraid of the man.”

“And so am I!” she confessed suddenly.

“It has all been too easy,” Kirby said in a slow voice.

“There is no doubt whatever that our possession of the cylinder of gold has had great influence on the Duca, and yet—”

He paused, taking her hand.

“And yet,” she went on for him, “you do not believe he would have conceded what he has, unless he intends to make trouble?”

Kirby nodded twice, emphatically.

“Well, you have trained all of us to use the rifles.”

He smiled gravely at her understanding.

“Yes, I have. And your skill, and that of the others, with the rifles, will always help us. Yet even so—”

Closer still she drew now, and there was sadness in her eyes.

“I think I see,” she said in a voice which choked.
“When do you think he will make a move to start trouble?”

Kirby hesitated, then drew a long breath.

“To-day!”

“On—on the day of our union?” Naida echoed in dismay. “Can you tell where or how he will strike at us?”

Kirby shook his head.

“There are a hundred things he could do. Naida, I—I—Well, somehow I am afraid of the ceremony this afternoon—the wedding ceremony!”

He felt a little shiver go through her, and would have taken her in his arms, save that a gay cry rang in the garden then.

“Naida, Naida!” It was her cousin, Nini, a bronze-haired youngster as elfin and Pucklike as her name. “I

thought we should never find you! Do you realize this is your *wedding* day, and that you're acting as if there was nothing to be done?"

Nini darted a mocking glance at Kirby, who grinned.

"Do come, Naida!" cried another girl. "Your gown is ready, and we want you to ourselves for awhile."

Other girls joined them, some singing and some carrying an obligato on the sweet, flutelike instruments which Kirby had first heard as he hung in the throat of the geyser. In front of them all, Kirby laughed and kissed Naida on the forehead. But as he took leave of her thus, he whispered:

"We must not let our guard relax for a second this afternoon. And I think there is a more definite precaution which I will take, besides."

Chapter 9

Some hours later, Kirby smiled with tight-lipped satisfaction at thought of that precaution which he had taken. What it was only he, Nini, Ivana, and three other girls knew, which secrecy pleased him as much as the precautionary measure itself.

Seated alone in a dimly-lighted, thick-walled cell of the ancient temple in which the dual ceremony of wedding and coronation would take place, he was waiting for the moment when the festivities would begin. Thus far the Duca had done nothing. Yet Kirby's uneasiness would not leave him, and he continued to be thankful that, if trouble should start, the Duca might not find as many trumps in his hand as he expected.

A couple of hours after Kirby had left Naida and the other girls in the garden, all had begun the two-mile journey from the castle to the small plateau on which stood this temple, where the ceremony would be held. Now, while Kirby waited alone, the Duca and his caciques had gone to another wing of the temple.

Naida, attended by her bridesmaids, had been assigned to a cell of their own, and the rest of the girls were waiting in the nave of the temple. Unable to attend the walk from their plateau to this, the old people of the race had remained in their crystal houses.

With ten minutes more to wait, Kirby rose from a bench on which he had been seated, and began to pace his cell. It was this archaic pile of stone, he finally decided, which was causing his depression. Unlike the bright and cheerful castle, this place, older than any other building in the realm, was squat, thick-walled, and gloomy. Here, in the dusky cells which lined labyrinthine corridors, the early generations of the race had found protection from outside dangers. All of which was all right, Kirby thought, but just the same he wished he had insisted upon being wedded in the brilliant and cheerful amphitheatre.

But presently he stopped pacing and faced the door of his cell. Then he breathed a sigh of relief.

From down the twisting corridors which wound out to

the central nave, stole the high sweetness of soprano voices, the whisper of flutes, and the mellow resonance of little gongs of jade and gold. It was the signal for which he had waited.

It had been the Duca's instructions that he should come out into the temple when the music began, and meet Naida there. Both would advance to the altar, and when they were in place, the Duca would come to them. Kirby, therefore, after a glance at the blue trousers and tunic of tanager scarlet which the girls had made for him, opened the door of his cell, and stepped out.

In a moment he traversed the windings of the corridor, and halted under a flat arch at one side of the temple nave.

As he paused so, to await the appearance of Naida and her bridesmaids under a similar arch directly across the temple, he held his breath. Not even nymphs could be as graceful as were the twenty-six girls who were performing the dance of Life Immortal, which tradition decreed should be given

before the ceremony by which, in this realm, two souls were wedded. The flash of rainbow gowns was like the swirling of light in a sky at dawning. The music of voices, flutes, and the little gongs of jade, would have stirred the souls of the dead.

If only the confounded sense of approaching disaster would leave him, Kirby thought grimly, this would be a magnificent moment. As it was, he turned his eyes away from the girls, and began to examine the temple.

Just as Naida had told him the case would be, he found both sides of the nave surrounded by arches similar to the one under which he was standing. Everywhere, dim and tortuous corridors led to cells like the one he had just left. Then, in one end of the nave, loomed a closed door from behind which the Duca and caciques would appear when the couple to be wedded were in place, before the altar.

The altar itself, a rectangular mass of some jadelike stone, stood at a distance of perhaps twenty paces in front of the closed door. On top of the greenish

stones, resting on a cushion of some crimson material, flashed the crown which would be used at the coronation. Kirby's eyes widened as he beheld a single rose-cut diamond two inches in diameter, mounted in an exquisitely simple bandeau of wrought gold. But, a moment later, even the crown which would be his—if nothing happened—seemed only a bauble compared to the other prize which he had won in this world beneath the world.

Naida!

He realized that the dance was ended, the music stilled, and that the rainbow garbed girls had formed a double line in the center of the temple. Suddenly his heart beat fast, and for just a moment, as he dared look full and deeply at Naida, and she smiled back at him across the distance, he even forgot to be depressed.

But even as he advanced to meet her, his uneasiness returned.

Now the girls were singing again, their voices raised

in a triumphant chorale as beautiful as Naida's face with its warm red lips and smiling eyes, as beautiful as her wedding gown that might have been woven, in its filminess, of mist from the sea. The bridesmaids, silent, their lovely faces alight, paused. But Naida came on.

From her floated to Kirby a fragrance more overwhelming than even the perfume of the geyser. Presently he felt her hand on his arm, and at last they stood side by side. Now again, his premonition of evil left him for a flash; but again it returned.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love *you*."

"But I am still afraid."

Naida's smile faded.

"And I too. Oh, I've been terribly afraid! We will keep our guard!"

“Yes.”

In front of them, on the altar, the crown diamond winked and shimmered in a dim light. The swelling chorus of triumph, in which the bridesmaids had joined now, made the whole temple ring. Slowly, while Naida moved easily beside him, Kirby began to march to the altar.

Then it was done, and they were halted. After both of them had given a lingering glance at the crown whose diamond shimmered now within their reach, they raised their eyes to the closed door behind the altar.

The thing was swinging open. An inch it moved, two inches.

Kirby waited, never taking his eyes away from the widening crack. With a crashing final volume of sound, the chorus swept magnificently to its climax. Then the door was flung wide.

Still Kirby stood stiffly before the altar, with Naida drawn up splendidly beside him. After two seconds, however, he moved.

Duca and caciques were not standing in the corridor.

In the semi-darkness, the only figures visible there were squatting, grotesque things whose bodies were covered with whitish hair and whose leathery faces were disfigured by gashes of mouths filled with enormous teeth.

A feeling of standing face to face with final disaster, turned Kirby sick. As he jerked back from the altar, sweeping a paralyzed Naida with him, the ape-men let out gibbering howls, half-human. With gigantic, hopping strides, the foremost rank of the creatures swung forward, straight into the temple.

Chapter 10

Kirby, already falling back toward the other girls, caught Naida up in his arms, and ran.

“Nini!” he bellowed. “Ivana! Get the rifles!”

While the two whom he had ordered sprang to a corridor, and four others followed, Kirby fell in with the others and dropped Naida on her feet. Sick as he was, there was still a ray of hope, because the hard-headed precaution he had taken against treachery this morning was to have Nini and Ivana bring the rifles here and hide them.

The first of the ape-men, snarling, laughing, had hopped beyond the altar, and the yellow foam of madness was slavering from his jaws. Over his shoulder he howled some jargon which made his hairy legion struggle to catch up with him.

“Have you got any puff balls?” Kirby snapped at Naida.

She shook her head numbly, just as Nini and Ivana swung forward with the Mannlichers.

“No. But you had sense enough to bring the rifles! Oh, what does it mean?”

“The Duca has sold himself out to the ape-man! He was helpless against us, and has brought them to destroy us for him. Here, Ivana, give me a rifle! Everyone for herself!”

The next moment he had a Mannlicher at his shoulder.

As the thing kicked, an ape who would have reached him in two more jumps crashed over with his heart torn out, the temple echoed with sound which threatened to rip its solid walls apart, and bright flashes at Kirby's right and left told him that other rifles were getting under way.

He fired again, twice more, slaughtering an ape with each shot. The five other rifles were creating havoc.

Blocked by a dozen torn and bleeding bodies on the floor, the reenforcements which still poured from the corridor, began to mill around amongst themselves, and the forward charge slowed down. All the panic which had sent the ape-men scuttling from the beach at their first experience of gunfire, seemed ready to break loose again now.

Kirby felt it was good enough for the work of a minute.

“Get into line as I showed you how!” he shouted.
“Rifles in the front rank, the others behind them.
We’re all right now! Keep firing!”

“Keep behind me!” he ordered Naida, still unarmed.

Then he placed a shell in the chest of one brute who was broader and heavier than the others—a leader—and saw that he had increased the demoralization; and from the hastily-formed front rank a volley leaped hot and jagged.

Then the rout which had threatened broke loose. As

eight ape-men slumped into blubbering, bleeding heaps, the milling remainder of the horde turned, and in a fighting, scrambling frenzy attempted to get back to the corridor.

Kirby let his triumph take the form of thoughts about what he would do to the Duca when that personage could be rounded up.

“Follow after them!” he ordered. “Don’t stop until we have located the Duca. He is the one we must settle —”

But he never finished.

As he himself, holding fire for a second, prepared to follow up the retreat, he found himself confronted by the utterly unexpected.

A voice unquestionably the Duca’s began to shout orders at the ape-men from somewhere down the corridor! And, riot or no riot, the tones of that voice seemed to inspire the creatures with more fear than the rifle fire.

So suddenly the change came, that by the time Kirby flung his rifle again to his shoulder, the crazy retreat had been halted, and as he fired again, the ape-men swung in their tracks and began to charge!

There was no time to guess by what power the Duca had turned the tables. There was not even time for orders. Kirby fired twice, knowing that the ape-men had been infused with some spirit which would bring them on in spite of rifle fire.

Naida, unarmed, cried out behind him, and he shoved his gun at her.

“Take it!”

He had just inserted a new clip. He handed her others.

“Fire for your lives!” he shouted to the girls.

“But you!” Naida gasped. “You are unarmed!”

“I’ll be all right.”

On the floor lay a jagged, hand-chipped knife of obsidian which had fallen as some ape died. Kirby grabbed it.

In another second the flood of ape-men had burst in all its fury over him. Crashing, thundering shots were dinning in his ears, animal death screams and the Valkyrie battle cries of the girls filled the temple. He could not tell how many of the apes were fighting him. As a cave-man's club whizzed past his head, he drove his knife once, and yanked it dripping from hairy, yielding flesh to plunge it again. A sudden side-step carried him away from another assailant. He dropped the knife to snatch the gigantic club of one of the creatures he had killed.

Quicker in every movement than the ape-men, he laid on, right and left, with such power that blood spurted in a dozen places, and heads were split open on every side. And because of his speed, the frantic, clumsy blows and knife thrusts which were directed at him proved harmless.

A terrific drive which smashed a snarling face into

pulp, left Kirby free for a second, and he emerged from the first round of battle ready to cut in and help the girls. But then he saw that he had gotten separated from the main body.

“Naida!” he called. “Naida!”

A series of shots answered him, and as several apes fell, a gap was opened through which he saw her conducting a well ordered retreat of all the girls toward the dark corridors surrounding the temple. Again Kirby fell to with his club, swinging, hacking, fighting with his whole strength to catch up. He made headway, and hope began to come again. The ape-men would not kill, or even harm, the girls. What they wanted was to carry them off. If he and Naida together could get their party rounded up in the corridors, the chances were good.

“Naida!” he shouted again. “Coming!”

Battering down an ape in front of him, he jumped up on the corpse, and saw that already the vanguard of girls had reached the first sheltering corridor. Naida

had been cut off from the others by eight or ten apes. But even so her fire made her mistress of the situation, and she seemed all right.

It was just as Kirby started to jump down from the corpse that he saw something which put another complexion on the matter, and left him frozen where he was.

Behind Naida, directly in the path in which her slaving aggressors were slowly forcing her, a huge stone slab in the temple floor had begun to tilt up as if it were a trapdoor raised by an invisible hand. Within the yawning opening, Kirby caught a glimpse of stone steps winding down into blackness.

In a flash he saw that it was Naida, and her alone, that the ape-men were after. The Duca's determination was to capture her, and it was the presence of this trapdoor, making capture possible, which had brought on the second charge of the apes.

A scream, high and wild, from Naida released Kirby from his trance of horror. He leaped off the corpse,

and smashed a suddenly presented skull like an egg shell. Momentarily he saw Naida, too terrified to fire, staring at the open trapdoor. Kirby felled two apes and felt their blood on his arms.

“Ivana!” he yelled. “Help Naida, for God’s sake!”

An answering shout, not from Ivana alone but from many girls, encouraged him, and he swung his club with a speed and force which would let nothing stand before him. But then another scream from Naida rang in his ears.

“Naida!” he shouted. “It’s all right! We’re coming!”

He knew, though, that it *wasn’t* all right. Fighting like a maniac, he opened another lane down which he glimpsed her. Fighting still, in a last terrific effort to force his way down the lane to her side, he saw the black opening gape at her feet; and, as Naida screamed again, a dozen hairy arms reached it at once, twisted the empty rifle out of her hands, and lifted her shining body as if it had been a feather.

Shouts and murderous fire were coming from the other girls, and Kirby swung his club as never before. But even as he fell upon the last two or three apes which kept him away from Naida, those who had snatched her, bolted down the steps.

Kirby was left with the memory of Naida's great eyes fixed upon his, fear-filled, beseeching his protection. In a second, the ponderous trapdoor crashed into place, and she was gone.

Chapter 11

Dazed and grief-stricken, Kirby stood in the bloody, corpse-filled nave of the temple, surrounded by thirty-two girls whose faces were blanched and most of whose eyes were tear-bright. The fight was over, and they were assembled to decide what must be done, but for a time no one spoke.

Gaining the trapdoor just as it was pinioned from beneath, Kirby had torn at it with bare hands. But that had been hopeless. Then he had begun to fight again. But that had been hopeless also. With howls and screams they started to retreat, and it had not taken Kirby long to find out that every part of their raid had been carefully planned, even to this retreat under fire. Straight into the damp black tunnel which led away from the corridor behind the altar, the apemen had leaped. And Kirby, in hot pursuit, had heard the Duca's voice driving them on. Too much the soldier to follow in that darkness where the Duca knew every foot of the way, and he knew nothing, Kirby had seen that he must go back to the girls and take stock.

Now he looked at the strewn ape corpses, smelled the corrosive reek of burned powder, and tried to put aside his grief.

“The Duca,” he said at last, “must have been planning this with the apes ever since the first morning in the castle.”

Ivana, Naida’s sister, nodded.

“The Duca brought the ape-people here, kept them in the tunnel, and then herded them back when their work was done. I suppose it was one of the caciques who opened the door when the time was right.”

“Does anyone think we ought to try the tunnels now?” Kirby asked.

Several girls shook their heads. He knew that already they felt he had been wise in giving up the pursuit. Ivana spoke.

“If the Duca and his horde stay underground, we shouldn’t have a chance against them. And if they

don't, we're better here."

Kirby shot a searching glance at her, somehow sure that her thoughts were running parallel with his.

"You don't think they're going to stay here, do you?"

"No, and you don't either," Ivana answered.

"It seems to me that they will retreat into the Rorroh as fast as they can," Kirby then observed.

And do you think the Duca and all the caciques will go with the apes?" This time it was Nini who spoke, and with the council so well launched, Kirby began to feel better.

"I think," he answered Nini, "that the Duca has gone over to Xlotli altogether. We fooled him to-day. Instead of killing or capturing us all, he—he only got Naida. But he won't give up. I think he is taking the apes off to some place from which he can launch a new attack. And we've got to stop him before he is ready to deliver another blow."

“What do you mean?” Ivana now asked.

“Do you know where the villages of the ape-people are?”

“Yes. None of us has been very far into the Rorroh, but I could guess where some of the villages may stand.”

Silence fell after that, but Kirby knew from the glint in Ivana’s eyes, and the quick breaths which other girls drew, that they understood.

“Ivana,” he said suddenly, “will you go with me into the Rorroh jungle, and stay with me, facing down every danger it may conceal, until we have found Naida and brought her back?”

A flush of life crept into Ivana’s pallid cheeks.

“Yes!”

Kirby faced the other girls, all of them keyed up now.

“Nini, will you go?”

Nini, bronze-haired, dainty nymph of a girl, who had yet the stamina of a man, looked at him with brave eyes. Then her hands tightened on her rifle, and she stepped forward.

“When will you have us start?” Ivana asked in a low voice.

“Now!” Kirby answered, and, taking up the rifle which lay beside him—the same with which Naida had fought—he looked at the other girls.

“There is not one of you,” he said slowly, “who would not go willingly on this quest. But the pursuit party must be small and mobile. And there is another duty. To all of you I leave the care of the castle and the plateau. Take the three rifles I shall leave behind, do what you can to reassure the old people, and hold the plateau safe until we return.”

A murmur of girls’ voices sounded in the temple. Kirby motioned to Nini and Ivana, and followed by a

low cheer, they moved off together.

The night was on them, where they crouched in a cave above a swiftly flowing river. Kirby, rifle across his knees, sat peering out across the black, invisible stretches of the forest. His nostrils quivered to this mingled smells of fresh growth and fetid decay of the grotesque land. In his ears shrilled the creaking and scraping of insects, the flap of unseen wings, the distant bellowing grunt of some unseen, unknown animal.

“I cannot sleep,” Ivana said presently, from back in the cave.

“Hush,” he whispered, “you will wake Nini.”

“But I am already awake!” came her answer. “I—I cannot forget the white snakes which slid from that tree when you tried to cut firewood.”

“Hush,” Kirby murmured again. “Presently the moon will rise on the earth above, and light will come here. Even if the jungle is terrible, were you not born with

courage? Go to sleep now, both of you, because you must relieve me soon.”

As silence fell again, he knew that the real thing behind their nervousness was their ghastly doubt about what the night was bringing to Naida. But none of them spoke of Naida. So sickening were the possibilities that Kirby would not permit conjecture to occupy even his mind when, at length, the sound of even breathing told him that Nini and Ivana slept.

After dreary passing of an hour, a faint light grew over the jungle, silver and clear, and Kirby let his mind run back to the two deserted ape-men communities which they had found and searched before dusk sent them to the cave. From the signs of hasty departure, it looked as though a far-reaching order had taken the brutes away from their dwellings, and sent them—somewhere.

That somewhere seemed likely to be the great central community which Ivana said was rumored to exist in the far reaches of the Rorroh. The problem was how to locate the community through the hideous country.

But Kirby presently drove the question from his head. To-morrow's evils could best be faced when morrow dawned.

Enough light had grown now so that the swirling bosom of the river, and a strip of sand directly below the cliff in which their cave was set, were visible. As Kirby let his eyes wander to the lush growth beyond the sand, he heard something which made him stir uneasily. Some creature which suggested power and hugeness immeasurable was moving there.

The brush parted, and he saw plainly an animal with the bulk of a two-story house. On two feet the nightmare thing stood, as lightly as a cat, and then came down on all four feet as it ambled out on the sand and extended into the lapping river a tremendous beak studded with teeth. A smell of crushed weeds and the musty odor like that of a lion house filled the night. The tyrannosaur—it was more like a tyrannosaur than anything else—breathed heavily and guzzled in great mouthfuls of water.

Kirby sat perfectly still. He hoped the thing would go

away. But the tyrannosaur did not go away. All at once it hissed loudly and stood up, its eyes glowing green and baleful, and Kirby leaned forward.

From the water was slithering another creature with a gigantic, quivering, jelly body. Kirby saw to his horror that, in addition to four short legs with webbed, claw-tipped feet, there sprouted from the body a number of octopus tentacles. From the scabrous mottle of the head, cruel, unintelligent, bestial eyes glared at the rearing tyrannosaur.

One of the serpentine tentacles whipped out, slapped against the tyrannosaur's fore-shoulder to call forth a hiss and a short bellow. Then other tentacles waved in the moonlight, and in a flash the tyrannosaur was enmeshed as by a score of slimy cables. He was not altogether helpless. Suddenly the steam shovel of a beak buried itself in the jelly body of the water animal, and there spurted out a flood of inky liquid. The water animal emitted a sickening gurgle. But the tyrannosaur's advantage was only temporary. Closer and closer drew the ugly, scabrous tentacles. The tyrannosaur never had a chance. Its green eyes flared,

the shovel beak plunged and slashed, but never for a second did the tentacles relax. As Kirby stared, he saw the water animal begin to back up, dragging its gigantic enemy with it. For a second the whole night was hideous with the sound of hisses, gurgles, dashing water. Then the river boiled once and for all, and both animals sank in its depths.

Kirby chafed cold hands together and shivered a little, then turned to see if Nini and Ivana had heard the struggle.

Fortunately, however, they still slept. And as if this peace which was upon them were an omen of good, the jungle continued quiet for the next hour. Kirby wakened them at last, and after a snatched nap, was in turn awakened.

The three of them started again when the first glimmerings of dawn came to the forest. Of food there was plenty—fruits which grew in profusion, and some roots which Nini grubbed out of the earth. Having started along the first trail which they encountered beside the river bank, they ate as they walked.

Kirby judged they had kept their steady gait for more than two hours before a slight widening of the trail roused him from the preoccupation into which he had fallen.

“See there,” he exclaimed to both girls, and pointed at a grove of trees with fanlike leaves which towered up to the right of the trail. “What are those big bundles fastened to the lower limbs?”

Ivana glanced at Nini, who nodded as if in answer to a question.

“This must be one of the places where the ape-people leave their dead,” Nini answered. “The bundles—But come over to them.”

Kirby forced his way ahead until he stood beneath a huge, unsavory bundle wrapped in roughly woven brown fibre, and wedged in a fork between two limbs. Judging from the ugly odor which overhung the grove, there could be no question about what the bundle contained. Nini and Ivana, glancing at the scores of similar bundles which burdened the trees of the

whole grove, made wry faces. Kirby slung his rifle in the crook of his arm, and nodded toward the trail.

“There must be a village somewhere near,” he said.

A mile farther on they found what they were seeking, a colony of seventy or eighty conical dwellings of mud and thatch, which were ranged in a double circle about a central common of bare, well-trodden earth. It took no long reconnaissance to discover that the town was deserted completely of all inhabitants.

Ivana beckoned and darted to one of the nearest huts, and Kirby, following her, found lying on the uneven earth floor within, a half-skinned animal which resembled a small antelope. An obsidian knife beside the carcass, the disordered condition of a couch of grass, the sour odor of recent animal occupancy, all told their story.

“The owner left in a hurry,” Kirby observed aloud.

Nini, who had gone beyond, to a larger hut which might have belonged to a king ape, called out

excitedly to them.

“A great number of apes have eaten a hurried meal here!”

Kirby entered the shadowed, foul-smelling interior of the central hut to find her statement true. Broken meats, some raw, some cooked, lay on the dirt floor, and scattered bits of fruit were mingled with them. The ashes of a burned out fire at the hut entrance were cold, but had not been for long.

“Do you think—” Ivana began.

“I think the whole of the Duca’s horde came this way, fed, and went on, taking everyone with them,” Kirby finished.

“But which direction did they take?” asked Nini, who was standing at the door of the big hut and had already begun to examine the crowding, green, inscrutable walls of jungle which foamed up to the clearing on all sides.

No less than seven trails wound away into the dark country beyond, and Kirby saw that the question would not be an easy one.

Having hastily circled the clearing and peered down one trail after another without finding a clue, he knew that it was the Duca's intelligence which had made the ape-people depart without leaving even tracks behind them. He did not like the situation.

"Well," he rumbled to his companions, "we may as well take our choice. One chance in seven of coming out right!"

But the words were hardly out of his mouth before he pulled himself up with a jerk, and cursed himself for having given in.

"Ivana! Nini!" Sharpness, a sudden ring of hope edged his voice. "Am I seeing things, or is that—"

As he pointed to a huge aloe bush down one of the trails to their left, they started to run. Then Kirby knew that he was not seeing things. What his first

inspection of the trails had failed to show, he saw plainly now.

Tied loosely to one branch of the aloe bush, almost concealed amidst the deep green of foliage, was a bit of white cloth! In a second Kirby was holding out to his companions a tiny strip of Naida's wedding gown.

"She knew we would come!" He stared down the trail with narrowed, keen eyes.

How Naida had contrived to leave her signal was more than they knew. The fact that she *had* done so, sent all three of them down the trail at driving speed.

An hour passed, then another, and the morning which had been barely born when they first took the trail, wore on to the sultriness and vast, colored light of a tropical noon. Twice the main trail forked, and twice they found an unobtrusive bit of cloth to guide them beyond the works. When the hands of Kirby's still useful watch pointed to twelve, they paused to eat and rest. Then they pushed on.

Meanwhile, the country through which they passed left Kirby with a clear understanding of why Naida and her people had shunned the Rorroh forest down the centuries of time.

Just one thing which stuck in his head was the sight of a small creature like a marmoset, sticking an inquisitive nose into the heart of a sickly-sweet plant which resembled a terrestrial nepenthe. No sooner had the little pink snout touched the green and maroon splotched petals, than the plant writhed, closed its leaves, and swallowed the monkey whole. Little squeaks of agony and terror sounded for a moment, and ceased.

At midafternoon they paused in a spot where a forest of trees with whorled tops were slowly being strangled to death by immense orchids of every conceivable shape and color, and by a kind of creeping mistletoe which grew almost as they watched. Here also, the ground was covered with fluffy, grey-green moss which seethed constantly as if it were a carpet of maggots. Both Ivana and Nini warned Kirby on his life not to touch or go near the

moss, and a moment later he knew why.

From the forest came the flash of a small, five-toed horse being pursued by some animal with a hyena head that barked. At the edge of the mossy glade the hyena swerved aside, but the terrified horse plunged straight out on the carpet of moss. Instantly the air was filled with the sound of animal screams, and a series of tiny, muffled explosions. A cloud of greenish-red mist swirled about the horse. Quivering, still screaming, the animal went down on its knees, and as the reddish green smoke fell on him and settled, it became a mass of growing moss spores.

Before Kirby's eyes, the pitiful animal was covered by a shroud of green that spread over him and cloaked him, licking over all with tiny sounds like far off muffled drums as fresh spore cases developed and burst. The screams died. Even as Kirby drew the girls to him and they passed on, the horse's nostrils, eyes, mouth were filled with choking green moss; and he lay still.

On and on, deeper into the jungle Kirby pushed, and

never for a moment did his companions falter. But the way was not so easy now, for nerves were jaded, muscles sore, and no human will could have been powerful enough to cast aside the growing fear for Naida.

Fear came finally to a head when, toward dusk, Kirby sighted a fork ahead of them, approached it confidently to look for Naida's sign, and found nothing.

"Oh Lord!" he muttered, and realized that it was the first time any of them had spoken for long.

"There must be something to guide us!" Ivana exclaimed as she searched with questing eyes through the swiftly deepening gloom of evening.

Nini, making an effort to keep up hope in spite of the paleness which came to her lovely face, darted down both paths, glancing as she went at every bush and shrub. But she returned in a moment, and as she shook her head, her great eyes were somber.

Kirby grunted, scratched behind his ear. Then, however, he stifled an exclamation, and clutched at the hands of both girls.

On one of the two trails appeared suddenly in the dusk an ape-creature. Kirby saw at once that the thing was small—a female undoubtedly—and that it had spied them and was moving toward them with all speed. And borne in upon him most certainly was the fact that the ape-woman was making signals of peace. In her outstretched hand flickered through the gloom a strip of cloth that was gauzy and white.

Again—a strip of Naida's gown.

"If you know any words of her tongue, call to her," Kirby said sharply.

Ivana obeyed. All three of them started forward. The ape-woman, after returning the hail in creaking gutturals, came up to them, and with an unexpected look of pathos and entreaty in her face, began to address the girls with a flood of talk.

Word after creaking word she poured out while Nini and Ivana listened in silence. Finally Kirby could stand the suspense no longer.

“What is it, Ivana? What does she say? Your eyes are lighting up with hope! Tell me—”

Ivana smiled and turned toward him, while the ape-woman still looked her entreaty.

“She says,” Ivana announced bluntly, “that she and the other women amongst their people, do not want any of the girls of our race to be taken by their males. Already the men are quarreling about Naida. They will not look at their own women. Naida told this woman that we would be following, and sent her to lead us to the place where the ape-people are assembling!”

Kirby felt his lips tightening in a grim smile at the thought that jealousy was not unknown even to the semi-human creatures of this neither world. He looked at Nini and Ivana during a stretched out second. Then he moved.

“Good,” he snapped. “We go on at once.”

That was his only recognition of what was surely one of the important happenings of a lifetime. But for all that, his tired brain, which so lately had felt the chill of black depression, was suddenly set on fire with triumph and thanksgiving.

Chapter 12

As they marched rapidly, the ape-woman, who called herself Gori, succeeded in making them understand that most of the ape-tribes, commanded by the Duca and his caciques, were assembled in the central community toward which they were heading, that grave danger of some sort threatened Naida, and that the need for haste was great. But what the danger was, the two girls could not understand.

“We can’t make out what is going to happen—what they plan to do to-night,” Ivana whispered at last to Kirby. “All Gori says is that we must rescue Naida and take her away, and must take the Duca away so that he cannot influence the men any more. And she keeps repeating that we must hurry.”

“And you can’t find out what we must rescue Naida *from*?”

Ivana shook her head.

“I’m afraid we’re facing something of an appalling

nature, as dangerous to ourselves as to Naida. But I know nothing more.”

By the time the silver glow which corresponded to moonlight flooded the jungle, Gori had left the open trail, and was leading them across country which humans could not have negotiated without the guidance she offered. Advancing cautiously always, she stopped for long seconds at a time to reconnoitre, shifting her huge ears about and changing their shape, twitching her nostrils, and glancing hither and thither with bright little eyes. Sometimes they passed immense spike-tipped flowers ten feet in diameter, with fleshy yellow leaves which gave out a nauseating stench. Vines with long, recurved thorns and blossoms of deep scarlet, laced the undergrowth together and made passing dangerous. Fire-flies drifted past, and all above and about them flapped moths as big as bats.

Kirby, his clothes almost torn from his body, sweat pouring from every pore, heard the labored breathing of the girls, and wondered how they could hang on. But they did, and after a long time, Gori, halting in

the midst of a slight clearing, held up a warning hand.

A queer sensation came over Kirby. As he stared and listened, he realized that the twinkles he saw far ahead were not fire-flies, as he had thought, but lights. In the frosted moon glow, Nini and Ivana drew close, and Kirby clasped their hands and pressed them for a second. Too tired to exult further he was, even though they seemed close to their goal of goals.

Gori swung her hairy arm in a signal, and with rifles clasped carefully, they began to advance. When, five minutes later, they stood in the heart of a rank glade beyond which they could see nothing, Gori spoke to the two girls in her creaking whisper, and Nini laid a restraining hand on Kirby's.

"We have gone as far as Gori dares! She says we must climb a tree here, and watch what will go on in a clearing just beyond this thicket."

"And we still don't know what we're getting into," Kirby muttered.

But at any rate they had reached the end of their march.

Exultation did come to Kirby now, but still he was too completely fagged, as were both girls, to give much sign. Gori pointed to a tree some fifty feet away, which shot up to a great, foliage-crowned height. They moved toward it, and in a moment were climbing, Gori first, the girls after her, and Kirby last.

“Here we are,” Ivana presently whispered, at the same time drawing herself out on a limb just beneath one on which Gori and Nini had crawled.

Kirby found himself hedged in by tasselled leaves through which he could not see. The foliage thinned, however, and soon Ivana halted, perched herself in a comfortable position. Kirby, making himself at ease beside her, and seeing that Nini and Gori were in place, turned his eyes slowly, expectantly downward.

At first, all that he saw from his bird’s-eye perch, was a circular clearing two hundred yards across, which was surrounded on all sides by lowering jungle. In the

exact center of the circle, like a splotch of ink on gray paper, there gaped a deep hole which might have measured six feet in diameter. Around this hole, eight poles as tall and stout as telephone poles stood up in bristling array. The moonlight showed that the whitish earth of the clearing was tamped smooth as though thousands of creatures had danced or walked about there for centuries. But not a living form was visible.

A grunt of disappointment escaped Kirby after that one look. When he looked beyond the clearing, however, a change came to his feelings.

A quarter of a mile away, lights were twinkling—the same ones which had been visible on the last stretch of the journey. And the moonlight touched the little conical roofs of fully two hundred huts of the ape-people. No sound was audible save the souging of night wind in the trees, the shrilling of insects.

Nevertheless, there stole over Kirby all at once a feeling that the great ape-village was crowded to overflowing. What was more, he felt himself touched by an eery sensation—familiar these days—of evil to come.

Ivana, seated with her rifle across her knees, stirred on the limb beside him.

“Oh,” she whispered suddenly, “I am afraid of this place!”

Kirby took her hand.

“I know. Maybe it is the sensation of all the legions of the apes herded together so silently in their village. I wish we knew what to expect from them. I wish—”

But he broke off, and called softly to Nini on the limb above. She looked down with a drawn expression about her mouth.

“Are you all right?” Kirby whispered.

“Yes. But—Well, are both of *you* all right? Gori says we have reached here in time, but I—” A gasp of uneasiness escaped her, and Kirby heard Ivana echo it. “There is something about that black, silent hole out there in the clearing, and about those poles sticking up like fangs, that makes me terribly, terribly

afraid. Oh, what are they planning? Where is Naida? What are they going to do to her?"

Kirby whistled in a low key. He had not thought about the black hole in the clearing.

"Hum," he muttered, "that's interesting. Ivana, Nini, what do you suppose—"

But he got no answer. Gori's twitching lips grimaced them to silence.

The next instant, the stillness of the night was hurled aside by a howling, gurgling shout from a hundred, a thousand hysterically distended ape throats. With the sickening sound came from the village the sullen roaring of drums.

Ten minutes later, a Kirby who was cold with apprehension and wonder looked down from his leaf-crowned height at such a spectacle as he knew human eyes had never before seen. The shouting had died away, the drums were silenced. Crammed into the clearing, their foul, hairy bodies packed close

together, the silver light glinting against rolling red eyes and grinning white teeth, stood fully a thousand apes!

Once the first tumult of shouting in the village had died, they had come on in silence, and in orderly procession. Those who bore the drums—huge gourds with heads of stretched skin—had formed a line entirely around the outer diameter of the circular clearing. Then others, lugging vats of a dark, heady-smelling liquor, had deposited their burden beside the drums, and formed a second circle. The balance of the thousand had crowded itself together as best it might, leaving bare the center of the clearing with its black hole and fangs of poles. Kirby, looking down at these legions, did not wonder that cold sweat wetted his back.

Capable of thinking about only one thing—Naida—he was trying with all his strength not to think. Ivana, her face blanched in the light which filtered their camouflage of leaves, sat rigid, her hands locked about her cold rifle. On the branch above, Nini and Gori were as still as mummies. No one had spoken

since the vanguard of apes had appeared.

But at last Nini leaned close to Kirby.

“Have you any idea of what all this means?”

A draught of hot night air carried up a stench of drunkenness, and the goatly odor of massed animal bodies.

“No,” Kirby whispered. “I suppose, from Gori’s having brought us here, that Naida is going to appear somehow. We’ve simply got to trust that Gori knows what she is about.”

“But listen—” Ivana suppressed a shudder. “Suppose they should bring Naida here presently to force her to take part in some ceremony at which we can only guess. Gori, who thinks we can work miracles, supposes we can rescue Naida. But I—I’m not so certain. Is there *anything* we can do?”

It was exactly that question which had made Kirby fight to keep himself from thinking. His face turned

gray before he answered. But answer he did, finally.

“Yes, there is one thing we can do, Ivana. We’ve got to be frank with each other, and so far, this is the *only* thing I’ve been able to figure out. If Naida is brought here, and they make any move to harm her or torture her, we can, and we will, shoot her quickly, before harm or pain comes.”

A grim silence settled once more. During the last miles of march in the jungle, there had persisted in Kirby’s heart the hope that there would be at least *something* favorable in whatever situation they might encounter. His spirits were so low now that he dared not speak again.

Amongst the noiseless sea of ape-men below them came, every now and again, a little ripple of motion as some anthropoid shadow fell out of his place, approached the liquor vats, and swilled down the black brew, a quart at a gulp. But mostly there was little commotion. Ivana drew a sibilant breath and said that she wished something would happen.

“I wish,” Kirby answered tensely, “that we knew *what* is going to happen.”

But the nightmare waiting was not to go on forever. Kirby leaned forward and pointed.

It was only instinct that had made him know action must come. For a second, no change in the expression of the ape-men, no movement in their crammed ranks, was visible. Then, however, a queer, subdued grunting rumbled deep down in many throats, and those who had faced the hundred-foot space in the center of the clearing squatted down on their hams.

In the back of the crowd necks were craned. The stronger shoved the weaker in an effort to get a better view of the cleared stage, and a few ape-men who had been drinking hurried on unsteady legs to their places.

“The drums!” Kirby whispered then.

With almost military precision, the scores of leather-faced creatures who had led the procession into the

clearing, clasped the skin-headed gourds to their shaggy bellies, and stood with free arm raised as though awaiting a signal. Nini moved in her position, and Kirby felt Ivana shiver and edge close to him.

From the front rank of the crowd, there sprang up a great male creature with the face of a gargoyle and the body of a jungle giant. Just once he reeled on his feet, as though black alcohol had befuddled him, then he steadied himself, flung both arms above his head, and rolled out a command which burst upon Kirby's ears like thunder.

It was as if the whole cavern of the lower world, and the whole of the round earth itself, had been rocked uneasily, dreadfully by the bellowing, crashing explosion of the drums. Maddened by the turmoil he had let loose, the gargoyle-faced giant ape-man leered about him with blood-shot, drunken eyes, and beat on his cicatrized chest with massive fists. Suddenly he let out a bellow. Straight up into the air he sprang in a wild leap. When he came down, he was dancing, and the portentous, the sickeningly mysterious ceremony for which such solemn

preparation had been made, was begun.

Kirby drew a rasping breath. Knowing that there must be some definite reason for the dance having begun just when and as it had, he looked beyond the solitary dancing giant, on beyond the crowded legions of the apes, toward the village. There, where the main trail from the community approached the clearing, he saw precisely the thing which he had both hoped desperately and dreaded terribly to find.

Headed directly toward the clearing, moving down the trail with slow, majestic pace, came a procession headed by a bodyguard of ape-men and augmented by other men whose nakedness was covered by unmistakable, unforgettable priestly robes of gray.

All at once the ape-people in the clearing began to scuffle apart, opening a lane down which the procession might pass to the central stage with its dancer, its ink spot orifice, and its fangs of tall poles. Kirby, watching the congregation, watching the majestic approach of gray robes through the night, wiped away from his forehead a sweat of fear.

“I think,” Nini called in a voice pitched high to outsound the drums, “that the—the Duca is with them!”

“Yes.” Kirby pointed jerkily. “In the middle of the procession, there, surrounded by his caciques!”

The Duca!

Yet his approach did not hold Kirby. Directly behind the priests were emerging now from the jungle a new company of ape-men. Squinting his eyes, Kirby saw that two of them were lugging on a pole across their shoulders a curious burden—a sort of monstrous bird cage of barked withes. Crouched on the floor of the cage in a little motionless, white heap—

But Kirby closed his eyes. Ivana, cowering against him, gulped as though she were going to be sick. Nini leaned down from above and looked at them with dilated eyes. Although none of them spoke, all knew that they had found Naida at last.

Kirby was the first to pull himself up. Opening his

eyes, he stared long at the white gowned, motionless shape within the cage. Next summing up the whole situation—the cage surrounded by an armed band, the clearing crammed with a thousand ape-men—he shook his head. Afterward, he made a quick movement with his hands.

Ivana, seeing that movement, seeing the expression on his face, started out of her daze.

“No! No! Oh, there must be some other way out for her! There must—”

Her cry, half a shriek, did not change Kirby’s look. What he had done with his hands was to throw a shell into the chamber of his rifle. Now he held the rifle grimly, ready to carry it to his shoulder.

The procession with the bodyguard of ape-men at its head, the renegade Duca and his caciques following next, and the cage bringing up the rear, advanced relentlessly down the lane to the central stage. The gargoyle-faced ape-man who held the stage alone danced with increasing wildness, writhing, twisting,

with weird suppleness. Upon the dancing giant the procession bore down, and before him it finally halted.

The halt left the Duca and the king ape facing each other, and the ape ended his dance. After each had given a salute made by raising their arms, both Duca and the king ape turned to face the creatures who were standing with the cage slung across their shoulders. Whereupon the bearers of the cage advanced with it until they stood between two of the tall poles. There, facing the ominous hole in the center of the clearing, with a pole on either side of them, the ape-men lowered the cage to the ground.

Kirby felt his last hope and courage ebbing. Now he noticed that each pole was equipped with a rope which passed through a hole near its top, like a thread through the eye of a needle. And while he stared at the dangling ropes, the ape-men made one end of each fast to a ring in the top of the cage. The next instant they leaped back, and began to heave at the other end of the lines.

From the drums came a quicker pounding, a more head-splitting volume of thunder. Over all the ape-people who watched the show, passed a shiver of what seemed to be whole-souled, ecstatic satisfaction. Slowly, as the two ape-men heaved hard, the cage swung off the ground, and slowly rose higher and higher into the moonlit air.

When finally the thing hung high above the heads of the multitude, swaying midway between its tall supports, the ape-men who had done the hoisting fastened their lines to cleats on the poles. Then they turned to the Duca and the giant king who stood behind them, executed a queer, lumbering bow, and fell back to the rear.

The next moment it seemed as though every creature in the clearing—men and those who were only half men—had gone crazy. The king flung himself into the air as if he were a mass of bounding rubber. Following his lead, the whole assembly let out howls that drowned even the drums, and then began to sway, to

squirm, to leap, even as their king was doing before them.

The caciques and the Duca joined in the madness of foul dancing as heartily as any there. Their eyes were flaming, their long robes flapping, their beards streaming.

On his perch in the tree Kirby muttered an oath which was lost, swept away like a breath, in the shrieking turmoil of sound. Then he turned to Ivana.

“They’ve brought Naida here to sacrifice her.”

“But *why*?” Ivana’s sweet face was frozen in lines of horror. “I’ve been able to guess what was going to happen to her. But—*sacrifice*. Why will it be that?”

“Don’t you see?” Looking up to include Nini, Kirby found his hands quivering against his rifle. “It is easy to understand. In the temple yesterday, what the Duca hoped to do was to kidnap most, or all, of the girls for the ape-people. But he was able to get only Naida. The first result was that the ape-men started to

quarrel over the one girl. From what Gori says, trouble started on all sides at once. It became inadvisable to let Naida live. So the Duca, in his shrewdness, planned a sacrifice. By sacrificing Naida, he rids himself of a source of contention amongst the ape-men. He also hopes his act will win favor from his Gods, and make them help him when he is ready to launch a new attempt to capture *all* the girls."

Ivana and Nini looked at each other, then at Kirby, and horror was etched deeper into their faces.

"I think," gulped Ivana, "that you—are right. I—begin to understand."

Nini leaned close to them.

"Tell us, then, *how* this sacrifice is to be made."

Silent at that, Kirby presently made a heavy gesture toward the maelstrom of howling, leaping animals below them.

"I couldn't guess at first. Now I think I can. They have

placed her in that cage and swung it high above the black hole you were afraid of. What can that mean except that she is to be offered to—to—”

It was a monstrous theory which had stunned his hope and courage, and to voice the thing in words was too gruesome.

His bare suggestion, however, made Ivana pass a hand limply over her forehead and look at him with blank, stricken eyes. Nini tottered so uncertainly that Gori, who had remained motionless and silent throughout, had to steady her with muscular arms. If it was impossible for Kirby to utter his fears aloud, he had no need to speak to make them understood.

“And—and we can do nothing?” Nini choked at last.

“You can see for yourself how she is surrounded. If we had been able to get here sooner, we might have done something. Now—”

Kirby’s voice trailed off, and he gave an agonized look at his rifle.

The terrific dance in the clearing was going forward with madness which increased second by second. It had been a general debauch at first, with the whole thousand of the apes bellowing and squirming. Now a change was becoming apparent. Red eyes which had caught the glare of ultimate madness, focused upon the caciques, the Duca, and the great king, all of whom were swaying together on the central stage. As they looked, the horde of ape-men broke loose with a heightened frenzy of noise and movement too overwhelming for Kirby to follow. He leaned forward, making an effort to see what actions of Duca and king could be so influencing the congregation. And then he saw.

Both of those central figures, the one with hair-covered giant's body and evilly grimacing face, the other with white robes and whipping silver hair, were definitely emulating the motions of a serpent!

It was as if the angles and joints had disappeared from their bodies. They were become gliding lengths of muscle as swift, as loathsome in their supple dartings and coilings as any snake lashing across the

expanses of primeval jungle. Lost in what they did, unconscious of the nightmare, demoniac legion before which they danced, they had eyes only for the empty, ominous hole beneath Naida's cage. As they circled the hole, drawing ever and ever closer to it, they opened and closed their arms with the motion of great serpent jaws biting and striking.

"God in Heaven!" Kirby cried in a voice which shrilled with horror and then broke.

It was not alone the Duca's dance which had wrung the shout from him. As Nina and Ivana shrieked and cowered, as Gori twitched, gasped, buried her head in trembling arms, Kirby knew that Naida was fully aware of what was going on—had been, perhaps, from the beginning.

Slowly, numbly she raised herself from her huddled position, rose to her knees, and clutching with despairing hands at the sides of her cage, looked out from between the bars.

The king and Duca edged closer to the hole until they

were dancing upon its very brink. From that position, they stared down into the depths, their faces tense and strained. And then their look became radiant, exalted, joyous. Suddenly the Duca leaped back. He shrieked something at the gargoyle ape, and they flung their arms high in a commanding, mighty signal which was directed across the nightmare legion of ape-men, to the drums.

As Kirby winced in expectancy, the drums ceased to roar. Over the night smashed a hideous concussion of silence, deafening, absolute. And the ape-men—all of them—and the Duca, his caciques, and the king, ceased to dance. As if a whirlwind had hurled them, the caciques scattered in all directions. The Duca, having already leaped back from the gaping orifice, suddenly turned and ran with blurred speed over to the slobbering, deadly still front rank of the congregation. An instant later the king crouched down beside him, and the whole stage was left bare and deserted.

Kirby gave one look at Naida, found her staring down, deeper and deeper down, into the hole which yawned

beneath her so blackly. Then Kirby lowered his eyes until he, too, stared at the opening.

Amidst the pressing silence there stole from the earth an uneasy sound as of some immense thing waking and stirring. Came a hissing note as of escaping steam. The tribes of the ape-men waited in silent rapture. Kirby saw Naida still looking down, and felt Ivana crouch against him, fainting. He held his rifle tighter, and continued to stare.

Something red, like two small flames, licked up above the edge of the pit. Then Kirby gasped and all but went limp. Up and out into the moonlight slid a glistening white lump that moved from side to side and licked at the night with flickering black and red tipped forked tongue.

The glistening white lump was the head of Quetzalcoatl, buried God of the People of the Temple. It was wider and bigger than an elephant's, and the round snake body could not have been encircled by a man's two arms. Kirby guessed at the probable length of the Serpent in terms of hundreds of feet.

Sick, numb, he glanced at Naida, who was still staring silently, and hitched his rifle half up to his shoulder. But he did not look down the sights yet. Although it was time, and more than time, that he fired, he would not do it until the last possible second, when nothing else remained.

Slowly from the hole slid a fifteen or twenty-foot column of the body, and Quetzalcoatl, thus reared, looked about him with a pair of eyes immense and not like snake's eyes, but heavily lidded and lashed; eyes that stared in a wise, evil way; eyes glittering and round and black as ink. After a time the mouth opened in a silent snarl, showing great white fangs and recurved simitars of teeth. The head was snow white, leperous in its scabby, scaly roughness, with here and there a patch of what looked like greenish fungus. From the rounded body trailed a short, unnatural, sickening growth of—feathers. Old and evil and very wise the Feathered Serpent seemed as his forked tongue flickered in and out and he stared at the ape horde, who stared back silently.

He seemed in no hurry to devote his attention to the

cage set forth for his delectation. The black eyes rolled beneath their lashes, staring now at the Duca in his robes, and again at the huddled ape-people. But after ghastly seconds, Quetzalcoatl at last had seen enough.

Again the moonlight glinted against simitar teeth as the great, white, puffy mouth yawned in its silent snarl. Quetzalcoatl reared his head a little higher, slid further from his hole, and then looked up at the dangling cage of barked withes.

In Kirby's mind stirred cloudily a remembrance of moments in the past: the feel of Naida's first kiss, her look as they advanced to the altar in the temple. Then he saw things as they were now, with Naida surrounded by all the tribes of the apes, and with Quetzalcoatl staring from beneath heavily lidded lashes at the whiteness of her.

Suddenly Kirby stirred to free his shoulder of Ivana's supine weight against it, and he made himself look down his rifle. He let the breath half out of his lungs, and nursed the trigger.

But he did not fire.

All at once he started so violently that he almost hurtled from the tree. Suddenly, trembling, he lowered his rifle.

“Oh, thank God!” he yelled in the silence of the night.

The idea which had transformed him was perhaps the conception of a lunatic. But it was still an idea, and offered a chance.

Again Kirby peered down his rifle. But he no longer aimed at Naida. As Quetzalcoatl lifted white fangs, Kirby aimed deliberately at him, and turned loose his fire.

With the first shot, the Serpent lurched back from the cage, snapped his jaws, and closed evil, black eyes. From one lidded socket squirted dark blood. As a second and third shot crashed into the cavernous fanged mouth, and others ripped into the flat skull, Quetzalcoatl seemed dazed. His head wavered back and forth and his hiss filled the night, but he did

nothing.

But all at once Kirby felt that he was *going* to do something in a second, and a great calm came upon him. He quickly jammed home a fresh clip of shells.

“Nini! Ivana! Fire at the Serpent. Give him everything you’ve got! Do you understand? Fire! He thinks that the ape-people have hurt him, and he will be after them in a second. If we have any luck, he will do to them what we never could have done, and maybe destroy himself at the same time! Me, I’m going down there and get Naida now!”

Chapter 13

No sooner did Kirby see comprehension in the girls' faces than he swung around and let go of his perch. As he crashed, caught the next limb below him, and let go to crash to another, he had all he could do to suppress a yelp of joy. For all at once every voice in the ape congregation was raised in howls and screams of devastated terror.

He did not care how he got down from the tree. Seconds and half seconds were what counted. From the last limb above the ground he swung into space, and a split second later staggered to his feet, clutched his rifle, and started for the clearing. His lungs seemed collapsed and both ankles shattered. He did not care. Not when the ape screams were growing louder with every step he took. Not when he heard Nini and Ivana pouring down from their tree a continuation of the scorching fire he had started.

Panting, his breath only half regained, but steeled to make the fight of his life, he tore from the jungle into the clearing just in time to see a twisting, pain-

convulsed seventy-foot coil of white muscle lash up and strike Naida's cage a blow which knocked it like a ball in the air. Naida screamed and hung to the bars.

But she was all right. It was not against her that Quetzalcoatl was venting his wrath: the blow had been blind accident. As Kirby stood at the clearing's edge, he knew to a certainty that Quetzalcoatl's reaction to sudden pain had been all he had dared hope.

In front of him forty or fifty ape-bodies lay in a crushed heap. While yard after yard of the Serpent's bleached length streamed out of the hole, the hundreds of feet of coils already in the clearing suddenly whipped about a whole squadron of apemen, and with a few constrictions annihilated them as if they had been ants. Across the clearing, the leperous head reared up as high as the trees and swooped down, fangs gleaming. The howls of the apemen trying to flee, the screams of those who had been caught, rose until they became all one scream.

But Kirby had not left the safety of the tree merely to

get a ringside view of carnage. He faced his next, his final task unhesitatingly. Straight out he leaped from the shadows of the jungle into the clearing, out into the presence of the beleagured, screaming ape-men. Well enough he knew that those creatures, despite their frenzy, might sight him and fall upon him at any second; well enough he knew that a single flick of the white coils all over the clearing could crush him instantly. But the time to worry about those hazards would be when they beset him. With a yell as piercing as any in the whole bedlam, Kirby rushed forward.

High up in the moonlit vault of the night, swaying between the two poles which supported it, hung the white cage which was Naida's prison. By the time Kirby had sprinted fifty yards, he knew that his yells had reached Naida. For she staggered to her knees and looked straight at him. A second later, though, he realized that the almost inevitable recognition of him by ape-men had come to pass.

Eight or ten of the creatures, left unmolested for a second by the Serpent, halted in the mad run they were making for the sheltering jungle, and while one

pointed with hairy arm, the others let out shrieks. Kirby gritted his teeth in something like despair. Then he realized that the worst danger—Quetzalcoatl's blurred coils—was not threatening him so far. And he went on, straight toward the ape-men.

He did not look where, how, or at whom he struck. All he knew was that his rifle blazed, and as he clubbed at soft flesh with the butt, blood spurted, and new screams filled the night. He felt and half saw big, stinking bodies going down, and clawed his way forward, around them, over them. Then he felt no more bodies, and knew that he was through. A little farther he ran over the trampled earth, and stopped and looked up.

The howls of the living, the shrieks of the dying deafened him. Renewed shots from the rifles in the tree, made the Serpent lash about in a dazzling white blur, smashing trees, apes, everything in its path. But Kirby, finding himself still safe, scarcely heard or saw. His eyes, turned upward, saw one thing only.

“Naida!”

She had snapped two of the withes of the cage and was leaning forward through the opening. Her face was livid with horror and exhaustion, but she was able to look at him with eyes that glowed.

“You—you came!” she gasped. “You came to me!”

In a flash Kirby jumped over to the poles and began to cast off one of the lines which held the cage aloft.

“Get ready for a bump!” he shouted, as he lowered away, arms straining.

Paying out the one line left the cage suspended from the second, but let it sweep from its position between the poles, down toward one pole. As the thing struck the tall support, Kirby bounded over to stand beneath it, only too sharply aware of the death waiting for him on every side, but ignoring it. Naida still hung suspended a good twenty feet above him, but there was no time to let go the other line. He braced himself and held up his arms.

“Jump!” he yelled.

Then he saw the white gown sweeping down toward him, felt the crash of a soft body against his, and staggered back. Recovered in a tenth of a second, he drew a deep breath, and looked at Naida beside him, tall and brave, unhurt.

“Are you able to run?” he snapped, and then, the moment she nodded, motioned toward the jungle.

Behind them, in front, on all sides, rose screams so horrible that he wondered even then if he would ever forget. As he started to run, he realized that when Naida had finally landed in his arms, the nearest squirming loop of the Serpent had been no more than four yards away, and that, right now, if their luck failed, a single unfortunate twist of the incredible hundreds of feet of white muscle could still end things for them.

But luck was not going to fail. Somehow Kirby knew it as they sprinted side by side, and the sheltering jungle loomed closer every second. And a moment later, something beside his own inner faith made him know it, too.

“Look, Naida! Look!” he screeched all at once.

At the upper end of the clearing, where an unthinkable slaughter was going on, there leaped out from amongst a surging mass of apes, leaped out from almost directly beneath a downward smashing blur of white snake folds, a figure which Kirby had not seen or thought about for many seconds.

The Duca’s robe hung in tatters from his body. Blood had smeared his white hair. His eyes were those of a man gone mad from fear. And as he escaped the tons of muscle which so nearly had engulfed him, he began to run even as Kirby felt himself running.

Straight toward him and Naida, Kirby saw the man spurt, but whether the mad eyes recognized them or not, he could not tell, nor did he care. All at once his feeling that they would escape the clearing, became conviction.

For suddenly the same single twitch of Quetzalcoatl’s vast folds which might have finished them, if luck had not held, put an end to the Duca’s retreat. At one

moment the man's path was clear. The next—

Kirby, running for dear life, gasped, and heard Naida cry out beside him.

The great loops flashed, twisted, and where had been an open way for the Duca, loomed a wall of scaly white flesh. The living wall twitched, closed in; and as the Duca dodged and leaped to no avail, a cry shrilled across the night—a cry that cut like a knife.

Kirby saw no more. But it was likely that most, if not all, of the caciques had gone with the Duca.

Somehow, anyhow, in but a few seconds more, Kirby dove into the spot from which he had left the jungle to enter the clearing. As Naida pressed against him, winded but still strong, he found his best hopes for immediate retreat realized, for Gori, Nini, and Ivana, down from their tree, ran toward them.

“She is all right,” he said with a gesture which cut short the outbursts ready to come. “But we’ve got to keep going. Ivana, tell Gori that her people are gone,

wiped out, but that if she will cast her lot with us, we will not forget what she has done. Come on!”

With Gori leading them they ran, stumbling, recovering themselves, stumbling again. To breathe became an agony. But not until many minutes later, when they plowed into the cover of a fern belt whose blackness not even the moonlight had pierced, did Kirby call a halt.

Here he swept a final glance behind him, listened long for sounds of pursuit, and relaxed a little only when none came to disturb the night stillness. However, that relaxation, now that he permitted it at last, meant something.

The complete silence gave him final conviction that what he had said about the whole ape-people being destroyed was true. As for the Serpent—well, perhaps he was destroyed even as they were. Perhaps not. In any case the grip which Quetzalcoatl held upon the imagination of the People of the Temple had been destroyed by this night’s work, and that was what counted most. The Serpent would be worshipped no

longer.

Kirby reached out in the darkness and found Naida's hand.

"Come along," he said to all of the party. "I think the past is—the past. And with Gori to guide us out of the jungle, and our own brains to guide us through the jungle of self-government after that, I think the future ought to be bright enough."

Ivana and Nini both chuckled as they moved again, and Gori, hearing her name spoken in a kindly voice, twitched her ears appreciatively. Naida drew very close to Kirby.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked presently.

"The—temple," he answered.

"About the crown which probably is still lying on the altar there?"

Kirby looked up in surprise.

“Why, I had forgotten about that!”

“What was it, then?”

“But what could I have been thinking about except how you looked when we came together in that gloomy place, and walked forward, side by side? *Now* have I told you enough?”

Naida laughed.

“There is so much to be done!” Kirby exclaimed then. “As soon as possible, we must climb to the Valley of the Geyser, go on into the outer world, and there seek carefully for men who are willing, and fit, to come here. And that is only one task. Others come crowding to me every second. But first—”

“What?” Naida asked softly.

“The temple. Naida, we will reach the plateau sometime to-morrow. All of the girls who kept watch there will be waiting for us, and it will be a time of happiness. May we not, then, go to the temple? There

will be no priests. But we will make our pledges without them. Tell me, may I hope that it will be so—to-morrow?"

Naida did not answer at once. She did not even nod. But presently her shoulder, still fragrant with faint perfume, brushed his. She clasped his hand then, and as they walked on in silence, Kirby knew.

